

eve

The Dream of the Information World

tzer

**Eve Meltzer**

# The Dream of the Information World

Eve Meltzer

1. Kate M. Sellers, Foreword, *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*, ed. Nicholas Baume (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2001), p. 1.

2. Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. and ed. Chaninah Maschler (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1971), p. 7.

The world is going to hell in a toboggan, and I'm putting these boxes together . . . . But, you know, that's not the point. The point is . . . [the idea] is followed absolutely to its conclusion, which is mechanistic. It has no validity as anything except a process in itself. It has nothing to do with the world at all.

Sol LeWitt, 1969

Look at a print of a drawing produced by Sol LeWitt in 1967, and then used as the announcement for an exhibition of his work at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles (Fig. 1). The drawing is a plan for four sets of nine pieces. One of these sets LeWitt has described graphically in both gridded form and written language. Take a grid, subdivide it into nine smaller, equivalent grids, then mark off each as its own isolated 'piece'. LeWitt has done just this, and then he has numbered the pieces from one to nine – a designation that appears to be their only distinguishing mark. Otherwise, these pieces appear to be completely identical, having been produced by the grid's fail-safe system of equivalences.

But look more closely and you'll see that LeWitt's drawing is actually asking us to imagine these nine pieces as distinct – he indicates this with a list of measurements jotted at the foot of the print. In fact, this set of nine pieces is more like *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)* from 1966 than the grid diagram would have us think (Fig. 2). Each piece in the print is defined by the uniqueness of its variation. Like *Serial Project*, the print represents a field of cubic forms that rise to incremental heights, in the way an urban landscape or miniature architectural model appears from above. But the drawn set would be better described not as architectural or even inhabitable, but as *structural*. In fact, the artist prefers the term, 'structure', over the more usual one, 'sculpture'.<sup>1</sup>

By 1967, the year LeWitt created this particular structure, the rules of structural order were widely and readily applied to nearly every field of cultural inquiry – mathematics, the empirical sciences, the social sciences, especially anthropology and psychology, and of course linguistics. In fact, by that year practitioners from a wide range of fields were calling upon the laws of structural order to examine and explain an extraordinarily wide range of cultural phenomena. In 1968, Jean Piaget, among many others, sought to define what exactly a structure is. In his terms, 'a structure is not a mere collection of elements and their properties', but rather, 'involves laws: the structure is preserved or enriched by the interplay of its transformation laws, which never yield results external to the system or employ elements that are external to it'.<sup>2</sup> The kind of structure I see LeWitt employing accords with Piaget's definition; it is a system of transformations. Looking closely at LeWitt's set of nine pieces, we can grasp that his grid's law of equivalences is actually used to spawn differences. There are only differences in LeWitt's structure. The meaning

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 1.** Sol LeWitt, *Untitled*, 1967, printed announcement, 35.6 × 35.6 cm. LeWitt Collection. © 2005 Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

of each piece is not immanent in it, much in the same way that structuralist linguistics teaches us that the letters that form the word 'cat' have no intrinsic meaning; they mean because they are not 'cap' or 'cad' or 'bat'. Furthermore, both field and module in LeWitt's structure are organised in such a way that precludes breaking the system. The elements of any structure are always subordinate to its laws. Piaget explains: 'the elements do not exist in isolation from one another, nor were they discovered one by one in some accidental sequence and then, finally, united into a whole. They do not come upon the scene *except as order*'.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the elements

3. Piaget, *Structuralism*, p. 7.

4. Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art',  
*Artforum International*, Vol. 5, no. 10, 1967,  
 p. 79.

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
 Oxford University Press apologizes for  
 any inconvenience.

**Fig. 2.** Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)*, 1966, baked enamel on aluminium, 50.8 × 41.4 × 41.4 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2005 Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

in LeWitt's structure have come into being all at once in the very moment the horizontal-vertical pattern is laid down. Thus to question or even think of any one piece from the set would be an activity inextricable from the integrity of the whole.

We could also say that LeWitt's grid does not frame or conjure. It is not, for instance, a perspectival grid. And so if LeWitt's structure pictures a world – as I want to suggest that it does – it does not do so in the way that we ordinarily associate with pictures. His grid does not serve as the armature for a scene represented, or for a ground with or without figures upon it. In fact, if LeWitt's structure could be said to indicate anything at all, it would be the very assurance that everything has been brought to the surface, or better, that the relationship between surface and depth, disclosure and hiddenness, visibility and invisibility has been extinguished. LeWitt's grid declares that 'everything is here'. And it does so with a self-generated sense of autonomy, like a miniature world created *ex nihilo*. In effect, visibility has become not a property of looking or even of the visual, but a figure of conceptual mastery.

This reconfiguration of the visible is critical here, not just for the self-definition of Conceptual art, but more importantly, for the world-view out of which LeWitt's grid and so many other works of art like it grew. LeWitt's grid pictures by renouncing the visual and, in its place, it proposes that there is a deeper, structural logic governing its form than cannot nor even need be seen with our eyes. In 1967, the year most often cited as the start-date for Conceptual art, LeWitt turned this sort of practice into something of a mantra: 'what the work of art looks like isn't too important'.<sup>4</sup> His language seems straightforward: he explains that, on the one hand, there is an art of the mind and, on the other, an art of the eye. LeWitt was not alone in making statements such as this; his words may stand in here for those of dozens of practitioners who might have said

the same: Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler come first to my mind. Indeed LeWitt reiterated his disavowal of the visual within this very print: ‘these pieces should be made without regard for their appearance’, he scrawled alongside the grid plan – as if to announce, along with the opening of his show at the Dwan Gallery, that we won’t find what we’re looking for by looking.<sup>5</sup> Appearances should be disregarded.

Above all, it is the *look* of LeWitt’s print that nearly causes us to *overlook* the obscurities of his language and swallow whole his stated disavowal of the visual. On first glance, it seems there is nothing to look at in the work; it is too lean, too stripped, too ‘pre-factual’, to use his word – always before something else that never fully arrives.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps it is because when one looks, as Donald Kuspit has surmised, ‘one does not so much see [the work] as think about [it], in part because the seeing . . . is quickly and fastidiously done’.<sup>7</sup> And when we do look, we quickly come up against the challenges of description. ‘It’s like getting words caught in your eyes’, wrote Robert Smithson after laying his eyes on this print.<sup>8</sup>

But what if we asked: *what does the print look like?* If we are to see this print as a species of the visual, and understand the world that its aesthetic pictures, then we will have to read its structure with an eye to form, as one reads a dream. We will have to attend to the strategies of withholding that have shaped that which is, despite all claims to the contrary, *certainly* given to be seen.

To show how the visual matters to this work and so many others like it, I will advance three claims, each describing what LeWitt’s print ‘looks like’. Then, by way of an examination of the *Information* show, held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1970, I will elaborate the depth of their significance and explain what each has to do with the others. My first claim: LeWitt’s *Untitled* looks like information. This is not just because the drawing *informs* us of the rules and specifications for the nine pieces, but also because – to rethink Donald Kuspit’s figuration, ‘the look of thought’ – the print has the look of information.<sup>9</sup> As I will elaborate shortly, this ‘look of information’ permits us to understand the technological imaginary of its historical moment. My second claim will come as no surprise to readers of Conceptual art: this drawing also looks like language. This is not merely because the drawing is largely composed of written form, but also because it has the look of language. To understand this idea we will need to consider carefully the structuralist imaginary of this historical moment – the range of cultural forms language was said to represent and encompass, and the ways in which it was understood to perform that representation. And lastly, my third claim: LeWitt’s *Untitled* print also looks like a work of art in a time of crisis, at least a late-twentieth-century rendition. ‘The world is going to hell in a toboggan’, the artist said in a 1969 interview with Patricia Norvell, ‘and I’m putting these boxes together . . . but, you know’, he continues, ‘the point is . . . [that the idea] is followed absolutely to its conclusion, which is mechanistic. It has no validity as anything except a process in itself. It has’, he concludes, ‘nothing to do with the world at all’.<sup>10</sup> This look, I will explain, has everything to do with the world: not just contemporary world-wide events, movements, and catastrophes, of which there were so many at this time, but also the way in which we conceive of the world – not *if* it exists, for that would be to return to the inquiry of Descartes’ ‘Sixth Meditation’, in which the existence of the world is predicated on its presence to his faculty of knowledge alone, as he says, ‘the power and

5. Statements of this sort went hand-in-hand with the transformation of conventional viewing practices and venues – the ‘suppression of the beholder’, as Charles Harrison has called it. As he describes it, the point was to resist the idea that art viewership relies on spectation and, by extension, to contest the conventional ideology of visibility: formalism, objecthood, the art market, and related notions of style, quality, permanence, and authorship. Charles Harrison, ‘Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder’, *Essays on Art and Language* (Basil Blackwell: Cambridge, 1991), p. 45.

6. LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, p. 79.

7. Donald B. Kuspit, ‘Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought’, in *Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts*, ed. Adachiara Zevi (I Libri di AEIOU: Rome, 1994), p. 210.

8. Robert Smithson, ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Jack Flam (UC Press: Berkeley, 1996), p. 80.

9. Donald B. Kuspit, ‘Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought’, pp. 209–25.

10. LeWitt, interview with Patricia Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, p. 121.

inward vision of my mind'.<sup>11</sup> LeWitt's print matters to the world with regard to the questioning of – as Merleau-Ponty frames it – 'what it is for the world to exist'.<sup>12</sup>

'Information', 'language', and 'the world' are far from self-evident terms. In fact, we have to understand these notions as fantasmatic. This is crucial if we are ever to understand truly what this visually confounding idiom was trying to say and why it erupted in the form of the visual in the first place. They are critical not just for understanding a single print by Sol LeWitt, but also for coming to terms with American art practice of the 1960s and 70s, when the linguistic forms and structural systems that appear in the print became a common lexicon often hitched to the word 'information'. That word we have come to associate more closely with the turn of the twenty-first century than with the 1960s and 70s. Information would seem to have more to do with present-day new media practices than with the comparatively clunky Conceptualist aesthetic; it would seem to be more at issue with respect to our currently expanding technologies of communication, the internet, bioinformatics, even information warfare and the US Defense Department's originally-named Total Information Awareness program, designed to mine databases for information to aid in the identification of terrorists. Indeed, the informational aesthetic prevalent around 1970 anticipates our present day in ways that I will not explore in this essay. Here my primary aim is to explain how this aesthetic permits us to understand the broader cultural imaginary of that earlier period, circa 1970, its relationship to fantasies about contemporary technologies of communication, and the revolutionary world politics that grew up with such fantasies. We know that the aims of these artistic practitioners were aesthetic and political. They embraced the critique of institutionalism, the reformulation of the relationship between art and audience, and the radical democratisation of artistic production and consumption. That much many scholars have already made clear.<sup>13</sup> But the deeper structure of the ideas and stakes with which artists were profoundly engaged—this too has been overlooked.

### *Information, 1970*

In an exhibition review, the critic Gregory Battcock conjures the *Information* show as a series of contradictory propositions:

Imagine: 1. an art exhibition that started out by inviting artists' contributions without anybody having seen the works first; 2. an exhibition with a catalog that will illustrate over 100 works—many of which will not be included in the show; 3. a catalog that lists artists that aren't represented in the show at all; 4. an exhibition that includes works that are not included ...<sup>14</sup>

The *Information* show, organised around what its curator Kynaston McShine called the 'strongest "style"' of the period, opened in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in July of 1970.<sup>15</sup> This was one year after the critic Lucy Lippard began to organise a series of exhibitions marking the emergence of Conceptual art on the international scene. Included were textual statements, diagrams, notes, proposals, photographs, and films clips (Fig. 3). There were systems of varied sorts, including Vito Acconci's *Service Area*, an installation in which Acconci had collected and then retrieved his mail having had it forwarded by the post office to the

11. René Descartes, *Mediations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1996), p. 96.

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1968), p. 96.

13. For example, see Blake Stimson, 'The Promise of Conceptual Art', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, (eds) Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

14. Gregory Battcock, 'Informative Exhibition', *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1970; The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 8.

15. Kynaston McShine, *Information*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 1.

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 3.** Installation view of the exhibition, *Information*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2 July 1970–20 September 1970. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

museum (Fig. 4). Inspired in part by information and systems theories, and in part by a desire to imagine an alternative social order, the *Information* show amplified the conditions of visibility that I have described as definitive of LeWitt's print. In some cases the work 'included' in the exhibition wasn't

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 4.** Vito Acconci, *Service Area*, 1970, installation/activity lasting for 3 months, various days, varying times each day, with plastic table, Plexiglas box, paper calendar, and mail. Included in *Information* show, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

16. Press Release, March 1970; MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 4.106a.

actually present, or at a minimum that presence resisted ordinary notions of visibility. Consider Jan Dibbets's catalogue contribution, consisting of nothing other than the request to be represented by a form alone, which had been distributed to all invited artists (Fig. 5). Indeed the show itself had something of an informational consistency. McShine uses the word 'transmitted' to describe the method by which some of the work would get from its point of origin to its audience.<sup>16</sup> Certainly this exhibition reconceived what it meant to be a viewer, perhaps following the model of an information system of the sort diagrammed in *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, a text we find listed under 'Recommended Reading' at the back of the exhibition catalogue. Sense perception is reconfigured as data transmission.

The 'exhibition' brought together over 150 artists from around the world in an effort, as McShine's catalogue essay proposes, to re-evaluate how an

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 5.** Jan Dibbets, contribution to the *Information* exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 43. © 2005 Jan Dibbets/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

artist might go about making a mark on a world beset by the nearly ‘universal phenomena of general social, political, and economic crisis’.

If you are an artist in Brazil, you know of at least one friend who is being tortured; if you are one in Argentina, you probably have had a neighbor who has been in jail for having long hair, or for not being ‘dressed’ properly; and if you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in bed, or more formally in Indo-China. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas. What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?<sup>17</sup>

17. McShine, *Information*, p. 138.

18. Kosuth, ‘1975’, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 338–39.

McShine’s query – what can the arts *really* do? – looks for a medium or mode of response that artists could adopt to rise to the task of representation and action. The show itself, by projecting that question into the contemporary idiom, did not so much give answers to McShine’s query as reiterate its asking. And for us, some thirty years later, now saturated in the rhetoric of information, the *Information* show poses this query: what does it mean to formulate the question of art’s urgency and utility under the sign of information?

We can chart the imaginary terrain of this governing term in the following ways: first of all, we know that the word was repeatedly used in relation to Conceptual art practice: in the titling of artworks (e.g. Joseph Kosuth’s *Information Room*, 1970); in seminal essays on Conceptual art (e.g. Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin’s ‘Information’, 1972); and as an organising rubric for exhibitions, public events, and their documentation (Fig. 6). ‘Information’ signalled a scientific aesthetic in which the artwork was abstracted down to its ‘essential’ aspects and conveyed through linguistic data or structural system. This stylistic was representative of a larger movement towards what Joseph Kosuth has called ‘infrastructural analysis’: the practice of interrogating the invisible structures that secure the ideological function of art and its economic, historical, and cultural values.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the *Information* show also permits us to see that when the work of art assumes this mode of ‘straight information’ (as opposed to the would-be

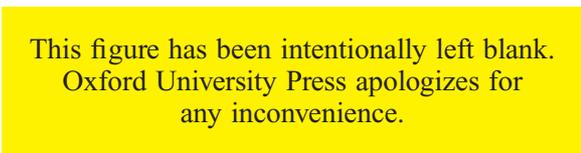


Fig. 6. ‘Straight Information’ poster, 1971–72. MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 3.96.

19. The *Information* show was not the first to bring together art and technology. In 1968, K.G. Pontus Hultén organised *The Machine: As Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It included work ranging from Leonardo Da Vinci's sixteenth-century drawings of flying machines to contemporary artist – engineer collaborations. Also in 1970, Jack Burnham curated the exhibition *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum. This show was the first major exhibition in the US to utilise a computer in a museum context. *Information* was less overtly technological, focused on ends rather than means, and, moreover, mobilised 'information' as a rhetorical figure. Because of this, the *Information* show gets us closest to the fantasies, aspirations, and anxieties that surrounded the term at this time.

20. Oskar Morgenstern, 'The Great Number', *Austriennale*, Palazzo dell'Arte al Parco, Milano, 1968; MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 2.56.

'indirection', 'distraction', 'obfuscation', even 'deviance' associated with visual representation), it takes on the formal structure of information in the technological sense of the word.<sup>19</sup> That structure is represented in the exhibition catalogue many times over – consider one example: a photograph pictures the pockmarked surface of the planet Mars and, on the opposing page, a grid of zeros and ones provides the corresponding digital information, as it was radioed on 14 July 1965 by Mariner 4, the first spacecraft to obtain and transmit close range images of the planet (Fig. 7). McShine's exhibition archive indicates that the Mars 'binary data dump' had been previously included in the Austrian contribution to the fourteenth Triennale di Milano, held in 1968, for which the theme 'The Great Number' was adopted partially in response to the recent location and computation of the largest known prime number. 'We must become abstract even where we deal with the physical world', Oskar Morgenstern writes in that exhibition's catalogue. '[W]orld images, pictures, measuring rods cannot cope with the world', he concluded.<sup>20</sup>

Some have surmised that artists had snatched the discourse of information from the field of communications engineering with which they were excessively impressed. It seems more likely that artists embraced its rhetorics because they were deeply immersed in the ideological fantasy that accompanied informational processes – namely, that information and communication technologies were, as Marshall McLuhan put it, 'programming our world to bits' by stripping it of detail, paring away

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 7.** Image and data obtained by the Mariner 4 spacecraft in July of 1965, included in *Information* exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, pp. 144–45. (Photo: NASA).

phenomenal ‘excess’, and reducing it to data to be used (Fig. 8).<sup>21</sup> One need look only as far as the exhibition catalogue cover to see the fantasy of ‘information overload and pattern recognition’ at work (Fig. 9). A grid of abstracted lithographic images of contemporary technologies of communication – an instamatic camera, an IBM Selectric, cruise ship, Volkswagen Bug, a portable television – together proposed that all forms of discourse had similarly achieved and suffered from a flattening and totalising informational consistency.<sup>22</sup> Considered together, the aesthetic of ‘information’ and ‘information’ in the technological sense of word gave rise to the following notion: the world itself had become an information system. And with the exigencies of contemporary political scene, the exhibition announced the desperate realisation that if the world was an information system then its subjects must be information-subjects; like the pattern of digital data, all were irreversibly alienated from the signified. Just as Mars was being made determinate by that grid of zeros and ones, it was also rendered radically contingent. Artists took up this fantasy, but significantly, they did so in the spirit of interrogation and experimentation, often moving between conviction, suspended judgment, and profound doubt. What – art viewers were asked – can and cannot be accounted for by the modular structure of information? Are zeros and ones truly adequate to the task of representing this world?

It was the artist Siah Armajani who most directly prompted these questions in his contribution to the exhibition (Fig. 10). The work, titled *A Number Between Zero and One*, began with just that – specifically, the number  $10^{-205,714,079}$ , which the artist had printed out and stacked as a nine-foot column of paper. The work wonders, worries, indeed obsesses over the question of what happens between zero and one. As Armajani had figured it, the answer was, of course, absurd – all 28.5714 hours of its print-out time. All the same, we can also see the work as an effort to render palpable the terrain not accounted for by the structural logic of information. Armajani rendered that terrain in the aesthetic of information – with computer, paper, and typed text – indeed, an ‘aesthetic of administration’, to invoke Benjamin Buchloh’s notion.<sup>23</sup> After all, paper’s surface is the very site of our institutional practices; on it, we map the world, graph the rise and fall of the economy, certify our titles, legalise our relations. But in Armajani’s nine-foot stack, paper’s behaviour subverts such functionality. One sheet after another, surface abuts surface, two dimensions become three, abstract space becomes real. In Armajani’s contribution, information has been squeezed out by presence of the material world itself. As for zeros and ones alone, try and try as they may, they will never be able to account for this world. This is what Armajani’s rejoinder insists.

Thus ‘information’ at this exhibition brought together on the one hand the Conceptualist notion of art as ‘infrastructural analysis’, and on the other, forms and fantasies derived from communication technologies. But that was not all. The word also represented, third and finally, matters of global political urgency. If there was a crisis of world proportions, then this exhibition made clear that it had to do not simply with the US invasion of Cambodia or the killing of the Kent State student protesters by the National Guard. Rather, artists contended with the idea that they and their work might be complicit. ‘Information’ was, therefore, also about art and action, and art as activism. The very notion was embraced by artists and activists in search of new signifying means and revolutionary avenues of information.

This figure has been intentionally left blank. Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 8.** Page 6 from ‘The Dewline Newsletter: Megascene Section’, by Marshall McLuhan, New York, Human Development. Vol. 1, No. 8. February 1969. Records 1.11b. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

This figure has been intentionally left blank. Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 9.** Cover of exhibition catalogue for *Information*, edited by Kynaston L. McShine. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1970. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

21. Figure 9, included in McShine’s exhibition files, was drawn from one of McLuhan’s *Dew-Line* newsletters. McLuhan took the title for his newsletter from the so-called ‘Distant Early

Warning' system of radar trackers in northern Canada. Jointly operated with the United States, that system was designed to detect enemy missiles aimed at the North American continent. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan remarks that when art is most significant it 'is a Dew Line, a . . . system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it'. Certainly there is a relationship between the military and information, this 'informational' aesthetic, and information warfare. That relationship will not be explored here, although it is my aim to begin to lay the grounds for that exploration. Marshall McLuhan, 'Agnew Agonistes', *The McLuhan DEW-LINE*, Vol. 2, no. 4, 1970, p. 2; MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 1.11. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 69.

22. Michael Lauretano, the catalogue's designer admits, 'we wanted to have a *sameness* about them all'. Michael Lauretano, interview with author, dated 12 September 2002.

23. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, no. 57, 1991.

24. Grace Glueck, 'Art Community Here Agrees on a Plan to Fight War, Racism, and Oppression', *New York Times*, 19 May 1970, p. 30.

25. The Art Strike Against War, Repression, and Racism leaflets (Lucy Lippard Papers, Art Strike file, Box 8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 10.** Siah Armajani, *A Number Between Zero and One*. Page 7 of *Information* catalogue, edited by Kynaston L. McShine. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1970. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Remember that only two months prior to the *Information* show a group of people from the New York art community convened to plan to protest against US war activities, specifically by retooling 'the art world's priorities'.<sup>24</sup> This group, called The Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression, pressured art institutions in New York to close for a two-week period in memory of those slain at Kent State and elsewhere, and as an expression of outrage at governmental policies. What Art Strike withheld from public consumption – quite literally, works of art in their conventional spaces and as conventional modes of viewing – it replaced with forms of information: museums were transformed into venues for 'information activities', and material made available there exclaimed: 'Information! Information! You are involved . . .' in a range of discriminatory and repressive practices, ' . . . unless you stop it' (Fig. 11)!<sup>25</sup>

Much of the work included in the *Information* show embraced the claim that the structures that sustained such repressive practices ran deep. Even facets of experience formerly conceived of as protected from such influences were perceived as produced by the symbolic order. Haacke's *MOMA Poll* made this plain by reconfiguring the domain of artistic and spectatorial practice to include the museum's financial and political affiliations. The work asked viewers to cast their vote in response to the question, 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indo-China policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?' Nelson Rockefeller's brother David was the then-chairman of the MoMA board and, at the time of the *Information* show, Nelson was running for re-election as the self-proclaimed 'peace candidate' despite his support of the Republican party and its policies in Indo-China. Sixty-nine per cent of the ballots were cast against the Governor.<sup>26</sup>

Haacke, although certainly not alone in this, brings to light the fundamental claim that haunted this show, which brings together these three valences of information that I have been fleshing out here. That claim goes something like this: being in the world was not just a matter of being saturated in information. Much more insidiously, the world had become a network of systems, and being a subject in that world meant being subjected by those systems.<sup>27</sup> Such systems, as Haacke has described them, are absolutely totalising – they are not just informational, but also physical, biological, social, natural, and man-made.<sup>28</sup> Haacke evinces an unusual confidence in this picture of the world and in the capacity of the artwork to intervene into that world-system, a conviction not shared by all contributors to the exhibition. His contribution trusted that the information solicited by his work might actually destabilise the governor's authority. He hoped that that information might challenge that authority at the level of public opinion. And certainly, he believed that works of art could effectively politicise the museum by making political opinion visible inside its walls.

Let me take stock of what I've said thus far. It was not simply the case that 'information' was a multivalent word that resonated with activists who were mobilising, became an important signifier for the field of communications engineering, and was seized by artists experimenting with a new stylistic. We cannot read these meanings as one would read a laundry list. Rather, the *Information* exhibition suggests that those valences were deeply connected, if not causally, then at the level of the cultural imaginary. Just as the word 'information' was being saturated with meaning from so many directions, it was also being interrogated. For the practitioners represented in this exhibition, the field of ideas represented by the word lived, wrestled with, and thrived off of the very same base-line claim: that only within sign systems were the individual and the social comprehensible as such, and that, more profoundly still, the world itself could not be, indeed *was not* without the sign.

### In the Beginning Was the Word

What I find myself saying here is that the *Information* show broached a structuralist world-view, or at least it leaned heavily on structuralism's principles for its representational means.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition pictured a world predicated on informational saturation and binary codification, and

This figure has been intentionally left blank. Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 11.** Art Strike Against War, Repression, and Racism leaflet, 1970. Lucy Lippard Papers, Art Strike file, Box 8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

26. Tim Griffin, 'Historical Survey: An Interview with Hans Haacke', *Artforum International*, Vol. 43, no. 1, 2004, p. 224.

27. In *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Pamela Lee reads *MoMA Poll* along with Haacke's 'real-time systems' through their incontestable situatedness in systems discourse, specifically, General System Theory, and, by extension, what Lee calls 'the question of time'. While Lee argues that the 'rhetoric [of systems theory] informs and certainly facilitates a new understanding of many of the artistic practices of the 1960s', I suggest that systems theory constitutes but one piece of the social fantasmatic critical to the understanding of the art of this period, one which, I explain below, must also take into account structuralist discourse and the extraordinary range of sign systems of which it speaks. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 67.

28. 'The working premise is to think in terms of systems', wrote Haacke in his catalogue submission to the concurrent exhibition at The New York Cultural Center, *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*. 'Such an approach is concerned with the operational structure of organizations, in which transfer of information, energy and/or material occurs. Systems can be

physical, biological or social, they can be man-made, naturally existing or a combination of any of the above'. Hans Haacke, 'Information 2', *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, The New York Cultural Center, New York, 1970, p. 32.

29. The reverse should be noted as well. Structuralism leans heavily on a notion of the informational. Take, for example, Jameson's description of the structuralist principle of binary opposition: 'We would ourselves be tempted to describe [the binary opposition] as a technique for stimulating perception, when faced with a mass of apparently homogenous data to which the mind and the eyes are numb ... It is a decoding or deciphering device, or alternately, a technique of language learning. At the same time this method presupposes a vast body of raw material or data, following the basic principle of communication theory that the communicational success of a message is in direct proportion to the amount of redundancy it contains'. Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1972), p. 101.

30. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1983), p. 113.

31. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1966).

32. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill & Wang: New York, 1967), pp. 11, 25.

33. In an essay titled, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam', T.J. Clark argues that Modernism is the practice of a 'wish to understand, and put under real pressure, the deep structure of belief of its own historical moment – those things about itself that modernity most took for granted, or most wished were true'. 'Modernism', Clark continues, 'was interested in the images and occasions of modern life, at least part of the time, but also, more deeply, in modernity's means of representation – the deep structure of symbolic production and reproduction within it'. While this essay focuses on the aesthetic-political claims and epistemic climate of the late 1960s and early 70s, Clark's polemic is instructive for my own. His is not just a call to the art of the present moment to question the deep structures of belief of its day, it is also an argument about the kind of questioning that is truly revelatory. Clark calls that questioning 'the test of form', and although he doesn't make his psychoanalytic debts explicit, to say that 'the art that survives is the art that lays hold of the primary process, not the surface image-flow' is to suggest that the aesthetic field is responsible for bringing into appearance, for formulating,

more radically, on the total foreclosure of the real and the bracketing of the human subject. In the structuralist view, the object and the subject are blocked out, and what is left hanging 'in the air between them', as Terry Eagleton explains, is a system of rules. This system, he elaborates,

has its own independent life ... To say that structuralism has a problem with the individual subject is to put it mildly: that subject was effectively liquidated, reduced to the function of an impersonal structure ... the new subject was really the *system itself*, which seemed equipped with all the attributes (autonomy, self-correction, unity and so on) of the traditional individual ... However far back we push, however much we hunt for the origin of meaning, we will always find a structure already in place.<sup>30</sup>

Structuralism's principles have transformed many fields. Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the differential sign, having already made a radical impact on the fields of anthropology (with Claude Lévi-Strauss) and psychoanalysis (in the work of Jacques Lacan), was, by the 1960s applicable to nearly every field of cultural inquiry.<sup>31</sup> As Roland Barthes contended in 1967, the whole wide 'world of signifieds [was] none other than that of language'.<sup>32</sup> Any meaningful system – kinship, the unconscious, the world of commodities – was said to be, or be structured like, a language. Language had become the grid through which the world was pictured.

My point is that we need structuralism to answer the question: what did language and its related forms and structures – the grid, most notably, in addition to a range of 'informational' representational strategies and figures – represent when so many artists came to believe in its aesthetic and political efficacy? We need, in other words, to recover structuralism for Conceptualism, to understand, first of all, structuralism's claims and, second, the limitations of those claims as this exhibition presses us to look for them. But let me be clear: I am not proposing that we subsume the whole of the use of language in art, circa 1970, into structuralism, nor am I arguing that we might finally understand this linguistic turn as amounting to structuralism's creeping its way into the visual field. Rather, it is the visual field that exposes the deep structure of its contemporary episteme, one which has had a profound and lasting impact upon not just the visual arts, but also how we practice the humanities more broadly. When the visual field dresses itself in language it reveals to us the unconscious of that world-picture, the deeper structure of the beliefs upon which it is based, as well as its limiting conditions.<sup>33</sup>

So here is what structuralism maintains: language is a system of differential signifiers that not only produces 'effects' of meaning, but also creates the 'world of things' and constitutes the subject itself.<sup>34</sup> In this view, we are *thrown* into language; language precedes and exceeds us, and our relationship to meaning or 'value', to use Saussure's word, is always bound by the temporal conditions of linguistic structure. 'In the beginning was the Word', mimes the structuralist psychoanalyst Lacan, 'which is to say', he adds, 'the signifier'.<sup>35</sup> In place of the Biblical narrative, Lacan anticipates what Barthes would come to call several years later the 'death' of the 'Author-God', the subject who claims the single origin of and final signified for his words. In this move, both word and world become *structural*. They are 'to be both followed and run', as Barthes explains, 'like the thread of a stocking', he illustrates, 'at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath'.<sup>36</sup>

If we ask ourselves what this notion of language looked like infrastructurally, we are directed to the grid. Indeed Barthes' stocking reference suggests this. But this is not just any grid; the structuralist grid is a closed system of synchronically occurring oppositional terms. To put it as Lucy Lippard did in her catalogue essay to the 1972 exhibition *Grids Grids Grids Grids . . .*, the grid functions as 'an arbitrary framework on which to build an entity, a self-restrictive device by which to facilitate choice'.<sup>37</sup> Like a net suspended over a void, the grid permits us to picture the absence that functions as the structuring principle and to grasp the idea that all of its terms are fundamentally negative or, as Saussure says, 'differences without positive terms'.<sup>38</sup> In this light, consider the proliferation of Lévi-Strauss' diagrams that map exchange among and within families, whether of women or buffalo meat (Fig. 12). Indeed his diagrams, much like those that, for example, Mary Kelly mobilised in her *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979), point back to the basic tenets of structuralist linguistics. We might say they are the offspring of the father-grid. As well, they are the anthropologist's means of representing what McLuhan calls in another context 'pattern recognition' – that 'breakthrough' that occurs when 'the details falls away and the pattern of interrelationships that they provide emerges starkly'.<sup>39</sup>

Structuralism also asks us to believe that being a subject is an ambivalent state of affairs. On the one hand, structuralists maintain that identity is marked by self-estrangement. In 1972, Frederic Jameson adopted Nietzsche's phrase, 'the prison-house of language', to describe this condition.<sup>40</sup> However, the flip-side to this imprisoned condition is that

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for  
any inconvenience.

**Fig. 12.** Diagram of cross-cousin marriage (above), and diagram of meat distribution among relatives (below), from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Published first in France under the title *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* in 1949. A revised edition was published under the same title in France in 1967. Translation copyright © 1969 Beacon Press. Reprinted with permission of Beacon Press, Boston, www.beacon.org.

the social fantasies that govern its time.

T.J. Clark, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam', *October*, no. 100, 2002, pp. 172, 164, 173.

34. 'It is the world of words that creates the world of things'. 'Man speaks because the symbol has made him man'. Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Norton: New York, 1977), p. 65.

35. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (Norton: New York, 1992), p. 213.

36. "Dans l'écriture multiple, en effet, tout est à démêler, mais rien n'est à déchiffrer: la structure peut être suivie, 'filée' (comme on dit d'une maille de bas qui part) . . ." Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', *Roland Barthes: Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 2 (Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1994), p. 949; Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', pp. 146–47. Significantly, as Benjamin Buchloh has already noted, the first English translation of Barthes' text appeared in a 1967 issue of *Aspen Magazine* alongside an essay in which LeWitt describes the 'serial artist' who aims not 'to produce a beautiful or mysterious object', but 'to give viewers information' as would a 'clerk cataloguing the results of his premise'. Sol LeWitt, 'Serial Project #1, 1966', *Aspen Magazine*, Nos. 5–6, ed. Brian O'Doherty, 1967, quoted in Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', p. 531.

37. Lucy Lippard, 'Top to Bottom, Left to Right', *Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1972.

38. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 120.

39. Marshall McLuhan, 'Agnew Agonistes', *The McLuhan DEW-LINE*, Vol. 2, no. 4, 1970, p. 2

40. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. 101.

41. 'So it is that our possession of language,' writes Jameson, 'which "writes" us even as we imagine ourselves to be writing it, is not so much some ultimate release from bourgeois subjectivism, but rather a limiting situation against which we must struggle at every instant.' Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. 140.

42. Jacques Lacan quoted in Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 210–11.

43. In a similar vein, Jonathan Flatley has offered a beautiful reading of LeWitt's *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974). He suggests that the 122 cubes achieve likeness through their shared incompleteness and, in effect, comprise what he calls 'a melancholy community – they are all missing the same thing, but each in a different specific way'. Flatley's description further imputes to the forms a profoundly *social* quality, machine-like indeed, yet it is their 'structure of affiliation' – and I would add their *structural* affiliation, the fact that their likeness and difference are predicated on the model of structure – that permits them political expression:

[T]he cubes are not alone in their loss; in fact, it is *loss* that brings them together. Being brought together by what they are missing, they form a kind of diasporic community. This structure of affiliation has the advantage of preserving particularity. It is also a form of affiliation that can easily support collective opposition, and as such it may be especially apt for the present historical moment. It is, for example, what brought the various activists together in the protests against the World Trade Organizations in Seattle . . . . By letting the idea be the 'machine that makes the art' LeWitt is able to produce art that helps us to remember not only what it feels like to be aware of the machines that order our everyday lives. *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* also remind us that the alienation that is an inevitable effect of being part of the machine-assemblage can also be transformed into the basis of affiliation, even collective opposition.

Jonathan Flatley, 'Art Machine', *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*, ed. Nicholas Baume (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2001), p. 101.

without self-loss there would be no sociality as such. Structural order is not only our limiting condition, but also the impetus for a politics that promises to transform that order.<sup>41</sup> In fact, although structuralism looks to be but an abstraction or a 'merely theoretical' terrain, it was, arguably, also lived and practiced by many. There's that famous graffiti left on a blackboard in the Sorbonne by a student in May of 1968, which read: 'Structures do not walk the streets!' Lacan's response argued just the opposite: 'if there is one thing', he retorted, 'demonstrated by the events of May, it is precisely that structures did take to the streets. The fact that those words were written at the very place where people took to the streets proves nothing other than that most often, what is internal to what is called action is that it does not know itself'.<sup>42</sup>

The structuralist imaginary further helps us to understand why some 'informational' art practitioners embraced the idea that imprisonment in an information world might actually be their saving condition: we cannot escape the grid, they thought, *but the code can be recombined*. Consider one iteration of this idea: Lucy Lippard's contribution to the *Information* show, titled 'A<sub>1</sub>B<sub>2</sub>S<sub>19</sub>E<sub>5</sub>N<sub>14</sub>T<sub>20</sub>E<sub>5</sub>E<sub>5</sub> I<sub>9</sub>N<sub>14</sub>F<sub>6</sub>O<sub>15</sub>R<sub>18</sub>M<sub>13</sub>A<sub>1</sub>T<sub>20</sub>I<sub>9</sub>O<sub>15</sub>N<sub>14</sub> A<sub>1</sub>N<sub>14</sub>D<sub>4</sub> O<sub>15</sub>R<sub>18</sub> C<sub>3</sub>R<sub>18</sub>I<sub>9</sub>T<sub>20</sub>I<sub>9</sub>C<sub>3</sub>I<sub>9</sub>S<sub>19</sub>M<sub>13</sub>' and consisting of an 8-page catalogue entry of detailed instructions. Fittingly, the work began with the word 'absence', which Lippard looked up in her dictionary. In the crevices of that book, she discovers a lost pair of tickets to a film screening. Lippard adopts the word 'absence' as the lost origin, as it were, of her structural system, and uses the numbers on the recovered ticket stubs to generate her 'absentee information'. Of course Lippard's 'absence' is not actually the void or no-thing that structures language's play of differences. Rather, it is its signifier, which generates a system of displacements that are to be 'followed' or 'run', 'at every point and at every level' – from the thesaurus (that eminent text of displacements) to the word; from the word to the lost ticket; from the lost ticket to the ticket numbers, and so on.

Using the numbers on the tickets, Lippard spawns a game of numerical and alphabetical permutation, combining the elements from the stubs in various ways to dictate the content of the work. This is her 'little bit of freedom', as Lacan would say; it is her 'speech act' in what is otherwise an arbitrarily dictated, yet rigid system of meaning. Note that Lippard's 'absentee information' also functions as 'criticism'. In the final page of the work, which ultimately takes the form of typewritten information, Lippard spells out specific instructions to McShine to challenge the social order. He must 'show no films glorifying war', she commands, and purchase artworks, again – and this is central to my point – according to some recombination of her code, and then donate them to 'independent museums all over the world . . . in low-income areas'. These are the culminating moves in her language-game. They are the 'work' of her artwork. If we codify a new language of art criticism, she believes, then we might be able to redirect art's distribution to disenfranchised viewers. If we put pressure on the museum's patrons to adopt new habits of viewership, we might redirect the ideology of the museum and the institutions with which it allies itself. If we halt the glorification of militarism in its imaginary forms, we may even – or so Lippard hopes – end war altogether.<sup>43</sup>

Still, there is still something hyperbolic, almost parodic about the circuitousness of Lippard's system, the incessant slippage from one signifier to the next, the obsolescence of its complexity, even her faith in its mode of

signification. Lippard's catalogue entry is parodic even if and as Lippard aspires to make systematicity democratise art, and make art in turn change the order of things. The subject of Lippard's information game is trapped inside its logic, both 'running' and 'following' at once. No wonder Barthes appositively pairs those verbs in his description of structure. Neither is quite right: 'run' is too early, too much ahead of the system, and 'follow' is too late – too much run by it. Only together can they do the job of describing the condition of being in a structural system, where there are, as Lippard evinces, 'innumerable centers', to quote Barthes again, and 'nothing beneath'; where one's sense of being and meaning happens laterally, as if across an expansive surface that can be 'ranged over', but never 'pierced'.<sup>44</sup> Where, in sum, being and meaning are shaped and delimited by the order of the grid.

### In the Grid

In a 1972 *Artforum* article, the critic Max Kozloff describes what he calls 'the trouble with art-as-idea' – another name for the aesthetic I have been examining here.<sup>45</sup> It is all data and no sense. Think Armajani's paper tower of zeros. Perhaps Kozloff's point is not entirely off the mark. As the critic sees it, this art is not so much telling us something as transmitting the broken bits of a lost message, or inventorying some transaction the details of which are too remote to put back together. Art has been reduced to marks that serve no function other than that of interruption, conclusion, accentuation, indication – but of what, we can hardly say. To all of this, Kozloff laments, the art world readily signs its name.

The critical reviews that followed the *Information* show in the summer of 1970 anticipated Kozloff's sense of dismay. Just days after its opening, Hilton Kramer declared the show to be 'unmitigated nonsense'.<sup>46</sup> 'The "relevant and meaningful" thing to do in the face of this grave political crisis is, apparently,' he added, 'to go to town with the Xerox machine'. 'The effect', described another reviewer, 'is the deprived feeling one might experience from reading a musical score but never actually hearing it'.<sup>47</sup> Carter Ratcliff defamed the *Information* show by forecasting that this art will 'not lead to future where anyone will live; this is the art of the death we cultivate around us now'.<sup>48</sup>

But to my mind the critics mostly mistook how the message was to be read. For – and here is the crux of my point – by signing its name to this picture of things artists did not so much embrace it, as lay it bare, broach its fictions and its limitations, even as they often risked getting caught in the very systems they adopted to do so. 'This is the dream of the information world', they seem to be telling us. A dream (indeed a nightmare for many) of the world as a total sign system, where even language has been stripped of affect and pared of everything save the bones of its infrastructure; a dream that sometimes promises revolution, but just as often threatens to completely dissociate cause and effect, sign and referent, subject and world.

The dream of the information world is a dream of being in and of the grid. Self-restriction; arbitrariness; that disciplined, autonomous, device-like quality of being both 'run' and 'followed' at once; the proposition of an absolute visibility that defies the very conditions of the phenomenal world; the very unquestionability of the laws that govern the system, and the proposition that 'if law is anywhere, it is everywhere' – these are the conditions of the grid.<sup>49</sup> There is also its scientific claim to reason, and

44. Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', pp. 146–147.

45. Max Kozloff, 'The Trouble with Art-as-Idea', *Artforum International*, Vol. 78, no. 1, 1972, p. 35.

46. Hilton Kramer, "Miracles", "Information", "Recommended Reading", *The New York Times*, 12 July 1970, p. D19.

47. Don McDonagh, 'New York Letter: Information', from an unidentified London newspaper; MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 8.

48. Carter Ratcliff, 'New York Letter', *Studio International*, Vol. 14, no. 7, 1970, p. 95.

its peculiar notion of visibility as all-seeing, immune to opacity, and powered by, to repeat Descartes formulation, ‘the inward vision of [the] mind’.

Yet this aesthetic often also permits us to see something more than this dream. Indeed, this must have been the case at the *Information* show. By bringing structural order up against other registers of meaning that don’t fit within its code, that reconceive of the capacities of the grid, the strategies of withholding that produce the dream can give way. To put it as Robert Morris has in another context, ‘Everywhere the *signified* assaults and overwhelms the signifier’.<sup>50</sup> Note that Morris’s words overturn Saussure’s foundational notion, described by Lacan in the form of an algorithm in which the signifier *always* stands over the signified (Fig. 13). Morris, among many others, suggests that the signifier cannot possibly be primary in every order of being. Or, to put the matter as Robert Smithson did, ‘[the system] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake ...’. Indeed the very ‘notion of the establishment’, he elaborates, ‘is a “bad dream” that has somehow consumed the world.’<sup>51</sup> In that bad dream, Smithson maintains in a language that seems to speak precisely of this structuralist imaginary, everything is catalogued within the terms of a ‘science’. Everything is, to use his word, ‘levelled’. There, social structures are ‘fictitious’ because they reflect only a ‘crumbling world-mind’. He suggests that the establishment is not a thing to be fought, revolutionised, or re-structured. It is not even a thing to be brought down. It is, moreover, a giant master-system of the socio-political, an overgrown grid with by now its very own mind that has both sprung from, and wrapped itself around our own. What’s more, as the contemporaneous work of Mary Kelly permits us to see, that mastermind has not merely wrapped itself around our own, it has also accrued enormous psychic capital. As Kelly’s own feminist and Conceptualist commitments can attest, we have come to love the idea of the grid. Its lawful scientism, abstraction, and cerebralism are themselves affective, even as – in fact, precisely because – they endeavour to keep the imaginary and with it the affective at bay. Structuralism has seduced us, symptomatised through us, and gripped us with its promise of a masterful *dis-affection*. We could look, finally, to Kelly’s reformulation of the Lacanian algorithm included in her *Post-Partum Document* as a parodic, albeit desperate attempt to informationalise this point: there are indeed signifieds that a structuralist world-mind knows not how to understand (Fig. 14). Of what world are they? What would a politics predicated on their terms look like? How might we represent and practice them?

Look once more – towards a conclusion now – at LeWitt’s *Untitled* print. Indeed it is informational. But with respect to our expectations of that term, it is also, crudely put, a mess. For, as with Armajani’s paper column, LeWitt’s information cannot help but accede to the tactile, temporal, and affective registers of meaning that inhere in his process and materials: the multi-directionality of the paper’s surface, the handwritteness of his information, the pressure, tempo, and sweep of his inscription that is not accounted for by the signification that his words alone aim to convey – in short, the phenomenal and corporeal realms, and the realm of affect, both of which structuralism would rather have us forget (Fig. 15). The haptic has found its way into LeWitt’s anti-optic, even as he has worked so hard to secure it and close it down.

By noting these qualities of the print, it might seem that I am suggesting that we leave behind the legacy of structuralism and its graveyard of dead

This figure has been intentionally left blank. Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 13.** Saussurean algorithm, reprinted from ‘Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious’ in *Écrits: A Selection* by Jacques Lacan, p. 149. © 1977. With permission of the publishers, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. and Taylor and Francis Books, Ltd.

49. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, quoted in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of*

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 14.** Diagram from Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Documentation II: Analysed Utterances and Related Speech Events*, 1975, paper in Perspex case, 20 × 25.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

authors for the purposes of returning to some age-old romanticised notion of the artist, his touch, and his work. Yet all too familiar is this dichotomy (and a false one as well) between, on the one hand, the radical foreclosure of the human held out by structuralism, and on the other, the divinisation of man and his work. Certainly, as François Dosse has suggested, an uncomplicated return to what preceded is neither desirable nor possible. Nonetheless, we must look back again in order, as he puts it, ‘to better understand this period whose contributions have irrevocably changed our understanding of humankind’, inclusive of the visual arts.<sup>52</sup> Thus my point: even as the grid has been called upon to ‘stabilise’ and ‘neutralise’ space by treating it ‘equally’, as LeWitt writes alongside his grid drawing, that very inscription unwittingly brings into visibility that which language and the grid have been conscripted to repress. After all, writing itself is hardly a matter of ‘treating things equally’. Even LeWitt’s words are undecided about what they have to say, and what they have to show. Perhaps LeWitt himself was always much more like Armajani than Haacke. Clearly his print suggests that writing’s forms are not entirely systematic, nor are they in every way ‘effects’ of the signifier, or even of representation. We might say that its forms picture a world that is not always-already after words,

This figure has been intentionally left blank.  
Oxford University Press apologizes for any inconvenience.

**Fig. 15.** Sol LeWitt, detail of *Untitled*, 1967, printed announcement, 35.6 × 35.6 cm. LeWitt Collection. © 2005 Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Beacon Press: Boston, 1969), p. xxi.

50. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Robert Morris: Around the Mind/Body Problem’, *Art Press*, No. 93, 1994, p. 32 (emphasis added).

51. Robert Smithson, ‘The Establishment’, in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, pp. 97–9. This essay was also published in an Italian publication titled *La Sfida del Sistema*, or *The Challenge of the System*, which Kynaston McShine got hold of and kept for his files for the *Information* show. In the context of that publication, the question concerning the challenge of and to the system was put to a number of artists. Smithson’s essay was one amongst several that responded to it:

QUESTION: Can the present language of artistic research in the United States be said to contest the system? In which way and to what extent? Considering the present ideological situation (political, aesthetic, social) is it possible for the function of art to occur to its full extent and not be compromised by the establishment even though it may be in opposition to it? Or can the hypothesis of a revolutionary outlet as being the vital condition of art outside and against the establishment, be verified in a symptomatic situation in the United States?

*La Sfida del Sistema*, unknown source; MOMA Archives, NY: *Information* Exhibition Records, 2.57.

52. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, Vol. 1, trans. Deborah Glassman (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), p. xxvi.

nor dictated by the laws of the grid. But it's not so much that their world is before words, or just outside of them; to think of the problem that way would be to remain suspended, like the grid, in mid-air. Rather, the forms that LeWitt shows us in this print exceed the representational capacities of the signifier, even as they have existed right there with that system, all along.

*This essay owes a great deal to Tim Clark, Shannon Jackson, and especially Kaja Silverman and Anne Wagner for their supervision of the doctoral dissertation from which it derives. I wish to thank my colleagues and students in the Art and Art History Department at Stanford University, as well as Seth Lerer and my fellow Stanford Humanities Postdoctoral Fellows for their careful attention to drafts and presentations of this material. The resources of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and the New York Museum of Modern Art Archive were indispensable to this essay. I am also indebted to Susan Jenkins, who generously shared with me her own findings on the Information show.*