

Information and Entropy in the Cold War and Its Present: Emergent Meaning in the Art of Robert Smithson.

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In such works as "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" and others generated out of his Arcades project, Walter Benjamin formulated a materialist critique of the bourgeois sense of "aura" that accompanied the meaning of mass produced objects. In his critique, Benjamin differentiated between the material production and status of the object and its meaning as a cultural artifact within the dominance of bourgeois ideology. Central to bourgeois aesthetics were such notions as the factuality of news, information, and science in the so-called "public sphere," the separation of natural and industrial production, and the progressive nature of historical events. In his essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," for example, Benjamin's located journalistic information as a form of knowledge "at a distance" that exemplified the notion of aura within the everyday social sphere of bourgeois knowledge production. For Benjamin, journalism was part of the "withering of experience"--a bifurcation of experience into an "inner sense" of experience (--a new, "personalized" sense of Erfahrung) and a sense of experience as something "publicly" lived through ("Erlebnis"). For the journalist and for the cult of public information that dominates modernity, repetition and narrative form create a sense of truth and coherence that has come to replace the contradictions of material production. For Benjamin, this is the sense of experience (as Erlebnis) that we live today. "Reality" is true and coherent--it is the personal (experience as Erfahrung) that is contradictory, ambiguous, and incoherent.

As Benjamin's critique of modernist "shock" during his writings of the 1920s and 1930s make clear, his critique of modern mass communication was constructed not simply by way of a formal analogy with technical machines of reproduction (such as the assembly line), but it was constructed upon a materialist critique of the manner by which technical machines themselves mediated and constructed knowledge and information. The aesthetic qualities of repetition and a narrow causal coherence which characterize modern information are both a formal and a material extension of technologies whose operational efficiency is premised upon these same spatial and temporal qualities. Only because Benjamin first identified the material and the ideological production of meaning in the aura of modern information could he then assert that technology led to and materially supported social and aesthetic technique, that is, the medium was constructive of the media. Indeed, Benjamin's well commented upon (and poorly understood) valorization of reproductive technology in "The Age of Mechanical Reproduction" only occurs in the context of relatively new media, whose rhythms are still new, and in that sense, somewhat different from those technical rhythms that serve aesthetic-informational ideology.

And it is only as new that these technologies can be credited with any revolutionary potential.

Benjamin's materialist critique of bourgeois aesthetic ideology through which the object obtains its normative meaning and social function in bourgeois culture was based on the critical strategies of montage and defamiliarization which he had observed in the Soviet avant-garde and in Brecht's theater. For Benjamin, such critical techniques were not just artistic, but more importantly, they were social tools for reevaluating the meaning of objects and events in everyday life. In this belief, Benjamin carried forward the Soviet avant-garde's, as well as Brecht's belief in the revolutionary task of the formalist and materialist artist.

The period of the Cold War in the West, particularly in the United States was a period which witnessed a tremendous production of mass culture within relatively narrow possibilities of political meaning. These affects are still very much with us today in the age of global capitalism and digital media. Within cybernetics (which carried a certain symbolic importance as the metascience of the Cold War), the goal of communication was that of systematic production and linkage. Information theorists such as Warren Weaver and Norbert Wiener had little hesitancy in extending technological models for communication and information production and reception to human domains of language and community. For information theory after the Second World War, the message--as both a technological and as a semantic entity--was a function of statistical norms. In the language of cybernetics, the security of the organism depended upon a statistical normativity and consistency both within its own internal information system and between itself and its environment. And analogous to the individual organism, ultimately, the security of the social body was dependent upon the smooth flow of consistent symbols. Weaver and Warren had no difficulty in seeing technological agents as cyborg helpers in the accomplishment of these psychological and social goals. In fact, it was the strength of digital machines that by virtue of their design they functioned most seamlessly when they processed information that was repetitious and strictly causal. The cyborg model was one based on not just any old unison between the machine and the human, but one whereby the material differences between these two types of organisms was subsumed by a shared logic of standards and operations. Cyborg logic is based on the oldest of humanisms.

For Benjamin, the Dadaists were exemplary social critics in their willingness to forefront the material properties of aesthetic images by the juxtaposition of disparate material elements from contradictory realms of social meaning (bottle caps with feathers, urinals in the confines of art exhibits, etc.). Far from reading into Dadaist shock a form of dandyism, Benjamin saw in such "shock" a counter-shock to that of technological reproduction.

In our own period, we have witnessed a similar glossing over of social critiques via bourgeois biographical hagiographies as happened to the Dadaists even in Benjamin's time. In the midst of the social and political overload of "information,"

artists such as William S. Burroughs, Andy Warhol, and Robert Smithson engaged the political overproduction and hegemony of public information in ways that were similar to the Dadaists, but which were in some ways even more sophisticated in an age of even greater hegemony. Though Burroughs' name and that of Warhol's are now, indisputably, those of media icons, Burroughs' sophistication in "cutting-up" and merging political and science fiction narratives in the late 1950s and early 1960s and Warhol's in exploiting the means by which technical reproduction establishes and then exhausts meaning in a commodity society remain beyond the reach of such hagiographical productions.

Smithson's work is less well known than Burroughs and Warhol's probably because it deals with the social production and exhaustion of meaning as a formal and material event, rather than through popular characters and media figures. I would like to suggest, however, that some of the same themes as inhabit Burroughs and Warhol's work, such as the exhaustion and collapse of the meaning of images, events, and language, the collapse of progressive senses of history, and the artifactuality of "factual" representations, occur in Smithson's work. Smithson's work, though, forefronts the material object in a socially reflexive manner, so that matter is given the task of negotiating the construction of meaning with the viewer, rather than simply signaling the exhaustion of meaning in public information (as in Warhol) or is simply used to build satiric horizons whose purpose is to allegorize politics and public information in a confrontational manner (as in Burroughs). In this manner, Smithson's work is closer to minimalism than to pop art since its strategy is to provoke a negotiation of the forms through which social space is constructed (such as its temporality) via the positioning of the object, rather than the creation of a parallel universe.

Smithson had a particular fascination with critically juxtaposing the natural and the artificial. This fascination is evident in the many references he made in various interviews and articles about his boyhood visits to the Museum of Natural History in New York City, as well as in the juxtaposition of the "artificial" and "natural" in his site specific art works and in his "non-site" art works constructed within the physical sites of various museums. In one of his earlier works, a photomontage that has been titled, "Big Fish," we see some of those concerns within a political narrative that is not far removed from Burroughs work: a monstrous fish is examined in a bunker-like setting by figures that exemplify scientific and military authority. Behind these authorities, two naked human torsos intrude, acting as both another element in the authorities' collection and as a countering reality principle. Though this work deals with representational cultural elements in a manner that is uncharacteristic of Smithson's later work, it suggests some of the social horizons that Smithson will challenge in through more formal devices: modernist science and reason framing objects and historical beings by regulated narratives, categories, communities, and systematized senses of time.

Smithson's materialist critique of information begins with what Smithson understood from communication theory as "'degenerative information.'" Pointing to

"self-inventing dialogue" in Warhol's films, Smithson points out that Warhol's language is constituted by layers of information and tropes that "collapse into verbal deposits." In this way, Warhol's work takes the idea of an informational system to its furthest end: endless streams of countless "facts" joined only by their tropic repetition. As Smithson points out, "Warhol's syntax forces an artifact of sadomasochism that mimic its supposed 'reality.' Even its surfaces destroy themselves" (82). Smithson's point is that information hegemony and overload result in a sadistic and masochistic sense of information. Even the sense of its being "information" (i.e., its particular discursive surface) becomes lost as the viewer feels beaten down by the "informationalist" quality of it all. Against an information age rhetoric that says that our culture does not have enough information, Smithson might have said that has, indeed, too much.

Information isn't "atomic" for Smithson; rather, information is built up, similar to how minerals and organic matter are shaped into the metal frames of cars, the houses of suburbia, and the paints of the canvas. In Smithson's ironically titled article, "A Tour of The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), Smithson chronicles his journey past rows of fledgling malls and suburban developments that "rise into ruins before they are built" (72). Such sites are "ruins in reverse" because construction sites organize mineralogical materials in order to then construct an entropic plane of organized sameness. For Smithson, these architectural homogenous containers of living space are "memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures" (74). The suburban landscapes are designed in order to create smooth flows of traffic and commerce and to economize movement and interaction according to an ideal logic of flows. In doing so, the landscape is turned into a concrete reflection of an idealization of living things. A sort of perverse heavenly landscape.

Smithson seems to have understood the ultramodernism of the 1930s as the beginning of art's articulation of the ironic fashion through which technical reproduction builds up objects of information only in order to have them exhaust their informational value and return to an entropic state of what Smithson, after Anton Ehrenzweig called, "dedifferentiation." In his essay *Ultramoderne* (1967), Smithson contrasts a modernist project of containment with a ultramodern project of endless reflection through the ultramodern's use of mirrors and crystalline structures. Such an exhaustion of containment works upon history's sense of time, as well. Modern historiography, as a reflection of events, is reflected endlessly, so that it results in an "obsolete future" where though "Nothing is new, nether is anything old" (65-66). The result of such an art is the appearance in social space of the formal logic of reflection made material and apparent by its endless reflection. As Smithson writes about the dedifferentiation between tool and materials, frames and objects, in Jackson Pollock's work, "What then is one to do with the container?" (102). This question refers not only to Pollock's literal paint can, but to conceptual tropes in language. In Smithson's ironically titled drawing, "A Heap of Language" (1966), for example, language is reduced to being a series of words about language on the one hand, and as appearing as a literal heap of "printed matter" on

the other. Information overload has given way to the emptying out of content and the pure appearance of form and matter. Tropes about language are language, and such a language is nothing but language.

As was the case with Benjamin, Smithson's critique of social information leads to a critical inversion of progressive notions of time. The two senses of time Smithson proposes in his writings are somewhat similar to what Gilles Deleuze has called "Chronos" and "Aion" (The Logic of Sense, "Tenth Series of the Ideal Game"). The difference between these two senses of time, respectively, is between a time that is made up of presents repeated to eternity and a time that contains the past and the future in the present. This latter is what Smithson called the relation between "prehistory" and "posthistory"--histories that stand outside of a narrative of presence. The true present, for Smithson, is Aion--filled with a knowledge of the sedimentation of the past and the future. "Technological ideology," as Smithson writes, "knows no sense of time other than its immediate 'supply and demand,' and its laboratories function as blinders to the rest of the world. Like the refined 'paints' of the studio, the refined 'metals' of the laboratory exist within an 'ideal system'" (106). That ideal system is the time of production and of modernist progress. What it is blind to is the quality of *différance* inherent to any present and the entropic spacings that all presences are built up from and return to. In other words, technological functionalism, like aesthetic representation, presents an idealized narrative of production that cancels out those possible futures inherent within the complexity of the "now."

In contrast to modernity's narrative of presence and progress, Smithson's work proposes an emptying out of "history" as a structural container for the present, and it attempts to view the present in terms of the multiple surfaces of an emergent set of possible futures. This unfolding, fractal multiplicity is evident in Smithson's work involving crystalline structures (e.g., "The Spiral Jetty") as well as his work with mirrors (e.g., Smithson's series of mirror displacements as described in his article "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan"). Smithson's site works attempt to construct a work that interacts with the complexity of the geographical site over time. In "The Spiral Jetty" (a large spiral jetty built on the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970), for example, Smithson attempted to construct an art work that was both inspired by, and would develop through, its location in the Great Salt Lake. Spiraling salt crystals, for example, soon appeared throughout the Jetty, building a history out of the material relations between the Jetty and the surrounding lake and land masses. The Jetty was built in order to both symbolize and proliferate the entropic complexity of the lake. Eventually, the entire lake would fill with salt, reaching a state of entropy that would then, eventually, deteriorate. The work of art would not enframe this event, but to the contrary, would be swallowed up by the predominance of the emerging material forms.

Smithson's work is unique in that it exposed representation and modernist historiography to the materiality and to the temporality of the physical "world" at its most complex and "total," In other words, Smithson's work exposed traditional

art to its social and material base. Against traditional aesthetic representation, Smithson created works that had a reflexive relation to the institutional walls that contained them. Against traditional historiography and presence, Smithson placed art within a "natural" context that far outran the limits and possibilities of modernist progress and human presence. Against technological determinism and functionalism, Smithson exposed the material meaning and aesthetic relations of technological objects.

For Smithson, the maximalization of information always involves emerging complexity and time. Neither order nor disorder, but complexity and time--and, foremost, uncertainty. Smithson's work is concerned with emptying out content from the "container" (as exemplified by his earthwork, "Asphalt Rundown" (1969)-- a dumptruck load of asphalt dumped down a mound of arid soil) and turning the container inside-out so that it's containing surface can be read through the variability of chaotic time and extended spatial surfaces and events.

Smithson's argument for a maximalization of information vis-à-vis a surface aesthetics provides a critical counterbalance to information theory's desire for redundancy and causal narrative, especially as its argument gains power based upon the very exhaustion of meaning by redundancy. In so far as redundancy and causal narrative produce a symbolic "content" whose signifiers come to act as a shorthand for meaning, information must be characterized as rhetorically tropic. And in so far as those tropes cease to be referential because of their sheer hegemony and overproduction, their material conditions for production may be brought to the fore by the shifting of scale.

In the works of Burroughs and Warhol, social satire largely cancels out the agency of matter as a vehicle for both political critique and social reconstruction. In Smithson's more formalist works, however, the exhaustion of content means that the social terrain is not left to a battle of similar, but competing forms for structuring meaning and objects. On the contrary, the object in Smithson's work is the reflexive surface upon which content becomes possible and time is read out of. Material is complex, contradictory, and presents resistance to rational placement. Its time is other than informational, but in this sense, it provides the information of the real. This, perhaps, is something to remember in the "age" of "the virtual" and its technologies of representation.