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A Brief History of Artistic Research in the United States

At their third annual meeting in 1949, the National Association for Schools of Design sent its members a tellingly worded questionnaire regarding the new association's core mission. Today, rebranded as the National Association for Schools of Art and Design, the organization is known for accrediting art schools and Bachelor of Fine Arts programs across North America. With methods of the old French Academy discredited, the association asked its members, "Are we in danger of creating a new academic?"[1] This lingering question at the start of the post-war period expresses an enduring conflict between art as an academic pursuit and the conviction that art practice cannot be mastered through formal training. In 1949, that new academic was largely one that fit the mold of the middle-class professional man and the cold war scientist.

Today, we see a similar set of tensions play out around the decision to go to art school, the value of a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree, or the logic of a PhD in art practice. Since the early 2000s, the idea of artistic research has become a constant presence. In a 2023 essay for *Artforum*, the critic Claire Bishop slighted research-based art as an overabundance of information presented in overwhelming yet banal modes of display.[2] These critiques reflect an investment in a certain kind of medium-specificity and practices of art criticism. Here, Bishop describes viewers in exhibition spaces awash in data—left to their own devices to question or sort out the truth. Her stated interest is the form these projects take, citing the predominance of vitrines, tables, pamphlets and Post-Its—all favoring the horizontality of reading over the verticality of looking at painting and sculpture. She also offers a periodization of artistic research

starting in the 1990s and ties each phase to a growing familiarity with digital information systems. But the contrast between the horizontality of reading and the verticality of looking at a painting is more than just a formal maneuver. It echoes a telling observation by the Conceptual Artist and art critic Charles Harrison. Describing Conceptual Art in the 1960s, Harrison contends, "that the type of disposition supposedly definitive of aesthetic experience—a type for which the appreciative viewing of paintings furnished the principal token—should be displaced in the culture by another." For Harrison, the kind of art that Conceptual Artists embraced "entailed a willingness to conceive of 'viewing' and 'reading' as requiring the same kinds of cognitive capacity."[3] In line with Harrison's observations about Conceptual Art from the 1960s, my book *Intelligent Action* contends that thought and social action are a part of aesthetic experience, and that aesthetic experience is an important alternative to dominant approaches to research and knowledge production in academia.[4]

By some measures, artists have always done research and engaged in forms of knowledge and thinking. If we consider artistic research as largely delimited by the institutions of higher education and other elements of the industrial knowledge complex, artists have long been working in educational institutions, receiving grants, and publishing academic writing on and around their work. Part of my argument in *Intelligent Action* is that artists in the university from the late 1950s through 1970s underwent a specific transformation with the rise of higher education and institutional support. Art historian Howard Singerman has shown that, by and large, visual art became legible as a field within the university by masculinizing the figure of the artist and training him (intentionally gendered) in theoretical discourse.[5] Singerman is concerned with the history of the MFA degree through art schools and programs within higher education. Without contesting the history Singerman describes, *Intelligent Action* uncovers the alternatives to this process of masculinization and professionalization, although never entirely free from the dominant models.

Focusing on the US context, Singerman explains how unaffiliated art schools and art departments rushed to take advantage of the growing university system thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill. With the passage of this bill, young men returning from World War II, or any subsequent military service, would be able to get most of their college tuition paid for by the US government. At the same time, the research university model was positioned at the end of World War II to make substantial gains thanks to the establishment of the National Science Foundation. A founding document of that organization, titled *Science, The Endless Frontier*, was written by computer scientist and visionary Vannevar Bush.[6] Bush's agenda and model helped establish a structure of research funding that was fueled by the cold war and shaped eventually by the counterculture of the 1960s. Against this backdrop, Singerman argues, art programs within universities and schools recruited an increasing number of young men and trained them in a particular way of speaking about their work.

The context of the cold war and 1960s counterculture is essential for understanding how a dominant model of artistic research developed in North America, only to be challenged by a small few. The dominant model was epitomized by The Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), an artistic research center initiated by György Kepes in 1965. After a period working with the Bauhaus luminary and émigré László Moholy-Nagy, Kepes was invited to teach first at New Bauhaus and later at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), just outside of Boston in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the 1940s and 1950s, Kepes found himself educating the senses of young architects and engineers, and his 1944 publication *The Language of Vision* was influential for designers beyond his own classroom.[7] Remembered for its application of Gestalt principles to visual design, it also expressed something key to the nascent cold war ideology of the time. As Kepes writes, "We are living in a formless age of transition, of chaos, incomparable to anything man has ever experienced before. In this confusion, plastic art, the most direct experience of order, the forming activity par excellence, gains significance."[8] For Kepes, form was a key term. In this case, creating form and structure from just a few elements mirrored the desire for structure and order after the chaos of World War II. Kepes sought to foster an appetite for structure, order, and form— reflected in his philosophy of design—without the need for oppressive totalitarian regimes.

By the mid 1960s, Kepes was putting his plans for CAVS into action. The center built on previous work to unite the arts and sciences but also emphasized collaboration and creative problem-solving. In 1967, seven artists joined the center as Fellows—among them Otto Piene, Vassilakis Takis, Harold Tovish, Ted Kraynik, Stan VanDerBeek, Jack Burnham, and Wen-Ying Tsai. The first collaborative task of the center was to develop plans for a public art project in Boston Harbor. Kepes's initial idea for the project was to create a "focal hearth" that could foster a sense of community for Boston residents.[9] Fellows invited to the center were asked to develop hypothetical proposals individually. With no real funding for any such project, the Boston Harbor remained a kind of testing ground for artistic research in the public sphere. Kepes's plans for the Boston Harbor project never solidified into a single plan, but served as what Otto Piene called a "Denkmodell" or object of thought.[10] Some proposals involved elements of light, with sponsorship from the Sylvania Corporation, while others involved elaborate performances staged with rowboats or floating islands. Kepes's own proposal for synergetic light buoys would use floating light sources to project abstract shapes above the water's surface. By the late 1960s, projects done collectively by the CAVS Fellows took the form of exhibitions and books, but with a similar goal to foster collaborative, experiential work meant for public consumption.

With the end of the 1960s came heightened tensions between the military-industrial complex's investment in academic research and the aims of the counterculture. At CAVS this played out in a public controversy over participation in the 10th Sao Paulo Biennial in 1969. Kepes's planned exhibition would bring together artists from the center and beyond to showcase his philosophy of artistic research – built on interdisciplinary crossovers, collaboration, and creative problem-solving. After nine of the twenty-three artists publicly withdrew, Kepes's planned exhibition was scrapped and reimagined in 1970 at MIT's Hayden Gallery and the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts. The exhibition also embodied Kepes's interest in creating technologically innovative works that mirrored the "lost pageantry of nature," as the title of an article in *ArtsCanada* heralded.[11] Kepes's solution to the "twisted, fake and hollow personal lives" of youth culture in the 1960s was a unification of new technology and "natural" forms.[12] The most public figure to drop out of the Sao Paulo exhibition was Robert Smithson, who did so with a letter to Kepes likening his work to a "sad parody of NASA."[13] Other figures who pressured Kepes not to participate included Lucy Lippard, the critic and champion of Conceptual Art.

The emergence of conceptualism, as both a Euro-American movement and a tendency around the globe, fostered an alternative to the vision of artistic research presented by Kepes. This vision, however, existed alongside Kepes's own at CAVS. While Smithson embodied this reproach of technological determinism with his interest in entropy (what Reinhold Martin called "organicism's other"), Jack Burnham became the posterchild for an alternative model aligned with the emerging Conceptual Art movement.[14] Burnham was one of the first artists to join CAVS in 1967, but he was also one of its earliest critics. Among the nine artists who withdrew from the Sao Paulo exhibition, Burnham's break with the Center culminated in an essay titled "Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed."[15] Much earlier, however, Burnham had begun to conceive of systems aesthetics as a more appropriate response to the world of technological transformation at the height of the Vietnam War era.

"Systems aesthetics" was Burnham's way of referring to an emerging yet capacious aesthetic paradigm of conceptualism with a lower case "c."[16] Burnham's article of the same name champions the post-formalist work of Les Levine, Hans Haacke, and Allan Kaprow, to varying degrees, and his seminal exhibition, *Software – Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (1970), included artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler, among others. Artists who would go on to epitomize Conceptual Art with a capital "c" were exhibited alongside artists working with early digital and computational media such as Agnes Denes and the Architecture Machine Group from MIT. The latter were exhibited on the first two floors of the exhibition and represented what Burnham saw as the more technologically oriented work. On the upper floor

were works considered more typical of Conceptual Art. Burnham intended this as a reference to Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–1923) or *The Large Glass*. The lower floors of the exhibition, then, were to stand-in for the machinery and so-called "malic molds" depicted and encased in the lower pane of the glass, while the more conceptual works were associated with the organic forms or "the bride" of the upper panes. Burnham's understanding and appreciation of Duchamp becomes central to his schematization, as well as his divergence with Kepes.

Although an interest in cybernetics and systems was closely tied to military research in some cases, Burnham's aesthetics were nonetheless distinct from Kepes's. In an interview with Willoughby Sharp about the *Software* exhibition, Burnham explains his interest in Duchamp's work, and its relationship to his own aesthetic paradigm.[17] For Burnham, Duchamp's project began as a question with an aporia at its center: how can one make a work of art that isn't an artwork? He thinks this through Bertrand Russell's true-false propositions and Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism, concluding that art breaks down as "it feeds off the logical structure of art itself as material, taking a piece of information and reproducing it as both signified and signifier."[18] This doesn't mean, however, that art is disappearing or dematerializing. Rather, it "dissolves into comprehension," as Burnham puts it, a possible reference to Russell's paradox and the comprehension principle, which holds that any concept can be used to create a category, such as art. Comprehension, thus, describes the conceptual knowledge that certain artists were producing—Duchamp chief among them—by mining seeming aporias, paradoxes, contradictions, and antinomies that exist between the material world and our categories of understanding.

In contrast to Kepes's approach to artistic research, one based on collaboration and creative problem-solving as well as a desire to discover visual principles in nature, Burnham's post-formalist ontology of art held out for potential hidden meanings to emerge from un-harmonious tensions. Art historian Luke Skrebowski has called this a "nervous breakdown" of

Allan Kaprow, Household, Photograph of Kaprow at Cornell University, 1964. Photographer Unknown. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

the New Bauhaus project that included people like Moholy-Nagy and Kepes; however, it was Kepes himself who couldn't seem to reconcile his own ambivalence about the marriage of art and technology.[19] Kepes's metaphor for integrating the two was the power of "centripetal" force to bring order and harmony to otherwise disparate elements.[20] Kepes looked for figures of this harmony in the visual and sensorial world, aesthetic experiences that would model for the individual the order that society lacked. If Kepes's vision was centripetal, then Burnham's was the inverse. The centrifugal power of conceptualism, or what Mel Bochner would later describe as "decentralized" aesthetic experience, spun outwards.[21] The kind of knowledge or thought produced by works of systems aesthetics was diffuse and fragmented between perceptual experience, inner thought, and communicative language.

For Kepes, this kind of aesthetics was too hard to see. In an article for *Daedalus* about possibilities for design in the urban environment, Kepes dismissed elements of urban planning such as communication and transportation networks—facets of the city that necessitated systems thinking—as too conceptual, lacking the "visual legibility" that other projects might provide.[22] Thus, Kepes project for engaging the public was premised on applying Gestalt principles to the cityscape. One of his favorite examples was the steeple of a church that could visually unify an otherwise disordered medieval city. It is not hard to see how this would inspire Kepes's and some of the Fellows' proposals for Boston Harbor. For example, in Piene, Kepes found someone whose projects carried on the legacy of "visual legibility." Piene would go on to become Kepes's successor at CAVS in 1974. Piene had made a name for himself before arriving at MIT, and his early "light ballet" works even received mention in Burnham's systems article.[23] However, once at MIT, his projects aligned with Kepes's interest in the power of large-scale visual symbols that might balance freedom and order through visual symbols. Piene's list of ideas for the Boston Harbor involved shooting a beam of air, water, fire, light, or steam into the air. He would soon bring a version of these ideas to fruition through his collaboration with the astrophysicist Walter H.G. Lewin, whose collaborative exchange helped him create giant inflatable beams that stretched across the sky.[24] While these works prove that artists can certainly benefit from access to scientific discoveries and technological innovations, they are less convincing as works of artistic research themselves. At best, they make use of new technologies but fall short of bringing meaningful aesthetic experience to bear on knowledge or thought.

While certainly the most high-profile, CAVS was not the only place where artistic research emerged as a result of the boom in higher education. Other fruitful experiments with art-as-research in the university setting were happening on the campuses of Rutgers University, The University of California Santa Cruz, Ohio State University, and The University of Iowa, to name just a handful of examples. Artistic research in these institutions didn't take the form of well-resourced centers like CAVS, but it did lead to participatory and intermedia experiments fostered by the pedagogical structure of higher education. Practices like Alan Kaprow's Happenings on college campuses, Robert Watts Experimental Workshop, or Hans Breder's Intermedia MFA program focused on the centrifugal force of artistic thinking and aesthetic experience in ways that would start in the classroom and move eventually beyond. This is perhaps best embodied by the work of students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. Although remembered as the school that Walt Disney dreamt up, or the cradle of West Coast conceptualism, it was also a stopover on the way to more socially engaged public art that changed what it means to be an artist in the twenty-first century. Artists no longer need to think of themselves like the cold war scientists discovering new knowledge and applying it to solve problems but can instead pose problems to generate new meanings from the contradictions that emerge.

This story of artistic research in the United States barely scratches the surface of the industrial-knowledge complex and its effects on the trajectory of American art. However, it does gesture toward some important transformations and tensions that played out due to the rise in mass higher education. First, artists found ways to take advantage of institutional resources by describing their practice as research,

while the demands of these institutions shaped the discourse in ways beyond artists' control. However, these institutions were important sites of countercultural contestation, in which some artists played an important role. Finally, the institutions of higher education offered an alternative venue for both the production and consumption of art; in doing so, they transformed the possibilities for art and what it meant to be an artist. The new academic these institutions created does not look like the one from the bygone era of the French Academy, but it need not look like the professional, cold war scientist, either.

[1] Douglas MacAgy, "Fine and Commercial Arts Redefined," in College Art Journal 9, no. 4 (Summer, 1950): 406.

[2] Claire Bishop, "Information Overload," in Artforum, Vol. 61, No. 8 (2023): 122-130.

[3] Charles Harrison, "Indexes and Other Figures," in Essays on Art and Language (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2001), 69.

[4] Tim Ridlen, Intelligent Action: A History Artistic Research, Aesthetic Experience, and Artists in Academia (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024).

[5] Howard Singerman, Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[6] Vannevar Bush, Science--The Endless Frontier: A Report to the President on a Program for Postwar Scientific Research, Reprint, National Science Foundation, 1960 (Washington, D.C.: 1945).

[7] György Kepes, Language of Vision (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1944).

[8] Kepes, Language of Vision, 201.

[9] György Kepes, "Center for Advanced Visual Studies," in Massachusetts Institute of Technology Bulletin 104, no. 3 (December 1968): 48.

[10] Otto Piene, "In Memoriam: György Kepes, 1906-2002," Leonardo 36, no. 1 (2003): 3-4.

[11] György Kepes, "The Lost Pageantry of Nature," ArtsCanada 24, no. 5 (1968).

[12] Kepes, "The Lost Pageantry of Nature," 31.

[13] Robert Smithson, "Letter to György Kepes (1969)," in Robert Smithson: Collected Writing, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 369.

[14] Reinhold Martin, "Organicism's Other," in Grey Room 4 (Summer 2001): 34-51.

[15] Jack Burnham, "Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed," [1980] in Video Culture: A Critical Investigation, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Rochester, NY: Gibbs M. Smith, 1986), 232–248.

[16] Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," in Artforum 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 30-35.

[17] Jack Burnham interviewed by Willoughby Sharp in Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 63-70.

[18] Burnham, Great Western Salt Works, 69.

[19] Luke Skrebowski, “Jack Burnham Redux: Reappraising Systems Aesthetics,” in Nervous Systems: Art, Systems, and Politics since the 1960s, eds. Timothy Stott and Johanna Gosse (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 29-54.

[20] See John Blakinger, György Kepes: Undreaming the Bauhaus (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2019), 211.

[21] Mel Bochner, “Excerpts from Speculation,” in Conceptual Art, ed. Ursula Meyer, (New York: Dutton, 1972), 56; Originally printed in Artforum 8, no. 9 (May 1970): 70-73.

[22] György Kepes, “Notes on Expression and Communication in the Cityscape,” in Daedalus 90, no. 1 (Winter 1961): 153.

[23] Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” 35.

[24] Blakinger, György Kepes, 346.

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