Jon Ippolito, "Where Has All the Uncertainty Gone?" (1996)

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What caused the increased prominence of "pure information" as artistic material in the mid-1990s? This essay argues it stems from a misunderstanding of the legacy of conceptual art, tied to anxiety about the rising influence of technology.

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Now that we can download the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* from the Louvre's World Wide Web site, it is more tempting than ever to treat art as just another form of data. While the notion that a marble sculpture could be equivalent to bits streaming through a telephone line may at first seem a side effect of advances in modem technology, this attitude really has its origin at least as far back as 1970, when art critics were trying to come to terms with conceptual art. That year, Jack Burnham decreed, "In the case of most Conceptual art, the commodity is pure information," and Kynaston McShine chose *Information* as the title of the Museum of Modern Art's survey of conceptual practices. A quarter-century later, a good deal of contemporary art still presents information: maps of Berlin, diagrams of family trees, text explaining the history of a seaport shown in accompanying photographs. Today's critics dub this work "neo-conceptualism," conjuring up a pedigree that harkens back to work of the 60s and 70s. *The New York Times*, for example, noted recently that all of the plastic bottles that make up a "neo-conceptualist" installation by Seiko Mikami are labeled with details about hazardous waste

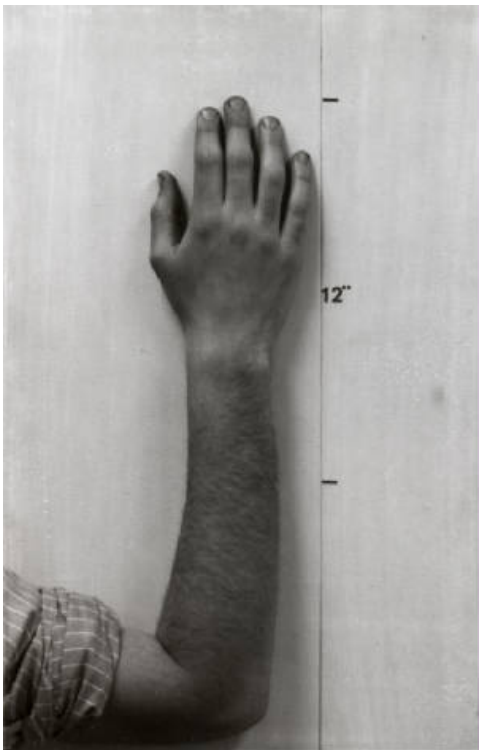


Figure 1 Mel Bochner, *Actual Size (Hand)*, 1968. Polaroid photograph, rephotographed, enlarged, and mounted.

disposal, prompting the conclusion that the work's meaning is "information itself." But is this the real legacy of conceptual art, that art can be pure, unambiguous information?

Answering this question requires doing some homework. First it's important to look at actual works of conceptual art rather than relying just on historical documentation. Of course, few of the most radical artworks--exploding sculptures, closed galleries, attempts at telepathy--have survived from the 60s and 70s except as some form of information, whether catalogues, documentary photographs, or interviews with the artists. This biased hindsight makes it hard to tell whether the original works of conceptual art were also reducible to information. Fortunately, several recent exhibitions, including *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and *Mel Bochner: Thoughts Made Visible 1966-1973* at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, have recently given us a second chance.

The second task required to decide whether the conceptualists reduced art to information, as these shows make clear, is distinguishing between the various conceptual arts. For even though first-generation conceptual artists never partitioned their work into mutually exclusive categories, over time their influence has crystallized into three separate models--Art as Critique, Art as Idea, and Art as Epistemology--each of which uses information to different ends. Finally, the most important task is distinguishing the neo-conceptual artists influenced by these three models from their artistic forebears like Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Kosuth, and Bochner. As we shall see, the younger generation trusts information implicitly, in a way the older generation never did.

Among the artists influenced by the three models of conceptual art, it was the disciples of Art as Critique who were first tagged "neo-conceptual" by the critics. Certain works of the 60s and 70s, such as Broodthaers' ersatz museum, had exposed the way institutions pigeonhole the artifacts of culture; so in the 1980s the simulated paintings and sculpture of Peter Halley, Sherry Levine, and Jeff Koons were supposed to expose the commodity status of art. While these "simulationists" conducted their critique from inside the museum's own gilt frames or atop its white pedestals, their successors in the 90s have preferred to linger near the museum door. There Andrea Fraser offers her surrogate acoustiguide, while Marc Dion imports a bestiary of urban wildlife across the threshold. Both seek to expose the order museums impose upon the objects they present. And out on the streets are Guerrilla Girls posters and Act Up leaflets, exposing the embarrassments of bastions of culture from the Whitney Biennial to the United States Congress. All in all, there's a lot of exposing going on, though in the transition from internal to external critique the denunciation has taken off its disguise (a critique of connoisseurship camouflaged as a color field painting) and stepped out in the open (a poster reading "The Administration Has Blood on His Hands"). In the process these works have given up trying to embody a critique, in favor of merely presenting one. The critique they present is a form of information, though it has none of the "take it or leave it" quality we often associate with information; its moral certainty gives us no other choice but to "take it."

Although Art as Critique was up till now the most influential strain of conceptual art, in the last two years Art as Idea has gained influence among contemporary artists. While artists who picked up the thread of the institutional critique use information to a pointed political end, artists of the second lineage seem to value information for its own sake. Kosuth, the patriarch of this second

bloodline, claimed that art could be pure idea, a self-definition analogous to an axiom of philosophy or mathematics. In his work from the 60s, Kosuth often narrowed his focus to definitions of individual concepts: *One and Three Boxes* (1965) conveys the idea of "box" through a physical object, photograph, and a dictionary definition.

Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Boxes*, 1965. Box, photograph of a box, definition of a box, 62 x 135 x 36 inches.

Kosuth's idealism lives on in contemporary art, albeit diffracted by a postmodern lens. While Kosuth's vision was analytic, his inheritors' is synthetic: instant of paring down to a single idea, they accumulate unrelated ideas. Ilya Kabakov explained in an interview in last January's *Art in America* that "the postmodern consciousness arises in a society that doesn't need new discoveries, a society that exchanges information, that correlates all possible languages and establishes interrelationships between them." As Kabakov's quote suggests, the information these postmodern artists present is rarely discovered firsthand. More often it is meticulously researched, as in the assemblage of found information with which Ronald Jones entitles his assemblages of found forms. *Untitled (This bookshelf served to hide the entrance....)* (1990) for example, features a bronze cast of the baboon heart that "Baby Fae" received in an unsuccessful

transplant in 1984, hanging from a facsimile of the bookshelf that Anne Frank hid behind in 1942. The trend to cobble together disparate ideas into a conceptual chimera has been growing especially among younger artists; the last season has seen the yoking together of, among other wacky idea-pairs, pirate booty and artistic heritage, Neil Armstrong and vampire lore, and testicular musculature and motorcycle-sidecar racing.

To be sure, these ideas come with more ready-made cultural appeal than the generic idea of "box"--but they are ideas nonetheless, and with the possible exception of Matthew Barney, the physical presence of the work itself is far less important for the artists' careers than the words on their press releases. (Often the work is just words next to pictures anyway--a sort of illustrated press release. For these artists, the transition from gallery to Web page would be easy indeed, except for the fact that in a non-art context their work would cease to be "neo-conceptualism" and simply look like odd juxtapositions from Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia.)

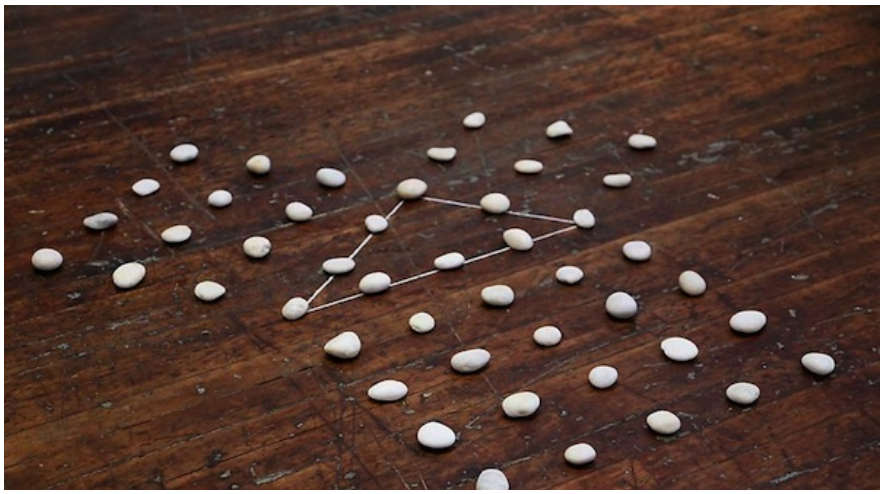
So whether prescriptive or correlative, whether critique or idea, information is indeed the stuff of which these neo-conceptual works are made; the photos, maps, and bar charts are just souvenirs we can take home to show that we, too, are familiar with these facts. And because their information is relevant (as Critique) or interesting (as Idea), these artists assume their artwork will be too.

By contrast, the information in the original conceptual art of the 60s and 70s, with the exception of works by a few artists like Hans Haacke, was almost always irrelevant and usually pretty uninteresting. Who cares whether Cesium 137 has a half-life of 30 years, or whether 10,000 lines

not touching can fit on a wall? Not only is it hard to pinpoint the social relevance of this information, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain exactly what, if any information is being conveyed. What is the information communicated, for example, by Christine Kozloff's painting bearing the words "A MOSTLY RED PAINTING"? Or by Daniel Buren's striped banners paraded through the streets, or by Robert Barry's proposal "Something which is very near in place and time, but not yet known to me"? What is interesting in these works is not the information being presented, but the presentation itself--the frame in which these artists chose to set this information, either inside or outside the gallery. Even in Kosuth's multiple definitions of "box," the gist of the work lies not in a successful evocation of the platonic ideal of a box but in the tension between the perceptual and linguistic definitions of "box."

Where the equation between early conceptual art and information really breaks down is with the third school, Art as Epistemology. The easy confidence with which today's artists trot out unquestioned facts for our consumption is definitely not a trait inherited from this branch of conceptual art's family tree, as proven by the current traveling exhibition of Mel Bochner's work from 1966 to 1973. At first glance, the ephemeral materials and diagrammatic look of Bochner's installations suggest they are indeed only vehicles for information. A strip of masking tape stuck to the wall bears handwritten numbers counted from right to left. A photograph shows the artist's hand next to a black arrow on the wall labeled "12 inches." A rock labeled with the letters A and B sits on a piece of paper on the floor; next to it is written "if nothing is between A and B then A and B are identical." But if there is knowledge in these works--how to count, how to measure with a ruler, how to tell what's next to what--then we have already learned it by the second grade. We take it for granted, use it every day, breathe it in like so much air.

But Bochner doesn't. What makes these works epistemological--the word is Bochner's own--is that upon closer inspection we find underlying each of these seemingly indisputable certainties the yawning question of how we know what we know. If we try to count along with the numbers on the tape from right to left we will find the sequence is discontinuous, jumping to a new patch of tape every five numbers or so. Meanwhile a sequence of underlying numbers penned directly on the wall counts from left to right; this underlying sequence seems to be continuous, but it's hard to know for sure since the pieces of tape occlude portions of the counting on the wall. What seemed to be a straightforward sequence of numbers is really a visual investigation into the conflict between measuring things and measuring space. Likewise, the 12-inch measure in the photograph looks straightforward enough until we realize that there is no reason that a foot photographed should be 12 inches long when reprinted; the fact that the label reads "Polaroid photograph, rephotographed, enlarged, and mounted" shows that we have been set up for this coincidence by the artist. Nor should we be taken in by the fact that Bochner has used a single rock labeled both A and B to illustrate the proposition "if nothing is between A and B then A and B are identical." He could just has easily have used two rocks touching each other, which would have rendered this axiom absurd.



In his work of this period Bochner orchestrated a terrific tension between what we think and what we see. When viewers

presume that these works are merely information, without ambiguity, it is not because they lack the mathematical background of set theory--it is because they didn't look carefully. For Bochner's investigations remind us that the word "geometry" means "measuring the earth," and a central problem of his works from the 60s and 70s was the translation from the diagrammatic space of Euclid's axioms to the real space of the gallery floor and walls. Left in their own mental domain, Euclid's theorems, like Kosuth's definitions, can generally be proven consistent or inconsistent; but as soon as infinitesimal points swell into rocks and infinitely thin lines inflate into measuring tapes, problems of translation create inescapable visual conundrums. One of the best examples of this is Bochner's "disproof" of the Pythagorean theorem. This cornerstone of geometric logic holds that the squares of the shorter sides of a right triangle should, when added, equal the square of the longest side. When Bochner tried to illustrate this diagram with rocks, he found the formula didn't hold: he always had three rocks left over. The discrepancy can be explained as a double-counting of the three vertices, or as a misleading identification of points with intervals--but what's important is that we start to wonder why textbooks treat the formula as a self-evident truth. Bochner's investigations are kind of institutional critique, in the sense that 1, 2, 3 and "X is between A and B" are institutions we patronize without being aware of them. Nevertheless, unlike most contemporary institutional critics, Bochner didn't decide ahead of time what the "point" of each work would be; there is often no preferred interpretation to his work. When Descartes purged his philosophy of received notions, he was left with the conclusion "I think, therefore I am" to serve as the rock-solid foundation for his enterprise. When Bochner purged his work of received notions, he was left with the conclusion that rocks were not so dependable after all--that fundamental to his enterprise was the very questioning of certainty.

This is the real casualty of the shift from conceptual to neo-conceptual: the ability to live with uncertainty and the desire to understand it. Unfortunately, when most of today's younger artists adopt the ephemeral materials or systematic approach of older artist like Bochner, the older generation's skeptical and inquisitive spirit gets lost in the translation. The Guerrilla Girls may be skeptical of authority, but they rarely direct that skepticism towards their own practice. The percentages and bar charts on their posters reflect good intentions, but they also reflect the same undo faith in statistics that props up Ross Perot's infomercials. Taking one step closer to ambiguity--though not a very big step--are the artists who fasten disparate images together in a rebus to be decoded: a molecule of benzene painted over pristine forest means "Nature is being polluted." Once we've matched the political platitude to the formal device, of course, the ambiguity dissolves, and the moral certainty of the message relieves us of the responsibility for questioning the slapdash juxtaposition that led to our conclusion. Finally there are the artists who shackle together ideas with only the most tenuous relationship--practicing saber parries while rollerblading around to various automated teller machines for example--and present them as text and photos on the gallery wall. If there is ambiguity in this work, however, it is an uncertainty about the artist's intentions, not some fundamental ambiguity about our world or the conceptual framework by which we understand it. And no matter how unconventional the ideas, what never gets questioned is the presumption that the silkscreened text and framed photographs that stand in for these ideas are a straightforward record of events outside the gallery walls. These artists would be quick to scoff at an easel painter who claimed that his oil paintings were just straightforward views of a landscape, imposing no ideology of their own. Yet these same artists trust their diagrams to act as a transparent "medium" by which the viewer receives a bundle of recommended opinions or interesting facts. Do they think the lesson of conceptual art is that we

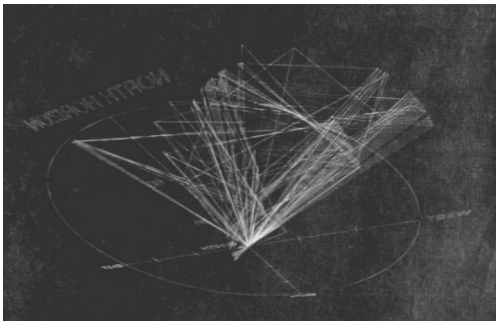
can use language as a transparent, objective vehicle for ideas? Every art has an obligation to question its own ideology, and part of that ideology is embedded in its form. As Bochner wrote in a wall drawing in 1970, "Language is not transparent", and his work proves that a captioned photograph is no more free of bias than the printed word.

So what ever happened to the epistemological conceptual art epitomized by Bochner's investigations?

I'm not entirely sure of the answer to this question, but part of it may be that our culture is increasingly driven by information that we have to take for granted in order to survive. The Greeks thought long and hard before they claimed to understand what it really meant to say that one rock was between two others. How many net surfers really understand the HTML code that brings Web pages to their computer screen, or the machine code that HTML is built from, or the quantum physics that underlies the semiconductors that the machine code runs on? Unfortunately, most contemporary artists are just as complacent; the typical digital artist dishing out scanned photographs on a Web server is no more questioning the fundamentals of technology than the painters of geometric abstractions are questioning the fundamentals of geometry. Forget the warnings of Heisenberg and Goedel that uncertainty is fundamental--the fact is, we don't want to admit how little we know about where our information comes from. There's a lot of information out there on Web pages and America online forums, but unexamined information is only useful for people who don't mind being misled.

There is an alternative. As his contribution to the "information" catalog in 1970, Dan Graham typed a list of diminishing distances, starting with "1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.00000000 miles to edge of known universe" and winding down through galaxies and solar systems until he reached the distance to his subway stop, then to his front door, to his typewriter, to the lens of his glasses, and finally to his retina. Now that faxes and email offer almost instantaneous contact with far-off points on the globe, these distances may feel less intimidating than when Graham first typed them. Nevertheless, Graham's list reminders how extravagant the promise of unimpeded information transfer really is, for it assumes that telecommunications and other technologies can safely transfer data across all these distances without loss or degradation.

But are all the checkpoints on the information superhighway really free of obstruction?



Laura Kurgan, *You Are Here: Information Drift,* at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, 1994. GPS computer plot.

A few contemporary artists have begun to explore this question, and in doing so to carry on the charge of epistemological conceptual art. Laura Kurgan pursues her investigation on a planetary scale; for *You Are Here: Information Drift* (1994), she linked a handheld receiver to the Navstar Global Positioning System, a constellation of 24 satellites orbiting the earth that broadcast position and time signals. The US military used the GPS during the Gulf War to fix the positions of aircraft, map minefields, and course-correct pilotless missiles. Although Kurgan's attempt to fix the position of the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York was perhaps

less critical to national security, it nevertheless revealed something about GPS that never makes it into Navstar's product descriptions: the likelihood of error. Thanks to imprecise satellite clocks, imperfect orbits, and ionospheric interference--not to mention the signal degradation intentionally introduced by the military to thwart its use by unfriendly forces--Kurgan's GPS computer plots look more like dispersed clusters of pixels than precise outlines of the Storefront building. Kurgan has also investigated the "background interference" of supposedly neutral display elements in cyberspace addresses, such as the dot, slash, and tilde of World Wide Web addresses.

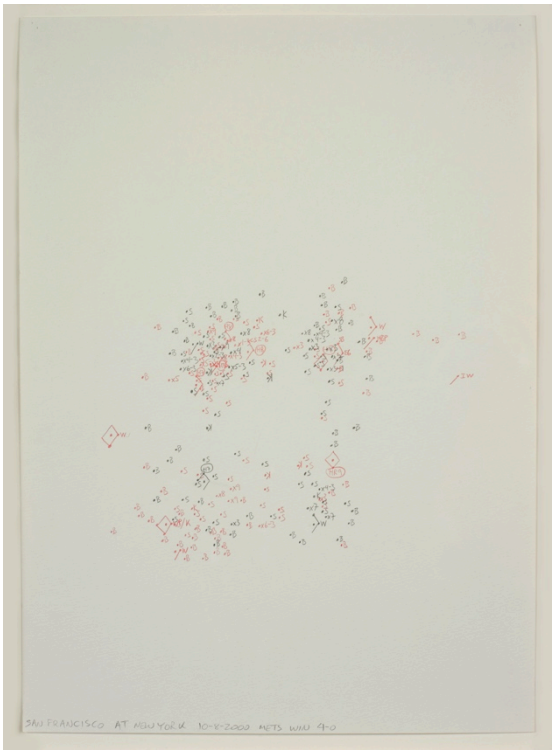
Christine Borland, *Weakness, Disaster, Old Age, and Other Misfortunes*, 1995. Shot crockery.

Two young British artists have meanwhile been exploring the "middle distance" of Graham's list, which links a locale in the neighborhood, such as Graham's subway station, to one's own front door. This sort of linkage is traced all the time by police detectives, who rely on fingerprints, DNA tests and other forensic technologies to connect evidence found at the scene of a crime to a specific subject. Abigail Lane has created a game to test the accuracy of this technology. She arms two players with stamps of her thumb- and fingerprints. One gets stamps of her left hand and the other her right. Whoever first manages to convict Lane of a crime wins. While Lane plays the criminal, Christine Borland plays the detective; her work often requires working

closely with forensic specialists. In *A Place Where Nothing Has Happened* (1993), she brought police to a block of derelict buildings in the heart of Tyne, England. It was a routine investigation--analyzing glass fragments, casting tire treads, and gathering other potential clues--except that what was being investigated was not a crime but the very process of investigation. In laying out the delicate pieces of evidence on a glass table, Borland put on display the fragile substances on which decisions of guilt or innocence are often based. In *From Life* (1994), forensic experts delved still further into a case, in fact right up to the victim's nose: Borland employed specialists in osteology and facial reconstruction to sculpt the head of a young woman from her skull. Similar reconstructions have served as evidence in court of law, yet as Borland learned in the making of *From Life*, there's no known scientific basis on which to reconstruct the nose and another fleshy features. That there is an art to this investigative act challenges the objectivity implied by the entire enterprise.

There remains one more scale to be examined: the leap from the lens of Graham's glasses to his retina. On the eve of the third millennium, we are not yet the integrated cyborgs that Donna Haraway predicts we will become, and there is yet some tiny gap across which the spark of an image or sound must jump before it enters our consciousness. Perhaps this gap is an opening, a space in which art may yet insert itself. As geometry once mapped the mind to the earth, another set of conventions now map the cathode ray tube to the eye, the telephone receiver to the ear, and the mouse to the hand. These conventions are as ripe with mistranslations as Bochner's diagrams, but only a few contemporary artists are going to the trouble to look for them. The Bauhaus-like screens on Macintosh computers inspire Rainer Ganahl's wall drawings. We are usually conscious only of the data in a computer's central window, but this "front end" is only what the

computer's designer wants us to see. What about all that information the computer is processing that we don't see, tucked away in the computer's unconscious? The activity in Ganahl's diagrams is usually on the periphery--icons, toolbars, and text cut off by the edge of the screen--suggesting information we only glimpse of the corner of our eye. And why don't we ever hesitate to comply with those intimidating warnings like "Unauthorized Action: Shutdown and Restart" flashed on the screen with a bomb pictogram and a Pavlovian beep? Though Ganahl may seem to be merely framing information, it is more that he is drawing the frames themselves--and drawing our attention to how they structure our attention. Plots of other interfaces may take a scattershot form: Janet Cohen watches baseball games on TV to estimate the locations of pitched balls as they enter the batters' strike zone; whether the resulting drawings chart the hand-eye coordination of the pitcher or of the artist is worth thinking about. Different technologies, of course, offer different interfaces to probe and undo. Regardless of what the end product of this technological epistemology looks like, the investigation into uncertainty--not being afraid to look forward and examine it--is more important to our society now than ever.



Janet Cohen, *Baltimore at California (8/31/93)*, 1995. Pencil on paper, 13 x 9-1/4 inches.