ENTROPY

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ENTROPY -- DEFINITION

In communication theory, entropy is a measure of the certainty or uncertainty between the sender and receiver of a message. When the predictability of receiving and understanding a certain message is high, then entropy is low. If a message is misunderstood, or out of context, then entropy is high. For example, the more we know about the nature of the message being sent, the less uncertainty there is as to the information of that message. If the message is out of synchronization with the receiver, then the certainty of receiving that information is low, and entropy is high. In addition, entropy is a measure of the order and disorder within a system. High entropy yields high disorder, and low entropy engenders low disorder. Thus, entropy is a measure of the certanty/uncertainty, order/disorder within a system -- a measure of the balance between sender and receiver.

In mass communication systems, entropy is high -- there is a great deal of uncertainty as to the meanings and information (or use) value of the messages. One reason for this is the social nature of the communication process. Communication systems reflect the predominant ideology of the times. Most communicators are white middle class males, working within a system that reflects those values, either spoken or unspoken. Our social system, however, is not predominantly white, middle class, or male. It is a constantly changing flux of social needs and realities, needs and realities that the present communication system cannot truly reflect.

Art as a communication process has also come to reflect the values of the dominant ideology. Most artists work within a continuum that is controlled by large institutions -- museums, art schools, galleries, publications -- which reflect, among other things, investment capitalism, staunch individualism, white middle class values and meanings, and elite ideas and philosophies. Artists who attempt to break this mold are usually ground down by the system -- on the one side the system is controlled by curators and art historians, on the other side artists' messages are laden with information that only an "art audience" can understand.

As a communication process, the whole system is highly entropic.

In the last few years there has been a seeming ferment in art and cultural thinking -- the acceptance by more artists that art is reflective of political and ideological imperatives within our social system and that there is no such thing as the "neutrality of art" (that art is separate from other aspects of our culture -- politics, economics, psychology, sociology, etc.). This position views art as an integral part of the entire political-cultural bulwark of society, and as such can no longer be divorced from the needs of society as a whole. Artists and art works can be responsive to the changing nature of culture and the struggles of people within that culture. Art can be a useful tool or discipline in examining, explaining, and coming to grips with the forces that shape our existence.

Formalism, minimalism, conceptualism, structuralism, etc., are all movements and manifestations of different ideas as to how art is to be used (but generally become co-opted to "read" how art is to BE). Most of these explicative movements are reactions to the frustrations and contradictions within the structure of the art system.

Generally, people working in art are frustrated on several levels. Artists may seek to present their personal vision of the world but that vision is only accepted when it is made to conform to the vision of the status quo. Artists may seek to communicate information, but that information is usurped by the institutionalized process of the traditional art system. When artists do place their message through the communication network, it is clothed in a language that their audience cannot readily understand. The meanings and nuances of their work is interpreted by curators and art-historians, and even the original impetus for their work may exist in the narrow confines of an aesthetic realm determined by forces outside themselves. Basically, artists do not have the control of the means of artistic production. Their works end up reflecting meanings that are determined by others -- middle class values of aesthetics, art as investment, validations of ruling class ideologies. The artist is alienated from the mainstream of culture, controlled by values inimical to the freedom that art attests itself to.

In the last few years, many artists have recognized these contradictions for what they are -- similar to contradictions within our society as a whole. Inequity in distribution and verification of meanings, inequity in social roles, inequity in production, unhappiness with work conditions. The response has been varied but has manifested itself primarily in a burgeoning self interest on the part of artists -- in organizing, in alternatives, and in social confrontation.

Artists' organizing (unionizing for rights) acknowledges the fact that most artists are underpaid and underprivileged workers, subject to poor and hazardous work conditions, with little or no security. Resale royalty acts and contracts, copyright stability, and unionization are attempts at forging quantitative change for artists, but don't really attest themselves to structural changes in the system. The goal is to transform artists into well paid and secure workers without fundamentally altering the meanings of production. It's a similar situation to the aftermath of the great unionization burst of the 1930's -- workers today are highly paid for frustrating and meaningless work.

Alternative art spaces and publications are envisioned as a way of coping with and changing the traditional art structure. These 'new art' systems attempt to house and incubate artists and art works that are antithetical to the art system -- by creating artist run galleries and artist controlled publications, and by creating new ideas, new relationships, and new ways of looking at things. The idea is to create a support structure that reflects only the role of the artist, eliminating the negative aspects of traditional art delivery and support systems -- by-passing museums and galleries as the definers of the meaning of art.

Yet most alternative spaces and galleries end up becoming parallel systems -- instead of an "outsider" controlling the merchandising of art products, artists become the controlling factor. Alternative spaces are still cordoned off from the social realities around them. Communication still takes place among the narrow confines of aesthetics. And the art works still reflect ideologies imposed on artists by a middle class system -- artists just have more to say in the production and display of their "wares." The vested self-interest of artists become stronger, but they do not attempt to deal with the contradictions of the entire system.

The current wave of artits' books falls into the same trap. Artists at first hoped to create new formats for the presentation of ideas and meanings, formats that were less likely to be usurped by the traditional art system. Artist books are portable, inexpensive to produce, and allow greater control on the part of the artist. But again, artists still imbue their books with meanings that reflect institutionalized versions of reality. The books become objects in themselves -- instead of putting a painting or photograph on a gallery wall, the artist places it in a book. The gallery has dwindled in size, but the use value remains the same -- a verification of the rarified air of aesthetics.

Taking control of the means of production is only the first step for artists. Recognizing who they are creating art for, and what values they reflect in their work, is the next vital movement that artists can explore. Until now, artists have been working for the status quo, by being accountable to the world of ART. Even by assuming more control over their production, this service function has not necessarily changed. Artists have to clarify who they want to serve, and be accountable for their works. And if they're interested in fundamental social change, then they have to develop an interface with the leading forces of that change.

Redefining the meaning and role of art is an ongoing dialogue embracing all aspects of art production and distribution. Art can be viewed as a useful tool for social change, as a social form capable of criticising and examining the contradictions inherent in our society. Works examining the political nature of art itself, examining the economic manipulation of work, examining the structure of cultural meaning, of the roles we are all involved in playing, directly attacking the nature of capitalism from a Marxist point of view, examining the nature of social realities -- all these areas are being explored and can be explored by socially conscious artists. But in addition to developing these parameters, artists must gauge their work to the culture at large. Creating a structural criticism of institutionalized values is entropic if it remains within the present traditional (or alternative) art system. Taking control of the art structure, creating new forms of communication, and distributing new information is entropic if the messages do not reflect the needs of a greater audience than is presently receiving those messages.

Artists must break through the system, wrest control of the means of production and distribution, examine what meanings are inherent in their work (what values the work engenders and for whom those values are created created) and channel those messages to a new and and wider audience.

SELF--CRITICISM

As a first issue, ENTROPY falls short of any major innovation in the realm of art for social concerns. The dichotomy between wanting to create a work of artistic merit and have material of useful social value usually ends up weighted on the side of art. And I have fallen into this trap.

Although my initial concept of ENTROPY was as a journal of cultural material that dealt with the contradictions inherent in our social system, my description of the magazine to other artists was too vague: "ENTROPY seeks to increase available cultural information to communicate new messages relating to aesthetic behaviour, to examine the contradictions inherent in present states of communication, to eliminate any restriction on choice and valuation." I found myself accepting work that would somehow broadly fit into the description of entropy and the problems of communication: new information, antithetical ways of looking at things, examinations of social realities, problems of order/disorder, certainty/uncertainty. And though there is nothing inherently wrong with this, it falls short of openly dealing with cultural contradictions.

The artists here are grappling with social concerns beyond the artists' environment, but most of the work is grounded within the meanings of the art world itself. Questions still go unanswered. What do we do with our art? Who is the audience? What are the needs that art can meet? After we identify the meanings of our culture and our art, how do we change those meanings? The material here is useful and worthy of investigation, and can be viewed as useful tools for social change, helping other artists identify new areas of investigation. What is needed, however, is a stronger conception of how these tools can be put to use -- a moving away from the rarified concerns of the realm of art, a clarification of the needs that art can meet, stronger social criticism in a context that can be used for social change. Hopefully, future issues of ENTROPY will close the gap between what is art and what is change.