PASSAGES

JACK BURNHAM (1931–2019)

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Jack Burnham working on one of his viewer-activated luminous ribbon pieces, 1982. Photo: Northwestern University archives.

AS THE CLOUDS of Hurricane Sandy gathered, I sped north from Virginia to Maryland en route to interview Jack Burnham, the elusive curator of the digital art exhibition “Software” (1970) and the author of the influential *Artforum* essay “Systems Esthetics” (1968). We had begun our correspondence months earlier, when I tracked him down to request permission to reproduce one of his alchemical diagrams for a piece I was publishing on mysticism, systems theory, and ecological art. When he returned the signed permission form, he included a diagram, a Kabbalistic tree of life mapping the circulations of water vapor, carbon dioxide, oxygen, and nitrogen, as well as the seasonal transitions, that he called his “irony of ecological art.”

The diagram hardly seemed ironic, as Burnham was known to have taken up the practice of the Kabbalah in the mid-1970s, around the time that he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study alchemical symbolism in the work of Marcel Duchamp. He engaged with Kabbalistic interpretation for the rest of his life, even teaching it as an art critical method to his students at the University of Maryland in College Park. The skepticism his diagram communicated was not directed toward such hermeneutic practices. Instead, I think he was skeptical of the value of the art I was researching, art that was by then forty years old. I was reminded of this diagram recently as I listened to a lecture he delivered at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1969, called “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems.” Early in the talk, he warns: “As far as art is concerned, I’m not particularly interested in it. I believe that aesthetics exists in revelation.”

To dismiss art in front of a group of curators and art historians deeply committed to its care was a provocative move and entirely in character. It was meant as more than a simple provocation, however; Burnham was announcing a need to change how we judge and value art, in response to art’s own recent “dematerialization” and to artists who were revising an older, static theory of environment by acknowledging the responsive character of environmental systems. Aesthetics, he argued, had to respond in kind to these new developments by anchoring itself to new criteria. Art could no longer be judged according to its capacity to provide visual pleasure, nor was it merely a matter of having been chosen by an artist or bounded by the framework of a gallery. What if, instead, we considered art as a tool that, like any other tool, extends human capabilities? The work of art, he suggested, was particularly useful for revealing relationships and was only art so long as it continued to perform its revelatory function. Like the machine or the ritual, art was an “information-processing device.” It could not generate or embody thought, but was a temporary functional apparatus suited to drawing connections between cultural and natural phenomena. An old work of art was about as useful in this regard as an old weather report.

This notion of the radical disposability of art as an information-processing system undergirded the central conceit of “Systems Esthetics”: the shift away from the production of stable objects toward a critique of cultural practices, particularly an economy driven by rapid cycles of production and consumption, the demand for continual growth, and the voracious appetite for material and energetic resources. Burnham’s synthesis of the concerns of a nascent digital art movement, environmental activism, and the aesthetic strategies of Conceptual art has given systems art its staying power. We owe these concepts to his exceptional ability to combine diverse discourses, including the history of modern sculpture, formalist criticism, liberal economic theory, structural anthropology, theoretical biology, systems design, and religious mysticism. His demand that art be revelatory was grounded in a sort of faith, a faith in the existence of latent meanings and recoverable connections that he passionately pursued. Ironically, this desire to pierce the veil would lead him away from the art world and academia and toward the hermeneutics of his final years. While his intellectual activities moved increasingly outside of mainstream thought, his ominous prediction of “biological self-destruction” for any advanced technological culture that did not address its unsustainable relationship to natural systems feels alarmingly relevant.

Burnham’s acute awareness of power relations and allegiance to art-world underdogs were apparent in his swift defense of Hans Haacke after the artist’s 1971 show at the Guggenheim was cancelled and in his championing of noncanonical, esoteric, and frequently unlovable works of art. In 2012, amid the storm that would plunge Manhattan into darkness and flood the storage rooms and offices of its art galleries, Burnham recounted his organicist theory of history. He claimed that, under pressure from overwhelming political and economic forces, political art always cycles away from sincere action toward irony and obscured agendas. He tied art’s political efficacy directly to its ability to draft, revise, and ultimately dispose of itself.

“Parody, decay, and decadence are just as organic as what came in the beginning,” he said. “But, of course, everybody wants to be in the heroic stage.”

Melissa Ragain is associate professor of art history at Montana State University and the editor of Dissolve into Comprehension: Writings and Interviews, 1964–2004, *a collection of Jack Burnham’s criticism and conversations that was published by MIT Press in 2015.*

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