

IDEAS AS FORM

Artists have long used instructions and abstract concepts to produce their work, employing mathematical principles, creating thought diagrams, or establishing rules for variations of color. Conceptual art—a movement that began in the late 1960s—went a step further, explicitly emphasizing the idea as the driving force behind the form of the work. In his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967), Sol LeWitt wrote: “The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity.” The works in this grouping—from Sol LeWitt’s large-scale wall drawing and Joseph Albers’s series of nesting colored squares and rectangles to Lucinda Childs’s dances and Joan Truckenbrod’s computer drawings—all directly address the rules and instructions used in their creation. Essential to each is an underlying system that allows the artist to generate variable images and objects.

GENERATIVE MEASURES

“Generative art” is defined as any art practice in which the artist hands over control to a system that can function autonomously and that contributes to or creates a work of art. These systems range from natural language instructions and mathematical operations to computer programs and biological processes. While artworks with generative qualities appear throughout the exhibition, the nearby works by Ian Cheng, Alex Dodge, and Cheyney Thompson underscore their own process of coming into being or emergence. This emphasis allows us to see an artwork as an open process, where algorithms enable variations in form. Whether using code or chat bots—computer programs designed to simulate conversation with human users—each of these works invites us to rethink authorship, materiality, communication, and meaning.

COLLAPSING INSTRUCTION AND FORM

Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, both leading figures of Conceptual art, use language as their material to highlight the linguistic nature of all art and to shift emphasis from the object to the idea behind it. W. Bradford Paley's more recent digital work also makes language its material but by displaying the code that generates his work. The pieces by these three artists presented nearby all consist of the very instructions through which they have been created, self-reflexively erasing oppositions between form and content and folding them into one. Paley's work draws attention to the fact that digital art—regardless of its visual appearance—always has a layer of code and is produced by the software used to create or manipulate it.

IMAGE RESEQUENCED

Several of the “programmed” works here reflect on how rules and code are used to rearrange images. Nam June Paik’s nearby massive wall of televisions, *Fin de Siècle II*, for example, choreographs music videos and “dissolves” the television program into combinations of dancing patterns, providing a different framework to understand broadcasting. Other works resequence images while engaging with such varied subject matter as image processing, interactive storytelling, and political commentary. Across the gallery, Steina’s multichannel video installation *Mynd* investigates the aesthetic effects of software processing, while Lynn Hershman Leeson’s interactive installation *Lorna* prompts visitors to navigate a branching narrative with multiple endings and the two works from Barbara Lattanzi’s series *C-Span x 4* annotate news reportage with subtitles borrowed from a political sci-fi film or karaoke-format song lyrics.

LIBERATING THE SIGNAL

The artists in this grouping use electronic or digital signals as their material but subvert the signals' intended function, thereby "liberating" them from their original purpose. In doing so, they draw attention to the potential for signals to be carriers of instructions and visual information. Nam June Paik's *Magnet TV* creates visual effects by distorting a television's electronic signal, while digitally manipulated signals are an element of Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* for which the artist reprogrammed a Nintendo cartridge to erase the sound and all visual elements except for the clouds from the iconic video game. Signal and image resolution are explored in three pieces by Jim Campbell, who programs LEDs to create cinematic and spatial images in both a room-sized installation and two screen-based works.

REALITIES ENCODED

The artists here use programming to adopt a critical stance by underscoring or exposing social, cultural, or political codes. Keith and Mendi Obadike's project *The Interaction of Coloreds*, for example, uses a statement by Josef Albers on rules and color as a starting point for exploring how longstanding systems of racial categorization might translate into the digital sphere, specifically how skin color factors into online commerce. Marc Lafia and Fang-Yu Lin's work reflects on the rules followed by authorities and their resistance while Paul Pfeiffer's video sculpture addresses cultural and racial identity in sports and Jonah Brucker-Cohen and Katherine Moriwaki's interactive data visualization explores how Twitter receives and shapes reality television.