During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism

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3. Information and Visualisation: The Artist as Designer

> While Jeff is perfectly nice, bordering on the goofy, and loves to chat about the complexities of his little factory, one can't escape his fundamental lack of soul. Koons is a reverse chameleon, whose colors flee into the objects around him, leaving him pale and bare. He's not so much a kid who never grew up as a kid who never had the chance to live like one, and now must elaborately fake it from hunger. You wouldn't want to be inside his skin.[218]

The mockery that critics and artists reserve for Jeff Koons is more than an innocent side-effect of his fame. Koons is despised and hated – and not just due to his clever marketing tricks. He is hated because he undercuts the dearest truths of contemporary art, precisely by inflating them into grotesque platitudes. *The work of art is a visual communication. The artist wants to convey something to the public. The visual appearance of the work is subordinate to the underlying ideas.* Such commonplaces are so deeply ingrained in our conception of art and artists that their objective truth is only contested by the occasional person who feels uncomfortable with the excess of positive intentions. But the embarrassment suddenly becomes complete when it is Jeff Koons who voices them – Koons, the artist who has assistants paint pictures of doughnuts, toys and plastic balloons.

Koons has turned shamelessness into a universal principle. He wants to make people feel good about themselves and to increase their self-confidence. The work of art should bring people together instead of driving them apart. "My work will use everything that it can to communicate. It will use any trick; it'll do anything – absolutely anything – to communicate and to win the viewer over." Koons believes that his work can reach educated as well as uneducated audiences. He does not want anyone to feel excluded. "Even the most unsophisticated people are not threatened by it; they aren't threatened that this is something they have no understanding of." Artists with politically correct ideas about social context and interaction,

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[218]   Charlie Finch, "Jeff Koons' Celebration. A Royal Flush Special", *http://www.artnet.com*, 5 December 1997.

attempting to reach a new public outside the established institutions, must be repulsed by hearing Jeff Koons, of all people, say such things. Their own agenda is as banal as his – and they know it.

> The work wants to meet the needs of the people. It tries to bring down all the barriers that block people from their culture, that shield and hide them. It tells them to embrace the moment instead of always feeling that they're being indulged by things that they do not participate in. It tells them to believe in something and to eject their will.[219]

Koons' point of reference is not the mature individual whose critical judgment can be addressed, but the child: an immature creature that eats candy during the day and wets its bed at night. Koons knows the power of infantile regression; he wants to convey this knowledge and share the power. He remembers how, at the age of four or five, he could not get enough of the colourful pictures on his cereal box.

> It's a kind of sexual experience at that age because of the milk. You've been weaned off your mother, and you're eating cereal with milk, and visually you can't get tired of the box. I mean, you sit there, and you look at the front, and you look at the back. Then maybe the next day you pull out that box again, and you're just still amazed by it; you never tire of the amazement.

Thus, sitting at his childhood breakfast table, he experienced a visual epiphany; and he understood that one's whole life could have such intensity.

> You know, all of life is like that or can be like that. It's just about being able to find amazement in things. … Life is amazing, and visual experience is amazing.[220]

By affirming and celebrating them without any reticence, Koons makes the banality of widespread art clichés painfully clear – not only in his statements, but also in his work. The paintings he has been producing since 1999 under the generic title *Easyfun-Ethereal* are like an all-too-literal

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[219]   Cited in Burke & Hare, "From Full Fathom Five", *Parkett* 19 (March 1989), 45.
[220]   Cited in David Sylvester, "Jeff Koons Interviewed", cat. *Jeff Koons. Easyfun-ethereal* (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2000), 18-21.

interpretation of the principle that a work of art should always be layered. He believes that different audiences can focus on different layers. Anyone who does not feel addressed by the images of the temptations pushed by the food and entertainment industry – mere pictures of "tasty" things – can perhaps take pleasure in the compositional virtuosity of the collage, or in the lightly encrypted art historical references.

According to his adversaries, Koons produces shallow, vulgar eye-candy[221] but to his supporters, what he makes qualifies as conceptual art. How is it that such contradictory properties can be attributed to the work of one and the same artist? And was not conceptual art directed precisely *against* the reduction of art to colourful wallpaper?

In order to fathom this paradox, we need to know what happens in the artist's studio. The first phase of the painting process is carried out entirely on the computer. "Colors are not mixed and altered on the artist's palette," writes Robert Rosenblum;

> limbs and faces are not recontoured or repositioned by the artist's brush and pencil; additional images are not inserted by hand. All of this once manual work is done on a computer screen, constantly readjusted under the artist's surveillance to create unfamiliar refinements of hue, shape, and layering.

When completed, the digitally generated picture is printed out and handed over to a team of painters who professionally transfer it to canvas:

> with the clinical accuracy of scientific workers and with an industrial quantity of brushes, paint tubes, and color codes, [they] replicate exactly the hues, shapes, and impersonal surfaces of the computer image through the traditional technique of oil on canvas. What begins as advertising photography is then transmuted back into an electronic product, which in turn is translated back into an old-fashioned medium.[222]

One thing is clear from this description: the "conceptual" nature of the paintings lies in the fact that Koons first designs them on a computer and

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[221] Charlie Finch describes the work as "cheap knock-offs of the movie *Toy Story*". Finch, "Jeff Koons' Celebration", unpaginated.

[222] Robert Rosenblum, "Dream Machine", in: cat. *Jeff Koons. Easyfun-ethereal*, 52-55.

then has them executed by assistants. His paintings are *designed paintings*. The creative aspect does not lie in the manual execution, but in the preceding design phase. It is this twofold nature that explains why his opponents speak of "mere form" and his admirers of "conceptual art". Whereas the former see only calculation, seduction and flatness, the latter emphasise control, planning and detachment.

> ... Koons has virtually annihilated the traditions of savoring an artist's personal touch, which now exists only in conceptual, not material, terms. In this new role for the artist, Koons has become an impresario in charge of a high-tech production process supervised by hired experts.[223]

The art historian Robert Rosenblum labels Koons as a conceptualist after first touching on all the possible painterly references in the work, varying from Baroque and Rococo to artists like Pollock, Magritte and Rosenquist. Only in the final analysis does he implement the familiar antithesis between painting and conceptual art, contrasting Koons with conventional painters for whom the secrets of the medium can never be captured in a recipe or inventory. In this rhetorical framework, Koons the painter-designer is diametrically opposed to artists for whom the conception and execution of a painting go hand in hand, as integrated aspects of a complex and unpredictable process of adding, subtracting, correcting and developing. Whatever the value of this tried and tested procedure, the meaning and originality of Koons' work is deemed to result from the fact that it deviates from it completely.

Is this enough evidence to call Jeff Koons a conceptual artist, as he considers himself to be? No one can contend that is he is just aiming at an aesthetic effect.

> I see [my work] as essentially conceptual. I think that I use aesthetics as a tool, but I think of it as a psychological tool. My work is dealing with the psychology of myself and the audience. [224]

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[223]   Ibid., 52.
[224]   Sylvester, "Jeff Koons Interviewed", 36.

For Koons, the main goal is never a matter of aesthetics. Aesthetics drive people apart and exclude certain groups from a shared experience. Koons sees himself as a conceptual artist, deploying his knowledge of the effect of seductive imagery for the sake of a higher goal.

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A valid argument for categorising Jeff Koons – and many others like him – as a conceptual artist is that his way of working would be unthinkable without the history of 1960s conceptual art. The contemporary truism that "Art is communication" is the result of a change that occurred in that period, when visual artists started to regard themselves primarily as transmitters of information. Conceptual artists adopted a position as information brokers in the most literal sense. A clear example is Robert Barry's *Telepathic Piece* of 1969, announced by the artist as follows: "During the exhibition I will try to communicate telepathically a work of art, the nature of which is a series of thoughts that are not applicable to language or image." The impresario that Rosenblum sees in Koons, the manager or supervisor of a delineated path of communication, already appeared in art in the 1960s – not for the first time perhaps, but certainly for the first time with so much pertinence and historical weight. The paradoxical confusion between conceptuality and design, which has reached a climax in the recent work of Koons, has its origins in early conceptual art. Ever since artists started to think of their work in terms of the conveyance of information, they have been beset by the spectre of design.

According to the standard interpretation, conceptual art revolved around the "dematerialisation" of the art object – the reduction of the work of art to a mere idea. The artists concerned are held to have occupied themselves solely with cerebral, immaterial things, as if trying to transcend the material realm. This widespread interpretation goes back to the title of a successful book published in 1973: *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, a collection of texts, documents, statements

and interviews compiled by Lucy Lippard.[225] It is no exaggeration to speak of the myth of dematerialisation. In reality, the manual aspect never disappeared and the material realm was never transcended. Some media, like painting and sculpture, may have been replaced by "cleaner" ones, such as photography, film, typewriting, collage and printing, but it is surprising how many conceptual artists – such as John Baldessari, On Kawara, Daniel Buren and Christine Kozlov – continued to use paint on canvas. Moreover, it is not true that conceptual artists were indifferent to aesthetics. They simply shifted the aesthetic parameters to another level, or rather let other factors determine them. Between 1966 and 1968, John Baldessari hired a sign painter to make a series of paintings for him representing texts or texts with photographs. The sign painter was given careful instructions; Baldessari determined exactly what was to be done, but kept his distance.

> Important was that I was the strategist. Someone else built and primed the canvases and took them to the sign painter, the texts are quotations from art books, and the sign painter was instructed not to attempt to make attractive artful lettering but to letter the information in the most simple way.[226]

In retrospect, the myth of the dematerialised art object was closely connected with a parallel myth, launched at precisely the same moment: the myth of post-industrial society. In the same year that Lippard's book appeared, the American sociologist Daniel Bell published a book, the impact of which similarly stems from the direct appeal of the concept that gave the book its title: *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. On the basis of post-war economic developments and shifts in the labour market in Western societies, Bell predicted the advent of a post-industrial economy grounded largely in the service sector. Smoking chimneys would be replaced by office buildings and banks of computers. He foresaw the emergence of a new knowledge economy, in which power would no longer rest with the owners of capital and the means of production, but with those authorised to take

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[225]   As early as 1968, an article by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler appeared under the title "The Dematerialization of Art", *Art International* 12:2 (February 1968), 31-36.
[226]   Cat. *John Baldessari* (Eindhoven/Essen: Van Abbemuseum and Museum Folkwang, 1981), 6.

decisions.[227] In the long run, the post-industrial society would see workers completely replaced by machines and unskilled labour superseded by qualified office and management jobs.[228] Bell observed the gradual rise of a new middle class of "salaried" employees (which, incidentally, had already been identified by German sociologists during the inter-war period). The steady bureaucratisation of corporations (which were evolving into huge conglomerates) as well as of government bodies suggested that capitalism had reached its third historical phase.[229]

A myth is not necessarily a lie. Those who believe in the myth devote themselves to their self-appointed historical task and collectively produce the evidence that establishes its truth. It would seem that, since 1973, the notion of a post-industrial society has been firmly substantiated by the rapid development of information and communication technology. Yet, at the same time, it has become clear that the functioning of post-industrial society is completely dependent on the displacement of labour-intensive production to countries where such labour is available at rock-bottom prices. Rather than disappearing, the smoking chimneys have merely been relocated to marginal regions of the world, where social and environmental laws impose fewer restrictions on production.[230]

Something similar goes for the myth of the dematerialised art object. Conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s evoked the idea of a post-industrial knowledge economy in all sorts of ways.[231] Two noteworthy exhibitions that took place in New York in 1970 demonstrated how intimate the connection between conceptual art, information and technology was thought to be: *Software* in the Jewish Museum and *Information* in the Museum of Modern Art. One exhibit in *Software* was a work called *News* by

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[227]   Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting* [1973], repr. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 119.

[228]   Ibid., 125.

[229]   Ibid., 64.

[230]   Cf. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Myths of the Informational Society", in: Kathleen Woodward, ed., *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture* (London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 3-17. Jean Baudrillard has a more rhetorical counter-argument: the factory may well be disappearing from society, but at the same time society as a whole is being transformed into a factory. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, tr. Iain Hamilton Grant (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 1993), 18.

[231]   Cf. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2003), 2-3.

the German artist Hans Haacke. This consisted of several telex machines connected to press agencies and continuously spewing out news reports. Another contribution to the exhibition, by Douglas Huebler, asked museum visitors to write an anonymous note containing a personal secret and to hand it over in exchange for a photocopy of a secret left by someone else. For *Information*, Vito Acconci produced a work entitled *Service Area*, consisting of a table and a plexiglass box. For the duration of the exhibition Acconci had his mail forwarded to the museum, where it was kept for him in the box; every morning he appeared in the exhibition to go through that day's messages. *Software* also included an experimental set-up by M.I.T.'s Architecture Machine Group under the leadership of Nicholas Negroponte (which later became the M.I.T. Media Lab). This project, known as *Seek*, consisted of a computer-driven miniature landscape of individual wooden blocks, occupied by a number of live gerbils, whose behaviour influenced the configuration of the blocks. Instead of a printed catalogue, visitors to the Jewish Museum could consult an interactive computer system offering a selection of information about the exhibition tailored to their personal preferences and interests. The system included a database of interconnected texts – the first ever public presentation of a "hypertext" environment.[232]

In short, 1960s conceptual art marks the moment when the "managerial revolution" spread into the artistic realm.[233] Critics found, to their dismay, that art was being permeated by "bureaucratic structures" and

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[232] For discussions of *Software* and *Information*, see Bitite Vinklers, "Art and Information. *Software* at the Jewish Museum", *Arts Magazine* 45:1 (September-October 1970), 46-49; Dore Ashton, "New York Commentary", *Studio International* 180:927 (November 1970), 200-202; Gregory Battcock, "Informative Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art", *Arts Magazine* 44:8 (Summer 1970), 24-27; and Willoughby Sharp, "Willoughby Sharp Interviews Jack Burnham", *Arts Magazine* 45:2 (November 1970), 21-23. On the relationship between conceptual art and information technology, see Edward A. Shanken, "The House that Jack Built: Jack Burnham's Concept of 'Software' as a Metaphor for Art", *Leonardo Electronic Almanak* 6:10 (November 1998), and Shanken, "Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art", *Art Inquiry* 3:12 (2001), 7-33; also in: *Leonardo* 35:3 (August 2002), 433-438.

[233] *The Managerial Revolution* is the title of a book by James Burnham published in 1941. Burnham has been described as "a Marx for the managers", since the revolution that he predicted would signal the end of capitalism and the advent of a state economy led by bureaucrats. See Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 90-94.

"bureaucratic styles".[234] Card-index files, questionnaires, photo displays, folders of photocopied documents, filing cabinets – the paraphernalia of conceptual art consisted mainly of office supplies. Yet such observations do not answer the question of whether conceptual work was merely a *product* of the post-industrial, bureaucratic society, or actually constituted a *critique* of it. Perhaps that distinction has lost its relevance, since evaluations and critical assessments have become a standard procedure within every bureaucratic system: think of the reports and assessments that managers spend most of their time writing. Insofar as conceptual art amounts to a critique of bureaucracy, it thus becomes an all the more perfect reproduction of it.

But even this observation can be turned around. On closer examination, it seems that in conceptual art it was precisely the aspect of quality control and self-assessment that was often omitted.

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According to the myth of the dematerialised art object, conceptual artists eliminated the manual work as much as possible, because it stood in their way ideologically, or it simply did not interest them. There are indications, however, that artists who understood their own activity primarily in terms of conveying information, discovered that the actual making of works became their biggest problem, for the very reason that one could no longer just "make" something. Rather than eliminate the manual work, they started to *design* it. Christine Kozlov painted the words *A MOSTLY RED PAINTING* in white on a red canvas. Joseph Kosuth had the text *FIVE WORDS IN BLUE NEON* executed in blue neon. Works like these are based on a circular procedure: the concept implies that the design coincides with the designed object, but the designed object is also a medium for conveying the concept.

In this phase, artists like Lawrence Weiner were obsessed with physical work and the processing of materials. Weiner's work consisted of

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[234]   Carter Ratcliff, "New York Letter", *Art International* 14:7 (September 1970), 95. See also Benjamin H.D. Buchloh , "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October* 55 (Winter 1990), 105-143.

Statements that evoke the material result of a physical action: *AN AMOUNT OF PAINT POURED DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY;* or *THINGS PUSHED DOWN TO THE BOTTOM AND BROUGHT UP AGAIN;* or again *1000 GERMAN MARKS WORTH MEDIUM BULK MATERIAL TRANSFERRED FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER*. It would make sense here to speak of an idealisation rather than a dematerialisation of the art object. Asked what his work was about, Weiner replied "Materials."[235] However, he also said that he was more interested "in the *idea* of the material than in the material itself".[236] His *Statements* could be carried out, by himself or by anybody else, but that was not essential, for the work "relie[d] upon information" and all the relevant information was contained in the statement.[237]

What exactly do artists do when they "design the manual work"? They subject it to a protocol – a set of explicit prescriptions and rules. They draw up instructions, which they then attempt to fulfil to the best of their ability. For his *Today Paintings* (from 1966 onwards), On Kawara invented the rule that they had to be completed within one day; if that failed, he immediately destroyed them. In August 1971, Lee Lozano set herself the assignment never again to speak to women (*Boycott Women*). Douglas Huebler's *Variable Piece #111* (1974) relied on the artist's instruction to himself, standing in front of a shop window, to make a series of close-up photos of mannequins and within ten seconds of each shot to photograph the passer-by most resembling the mannequin. Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) started with the artist giving himself the instruction to follow a random person on the street and to keep doing so until that person entered a private place.

With the physical labour subsumed within a protocol, it became possible to delegate the execution of the work completely. Some of the artists who took this step were initially motivated by mainly practical reasons. For the *68th American Show* of 1966, the Chicago Art Institute

[235]   Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [1973], (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), 73.
[236]   Lawrence Weiner, "October 12, 1969", in: Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 218.
[237]   Lippard, ed., *Six Years*, 130.

invited New York artist Robert Morris to exhibit two of his wooden, L-shaped sculptures. Morris sent construction drawings to the museum's workshop in Chicago, where the objects were built for him. It would have cost much more if he had constructed them himself and had them transported to Chicago.[238] The difference between this case and Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* is that Morris probably still insisted that his design be carried out correctly. The same applied to Tony Smith's work *Die* (1962), a six foot steel cube which the artist ordered by telephone from a forge ("I didn't make a drawing. I just picked up the phone and ordered it"[239]). Weiner, on the other hand, regarded the statement as the primary work of art; to him, any material realisation of it was of subordinate importance. Countless different versions were imaginable, and none of them was better or worse than any other:

> ... there is no correct way to construct the piece as there is no incorrect way to construct it. If the piece is built it constitutes not how the piece looks but only how it could look.[240]

The same went for the "word pieces" and "event scores" produced by Fluxus artists La Monte Young and George Brecht: short instructions printed on cards (such as "Draw a straight line and follow it"), which could not be carried out without a substantial contribution from the individual recipient.[241]

As early as 1969, the small but crucial distinction between these two positions was subjected to a tentative institutionalisation. For the *Art by Telephone* exhibition in Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, conceptual and other artists were invited to telephone instructions to the museum staff, who would then execute the work for them. Jan van der Marck, the initiator of the exhibition, stated that "In order to make the experiment of solely

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[238]   Jack Burnham, "System Esthetics", *Artforum* 7:1 (September 1968), 32.
[239]   Cat. *Tony Smith. Two Exhibitions of Sculpture* (Hartford/Philadelphia: Wadsworth Atheneum and Institute for Contemporary Art, 1966), unpaginated.
[240]   Weiner, cited in Lippard, ed., *Six Years*, 74.
[241]   Cf. Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score", *October* 95 (Winter 2001), 55-89. The example cited is *Composition 1960 #10* by La Monte Young.

verbal communication a maximum success, the use of drawings, blueprints or descriptive texts was completely renounced".[242] Some of the artists participating in *Art by Telephone* will have found that for them the telephone was a suitable medium, corresponding exactly to their own view of art. Others probably devised a specific work for the occasion that would fit within the concept of the exhibition. In both cases, what counted was that "The artist initiates the information process, but does not conclude it."[243] Robert Smithson asked to have a truckload of liquid concrete poured into a quarry outside the city. Dennis Oppenheim instructed that five piles were to be made in the exhibition space, each having exactly the same weight as the artist himself and each composed of one of five materials used in building the museum (plaster, sawdust, cement, metal shavings and insulation material). Once a week Oppenheim phoned museum staff to tell them his current weight and the size of the piles was adjusted accordingly. Mel Bochner chose a fragment from a piece of art criticism; he had it read over the telephone to someone in Italy, who then had to translate it into Italian and read it over the phone to someone in Germany, who had to translate it into German and read it over the phone to someone in Sweden. Via the last link in England the text returned to Chicago, where both the original and the final version, plus all the intermediate translations, were included in the exhibition.

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The idea that a concept for a work of art could be transformed into information conveyable by means of a modern technological medium like the telephone goes back to László Moholy-Nagy's "telephone paintings" – five abstract, geometrical compositions on enamelled steel which the artist had had manufactured in a sign factory by giving instructions over the telephone.

> I had the factory's color chart before me and I sketched my

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[242]   Jan van der Marck, "Kunst per telefoon in het Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago", *Museumjournaal* 15:1 (February 1970), 58.
[243]   Ibid., 60.

paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position.[244]

In 1968 Jack Burnham, critic for *Artforum* and curator of the *Software* exhibition, referred to the telephone paintings in his essay *System Esthetics*. In this text, he explicitly linked the desire of contemporary artists to move beyond formalism to the conditions of the new information age.

> We are now in a transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture.* Here change emanates, not from *things*, but from *the way things are done.*[245]

During the initial phases of industrialisation, "decorative media", including painting and sculpture, had maintained their monopoly on what Burnham calls the "esthetic impulse"; "but as technology progresses this impulse must identify itself with the means of research and production." In the society of the future, positions of power would no longer be identified through the traditional symbols of prosperity and wealth; knowledge and information were to become the new parameters of power. Artists would have to deal with the same social changes that manufacturers, managers and administrators were facing; new demands were being made on all these groups.

> In the emergent "superscientific culture" long-range decision making and its implementation become more difficult and more necessary. Judgment demands precise socio-technical models. Earlier the industrial state evolved by filling consumer needs on a piecemeal basis. The kind of product design that once produced "better living" precipitates vast crises in human ecology in the 1960s. A striking parallel exists between the "new" car of the automobile stylist and the syndrome of formalist invention in art, where "discoveries" are made through visual manipulation. Increasingly "products" – either in art or life – become irrelevant and a different set of needs arise: these evolve around such concerns as maintaining the biological livability of the Earth, producing more accurate models of social interaction, understanding the growing symbiosis in man-machine relationships, establishing priorities for

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[244]   "Abstract of an Artist", in: László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), 79.
[245]   Burnham, "System Esthetics", 31.

> the usage and conservation of natural resources, and defining
> alternate patterns of education, productivity, and leisure.[246]

Burnham's comparison of the outdated formalist art practice with the
activity of industrial designers in the car industry is striking. He overlooked
the extent to which the very tendency he supported – an increasing focus on
information and communication systems in art practices – would result in
the artist becoming a designer. In that respect, the precedents he mentions,
including Moholy-Nagy's telephone paintings and the *L-Beams* made for
Robert Morris in Chicago, are revealing. Burnham was perhaps too close to
his subject, or too eager to play the apostle of the avant-garde, to realise that
it was precisely by rejecting the primacy of stylistic issues that artists could
create a role for themselves as designers of a communication trajectory.

  Paradoxically, the presumed conceptual purity of their works could
be seen to approach the purity of "pure design". Even the most radical
artists, who felt it was unnecessary for their concepts or proposals actually
to be carried out, could not get around the design factor. For some
observers, many years later, this came as an unpleasant surprise. In a
discussion with Lawrence Weiner in 1998, Benjamin Buchloh expressed his
admiration for the neutral presentation of Weiner's *Statements* in the late
1960s – that is, for the complete absence of typography and "design choices"
in the layout of the books. Weiner promptly corrected him.

> Those early manifestations … are so highly designed you cannot
> believe it. I mean, take *Statements*: there is a design factor to make
> it look like a $ 1.95 book that you would buy. The type-face and the
> decision to use a typewriter and everything else was a design
> choice.[247]

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[246] Ibid.
[247] "Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in Conversation with Lawrence Weiner", in:
Alexander Alberro et al., *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 20.
During a conversation with Patricia Norvell in 1969, however, Weiner claimed that
the book had no underlying typography or design at all. Perhaps his remark to
Benjamin Buchloh was a way of countering Buchloh's critical remarks on the later
work, which, from a graphic point of view, is much more exuberant. See Alexander
Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art. Early Interviews with
Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson,
Weiner by Patricia Norvell* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California
Press, 2001), 107-108.

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Moholy-Nagy's legendary telephone paintings, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, turn out to be based literally on a legend. The whole story is apocryphal. In 1972 Lucia Moholy, the former wife of the artist, published a book in which she revealed that he did not communicate the instructions by telephone at all, but delivered them in person to the sign factory. He was so thrilled by the result, however, that he elatedly declared "I might even have done it over the telephone!" Lucia Moholy explicitly rejected the idea that Moholy-Nagy was a predecessor of conceptual art and telephone art.[248]

Exactly the same apocryphal story is doing the rounds in the Netherlands with respect to Wim Crouwel, graphic designer and in 1963 co-founder of the Total Design design firm. Crouwel is supposed to have been in the habit of communicating his designs to the typesetter verbally, over the telephone.

> Crouwel shocked his colleagues and students as he would "just phone through a design"; or he would go home after an appointment at 11 o'clock in the evening in order to "design another chair".[249]

The persistence of this apocryphal story is due to Crouwel's austere visual style and rational and business-like design approach. From the late 1960s such qualities were associated with state bureaucracy and impersonal, large-scale power concentrations. Crouwel's telephone legend thus acquired a highly ambivalent connotation. In 1976, when the Dutch postal service (PTT) introduced a new series of stamps drawn by Total Design, some observers saw a connection between the rising postal rates and the plain appearance of the stamps. "Inflation seems to have influenced not only the

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[248] Lucia Moholy, *Marginalien zu Moholy-Nagy/Marginal Notes. Dokumentarische Ungereimtheiten/Documentary Absurdities* (Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1972), 74-79. See also Louis Kaplan, "The Telephone Paintings: Hanging Up Moholy", *Leonardo* 26:2 (1993), 165-168.

[249] Frederike Huygen and Hugues Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module* (Rotterdam: 010, 1997), 137. When asked about this story, Crouwel denied it, but he admitted that the use of layout grids did permit him, in certain cases, to send corrections over the telephone. (Conversation with the author, 19 April 2002.)

price: even the design is practically worthless. The rumour that Crouwel phones through his designs must be true after all," *Obstakel* magazine commented sarcastically.[250]

At the same time as the managerial revolution was happening in art, it was also taking place in the domain of graphic design. Wim Crouwel was the prime representative of this change in the Netherlands. As Hugues Boekraad has written, graphic design in the Netherlands in the second half of the 1960s amounted to "a derivative of professional communication".[251] In the post-war decades the expansion of the state apparatus, combined with a call for more openness, transparency and participation, resulted in an explosive increase in the flow of public information. Public bodies at both national and municipal level began to imitate private sector organisations by pursuing an active information policy, aimed at communicating with citizens. Increasingly, graphic design was deemed a necessary and integral part of public relations. Professional PR departments were set up, and designers – the link between clients and the graphic industry – were expected to have a professional, business-like attitude.[252]

The "house style" phenomenon, developed in the USA as "corporate identity", made its appearance in the Netherlands in the 1960s. Total Design was the first design firm to assemble the range of graphic, industrial and product design expertise necessary for the development of integrated house styles. The concept of "total design" even became their corporate philosophy. Crouwel and his co-founders, Benno Wissing, Friso Kramer, Ben Bos, Dick Schwarz and Paul Schwarz, declared that they could create a unified identity for any client, whether it be an oil company, a temping agency or a ministry. House styles amounted to a standardised design for clear, efficient internal and external communication. Boekraad:

> The client wanted order. On the one hand there is the phenomenon of "corporate identity", motivated by the need for consistent internal communication within companies and government institutions operating on an ever greater scale. On the other hand, the need is felt to maintain visually distinct concepts in the stream

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[250]   Reproduced in ibid., 160.
[251]   Ibid., 175.
[252]   Ibid.

of visual stimuli which capitalism, having become dependent on mass consumption, is deluging the urban environment with. The chaos that has to be overcome is not that of uncultivated nature, but that of an uncontrolled market. An individual trademark has to be steady as a rock.[253]

Total Design's modular design method was applied to everything from sugar bags and stationery to company vans and whole buildings. Although the "total design" ideal proved to be more difficult to achieve in practice, and the business results of the firm proved very sensitive to market conditions,[254] it is no exaggeration to say that, ever since the mid-1960s, public and private sector environments in the Netherlands have been heavily dominated by Total Design's logos and trademarks. Among the best known are those of distance education organisation Teleac, the Stedelijk Museum and bed manufacturer Auping (all dating from 1964), De Doelen concert hall in Rotterdam (1965), Stichting Kunst en Bedrijf (1967), Randstad temping agency and Kluwer publishers (1968), Ahoy' (1969), *Haagsche Post* magazine (1970), the Nederlandsche Credietbank, Spectrum publishers and Museum Fodor (1971), the city of Rotterdam (1972), the Rabobank (1973), the Bouwfonds Nederlandse Gemeenten (1974), B&G Hekwerken (1978) and the Ministry of Education and Science (1982).[255]

Crouwel's self-image as a designer revolved around the elimination of all inessentials. His great example was the work of Swiss modernists like Karl Gerstner, Ernst Scheidecker and Gerard Ifert, of whom Boekraad says "The beauty of their work is … graphically determined, based on the reproduction technology of printing."[256] Crouwel continued in that direction by translating the "external conditions" that determined the assignment into "starting points for directing the design process."[257] The graphic product should be a direct reflection of its own conditions of existence. In 1961 Crouwel himself formulated it as follows:

253   Ibid., 51-52.
254   Ibid., 141-143.
255   For a complete survey of the logos and trademarks up until 1982, see Kees Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1983), 18-20.
256   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 57.
257   Ibid., 46.

> Every assignment can be dissected into a number of elements, all of which hang together. These elements are factors that designers have to deal with as facts. That is what makes our craft an applied one, why it's called applied art. For every assignment you have to analyse the factors, pinpoint them as it were on a horizontal and a vertical axis, stretch a piece of string between them and then see what you get.[258]

It is no coincidence that, at this elementary level, there is a parallel with the working method of conceptual artists of the same period, described by Charles Harrison as follows: "… deciding what kind of work to do had become practically inseparable from learning about the conditions – both logical and ideological – under which that work was to be done."[259]

In the course of Crouwel's career, substantial changes occurred in the technology of printing. In the early 1970s, the printing industry switched from lead type to film.[260] The twelve point system of typography deriving from the use of lead type was replaced by a decimal system. The classical layout collapsed, since new printing techniques now made it possible to realise every imaginable arrangement of text. Designers like Crouwel, however, saw no reason to celebrate this newly attained typographic freedom with unpredictable, whimsical orgies of form. Instead they opted for a rigid, standardised typography, based on an efficient and repeatable grid that reduced the number of variables to a minimum. Only in this way could the enormous growth in demand for well-designed printed matter be met.

> The grid fixes the measurements and the positions of text and image on the page. The width of the text columns are derived from this, as are the dimensions of the reproductions. Text and image, defined as surfaces with a certain grey value, are arranged as such within the grid.

The result is a design that works as a neutral packaging – as "a universal storage system … for every type of text and every type of image", in the

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[258] Cited in Hein Van Haaren, "Wim Crouwel", *Extra bulletin: over het werk van Wim Crouwel* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), unpaginated.
[259] Charles Harrison, "A Kind of Context", in: Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* [1991], new ed., (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2001), 21.
[260] Edy de Wilde calls this transition a "silent revolution", in: *Extra bulletin: over het werk van Wim Crouwel*, unpaginated.

description of Hugues Boekraad.[261] The grid is non-hierarchical: each intersection of lines is equivalent and each potential letter position acquires the same symbolic weight. The hierarchical, symbolic value of the classical layout disappeared, to be replaced by a new, largely implicit symbolism reflecting the rational self-image of designers and their clients.[262]

At the time, Crouwel saw himself as a functionalist staying as close as possible to the content of what was to be communicated. The grid enabled him to do this. "The typographic field can be divided on the basis of calculable factors induced by the material and the nature of the assignment," according to Hein van Haaren in an article on Wim Crouwel.[263] Above all Crouwel warned against the use of new technologies to imitate the traditional structure of the old lead typesetting. Instead, designers had to discover structuring principles that were compatible with automated typesetting and advanced printing technology. "One consequence could be that letters acquire a fixed width, as is the case with typewriters, for example," he wrote in 1974.

> The ordinary typewriter with its simple typographic arrangement, whereby all the letters are strictly arranged both horizontally and vertically, suddenly appears to offer a solution to many questions concerning the production of fast and legible text at relatively low cost.[264]

The austere and restrained tone that typifies Crouwel's designs cannot be traced back to a single source. "Habit, social demands and professional distinction merge in Crouwel's work."[265] His principle that no formal decisions could be taken arbitrarily – that every design choice had to be accounted for – certainly had to do with the need that was felt at the time to lift the metier of graphic design out of the sphere of artistic intuition and to turn it into an independent profession. In the early years of Total Design, this status still had to be fought for. The general tendency to associate

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261   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 200 and 176.
262   Ibid., 176.
263   Van Haaren, "Wim Crouwel", unpaginated.
264   Wim Crouwel, *Ontwerpen en drukken. Over drukwerk als kwaliteitsprodukt* (Nijmegen: G.J. Thiemefonds, 1974), 7-8.
265   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 52.

designers with the bohemian world of artists threatened their image of professionalism and competence. Total Design was the first combined design firm in the Netherlands,[266] which meant that pioneering work had to be done with respect not only to clients, but also to the in-house staff. Benno Wissing once explained:

> Our early work looked dogmatic. It had to be that way because at the time we were still busy training a group of employees who had been taught to take decisions about form on arbitrary grounds ... [267]

Crouwel even talked about "the conscious avoidance of form",[268] thus exhibiting an almost compulsive denial of the aesthetic dimension of the trade – a denial that in turn was contradicted by his work.

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The fact that a designer regards himself as a functionalist does not necessarily mean he has no aesthetic preferences. In a certain sense, Crouwel's functionalism was nothing but a preference for a functionalist aesthetic. Such an aesthetic means that letters and texts are stylised and layout variables are as limited as possible. Crouwel concealed his aesthetic preferences by legitimising them with the argument of maximum legibility. The reduction of typographical variety would not only make typesetting more efficient, but also increase the transparency of the design itself. The telephone directory that Wim Crouwel and Jolien van der Wouw designed in 1977 for the PTT is completely permeated by this aesthetic of efficiency. The decision to use four narrow columns (instead of the three wider ones used in the old directory), with the telephone number before the name of the subscriber instead of after a row of dots at the end of the line, helped to provide the extra space needed to compensate for the doubling of the number of telephone connections since 1962. The functional look of the text was further enhanced by the decision to use only lower case, with the subscriber's name printed in bold instead of in capitals, and to place his or

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[266]   Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design*, 7.
[267]   Ibid., 13.
[268]   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 32.

her profession on the line below, even when there was enough space for it on the same line. Because the subscriber's number was put in the left hand margin of the text column, it was no longer necessary for additional lines to be indented. As a result, the columns became at once tauter and more elegant than the frayed text blocks so characteristic of the old directory.[269]

Crouwel's obsession with legibility also showed in his preference for constructing logos and even whole posters on the basis of a graphic arrangement of letters.[270] The poster that Crouwel, as the regular designer for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, made for the *Vormgevers* exhibition in 1968 is a clear example of this. The crucial visual element in this poster is the layout grid, which for this occasion – an exhibition about graphic design – has itself been made visible in printed form. The text features a single typeface, in a large and a smaller variant, mounted onto two different levels of the grid. The font refers to the functionality of computer screens and dot-matrix printers; Crouwel had constructed it by filling in the cells of the grid in a quasi-mechanical manner. The way the text is lined up on the left with virtually no margin reinforces the impression of a cerebral anti-aesthetic. In this poster, Crouwel presents the world of graphic design as a strictly logocentric universe, in non-pictorial black and white – a digital world in which questions can only be answered with yes or no. At the same time, the inclusion of a number of inconsistencies in the design means that the image of a cast-iron system again needs modification. The visualised grid is the standard one that Crouwel used for the Stedelijk Museum – but only for its *catalogues*, not for the posters. In its application to the *Vormgevers* poster, it had to be enlarged several times. Instead of making the underlying structure of the design transparent, the grid now serves, in a sense, an illustrative purpose. Furthermore, the rigid construction of the typeface is somewhat softened and rounded at the corners. Such details suggest that, at crucial moments, Crouwel opted for the "arbitrariness" of what worked better visually, rather than rigidly persevering with a pre-established system.[271]

On the other hand, the priority of maximum legibility was not

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[269]   Technical details can be found in *Drukkerswereld* 19 (11 May 1973).
[270]   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 177.
[271]   Ibid., 200-201 and 332-333.

always evident either. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that every design system creates its own insoluble difficulties, especially when taken to the extreme. Ironically, one of Crouwel's least legible designs was a poster for an exhibition on visual communication: *Visuele communicatie Nederland* (Stedelijk Museum 1969). Once again the grid – consisting of vertical stripes in groups of three – was incorporated into the design and used at two levels of scale to impose a priority order on the information: details (subtitle and dates) were set in a smaller font than the title of the exhibition and the name of the museum. The white spaces between the bundles of stripes serve, at the "higher" level, to space the letters – each letter has the width of three stripes – but at the "lower" level of the detailed information, where each letter is only as wide as one stripe, the spaces occur at arbitrary places in the middle of the words, thus diminishing their legibility. The taut rhythm of the letters with their standard width – narrow letters such as i and t are stretched laterally – is disturbed by the anomalous rhythm of the vertical stripes.[272]

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For Wim Crouwel, the essence of graphic design consisted of the visualisation of information. In 1974 he wrote, "Applied design is practised within the situation of an assignment, whereby a certain piece of information, whatever it may be, is visualised in such a way that the information will be conveyed at its best." This had nothing to do with "beautification". "It is a matter of creating clarity; which form is used to make that happen is not important." Nor did it have anything to do with originality. "Relevant and essential information is fully original in itself; the designer has nothing to add!" The ethics of the professional designer lay not in his or her involvement with the content of the assignment, but precisely in refraining from such involvement. Even though the designer had to be aware of "what the implications are of his efforts", what was paramount was an "undistorted transfer of information".[273]

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[272]   Ibid., 338-339.
[273]   Crouwel, *Ontwerpen en drukken*, 12-16.

In contradiction to his actual production, Crouwel consistently expressed the view that a designer does nothing more than arrange and order information. "Typography is an ordering process par excellence. Any design that wants to be more than this is too much."[274] Designers clarify the information to be conveyed by reducing the elements to their most concise and least ambiguous form and ordering them with the appropriate graphic means. Even in times of corporate expansion and automation, they contribute to the efficiency of the client's communication policy by professionally integrating all the design phases in the production process of the graphic industry. According to Crouwel, the sole responsibility of designers was to increase the transparency of information transfer. Just as he denied that aesthetic considerations played a role, he also denied that the designer did anything more than organise and clarify so as to facilitate communication between client and target group. The designer did not even take part in the communication process himself.

> I believe in upholding expertise. Let's respect one another's expertise. As mediators, we should not try to convey the message better than those who actually send it.[275]

It is striking that the ordering principles associated with this design philosophy – principles like standardisation, modularity, seriality and reproducibility – seamlessly match the formal procedures of bureaucracy. Even the goals are the same: efficiency, expediency and speed. The following statement made by Benno Wissing in 1983 shows how far such organisational preoccupations shaped the philosophy of Total Design:

> Early on in our activities, Friso [Kramer], Wim [Crouwel] and I soon discovered that in dealing with large projects a number of things had to be standardised; simplifying the procedures for information processing would leave us more time to deal with intrinsic problems. If variations had to occur in the final product, we preferred to look for them within a modular system, so that correlating, interconnecting, stacking and other forms of industrial production would require no extra work. The principle was

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[274]   Crouwel (1972), cited in Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design*, 91.
[275]   Ibid.

applicable to architectural, industrial and graphic design.[276]

Where Hugues Boekraad postulates that functionalism "represents the power of those in charge of the new technologies",[277] we could go one step further and argue that functionalism actually imitates these new technologies of control and adopts them in its own organisational process. All in all, it is not surprising that, throughout the 1970s, Total Design – identified with the person and work of Wim Crouwel – was often accused of being part of a small clique controlling the Dutch "aesthetic establishment".[278] As the firm acquired more and bigger institutional clients and its logos and trademarks increasingly dominated the cultural landscape, the resistance grew and the criticism became bitter. Some saw Total Design as "the face of order and neatness, the face of integrity, the face of neutrality and sobriety, the face of timelessness and truth".[279] Others associated the unadorned style of Total Design with the apparatus of authority and tyranny.

> It is annoying that this man [Crouwel] has so much power. To like ugly things may be his constitutional right, but it so happens that his ugly things are our telephone directories, postage stamps and banknotes, so he has the government and all its services on his side. … Crouwel assumes that these things are good for us even if we don't appreciate them ourselves. There's something in that designer ideal that makes you think of the totalitarian state, with its deadly preference for a calm image on all fronts.[280]

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In the context of the managerial revolution that penetrated the cultural field in the 1960s, the graphic designer and the conceptual artist were each other's counterparts. Both observed a strict distinction between information and visualisation, to which they attached far-reaching consequences regarding their own responsibility. Designers like Crouwel did not feel

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[276]   Wissing, cited in ibid., 11.
[277]   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 179.
[278]   Ibid., 159 ff.
[279]   Gert Staal, "Het arrogante, ongrijpbare van Total Design", *de Volkskrant* (13 May 1983).
[280]   Tamar, "In afwachting van de bal", *Vrij Nederland* (31 March 1979).

responsible for the content of the message they visualised on behalf of their clients. Conversely, artists like Lawrence Weiner did not feel responsible for the visual realisation of their concepts. Both Crouwel and Weiner evinced a professional indifference, amounting to a complementary demarcation of expertise. Crouwel claimed to be neutral towards the content of the information to be conveyed ("whatever it may be"). Weiner left it to the receiver of his work to decide at any moment to "build" it, in whatever way. He refused to draw a distinction between correct and incorrect interpretations. Even the decision to destroy a work, once it had been carried out, was left to the receiver. "People, buying my stuff, can take it wherever they go and can rebuild it if they choose," he wrote in 1972.

> If they keep it in their heads, that's fine too. They don't have to buy it to have it – they can have it just by knowing it. Anyone making a reproduction of my art is making art just as valid as art as if I had made it.[281]

Conceptual art and graphic design can thus be seen as two complementary forms of the "delegated production of culture".[282] Both the functionalist designer and the conceptual artist rejected the unregulated, "holistic" approach that had long been dominant in their respective fields. They started out from a strict standardisation and disciplining of their own production by means of a thoroughly rationalised and repeatable protocol. This had paradoxical consequences. Wim Crouwel felt it necessary to deny and suppress the role of aesthetic principles in his work. He even drew a distinction between "real" design and a superficial variant that he referred to as "styling" (a term borrowed from the fashion world).

> Design is real, it is giving form to something, determined by the function the thing has to have and the technical conditions of its production, ... styling is adapting something to a fashion, determined by commercial motives.[283]

Apparently there was a subtle cultural hierarchy: just as art saw itself as

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281 Weiner, "October 12, 1969", 217.
282 Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 192.
283 Crouwel, cited in Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design*, 3.

more content-oriented than the neighbouring discipline of design, so designers looked down on a completely externalised practice which they referred to as "styling".

> Design in the sense of styling is an imitative activity that relies on incidental whims and conformity with arbitrarily chosen stylistic elements, whether old or new, with no further consequences being drawn. … In most cases there is no logical continuity at all between the mechanism, or basic structure, and the visual form.[284]

There were also paradoxical consequences for conceptual art. By separating conception and execution and rejecting the priority of the visual, the artists in question may have thought they were taking a stand against the unbridled accumulation of insubstantial and unconsidered imagery, but in fact they started using methods and procedures similar to those used by designers. At the time when it was published, Sol LeWitt's polemical proposition that "Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions"[285] was clearly strategic with respect to the position that he and a group of kindred artists were creating for themselves. In retrospect, however, it is evident that the suggested antithesis between a cerebral and a "retinal" form of art – an antithesis that goes back to a notion by Marcel Duchamp – had already completely collapsed by then. In the 1960s, painters like Frank Stella had contributed to this just as much as minimalists like Carl Andre and Dan Flavin. Significantly, Dan Graham, Lawrence Weiner and other conceptual artists were strongly influenced by some of their more "retinal" colleagues. In 1985 Graham wrote that he found Duchamp's solution to the problem of the value of the work of art – namely, the introduction of the readymade into the exhibition space – unsatisfactory, preferring Dan Flavin's solution instead.[286] In the interview with Benjamin Buchloh quoted earlier, Weiner revealed his enormous admiration for Frank

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[284] Wim Crouwel, *Vormgeving – door wie?* (Delft: Waltman, 1973), 7.
[285] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" [1967], in: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1999), 15.
[286] "… Flavin's fluorescent light pieces are not merely *a priori* philosophical idealizations, but have concrete relations to specific details of the architectural arrangement of the gallery, details which produce meaning." Dan Graham, "My Work for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art'" [1985], in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 420.

Stella's *Black Paintings*.

> I thought they were absolutely fabulous. I remember a PBS-
> broadcast of Henry Geldzahler interviewing Frank Stella in the early
> 1960s. Stella looked plaintively at the camera and said, "My God, if
> you think these are boring to look at, can you imagine how boring
> they are to paint?" I was very impressed.[287]

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After Moholy-Nagy's telephone paintings, Stella's early work is another
example of "designed painting".[288] As an artist who designed the manual
work, Stella was an important example for conceptual artists. He divided the
production of a painting into two separate steps – the design phase and the
execution phase – so as to disengage the artist's ego from the process.[289]
Stella created two roles for himself, each with separate responsibilities. In
her book *Machine in the Studio*, Caroline Jones describes this separation as
follows:

> Stella hoped to vanish as a personality in the act of (commercial)
> painting. He would return as the ideator-executive: the designer of
> diagrams and plans that the artist-worker would execute. (*MS,* 124)

These two roles – the designer who supervises and controls, and the worker
who executes – have a completely antithetical orientation, both in social and
economic terms. The design phase is modelled on the world of logos and
trademarks, the branding of companies and institutions by advertising
agencies and graphic designers. Jones compares Stella's 1964 painting
Sidney Gruberman, for example, with the logo of the Chase Manhattan
Bank, designed by Tom Greismar in 1960. Criteria such as recognisability,
urgency and directness have supplanted the qualities normally regarded as

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[287]   "Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in Conversation with Lawrence Weiner", 9.
[288]   Sven Lütticken calls Stella's paintings of the early 1960s "designed rather
than composed". *Allegories of Abstraction* (PhD thesis, Amsterdam: Vrije
Universiteit, 2002), 8. See also Lütticken's essay "Het schilderij en de afvalbak", *De
Witte Raaf* 89 (January/February 2001), 11-13.
[289]   Caroline A. Jones calls this: "... to remove the ego of the artist from
painting". Jones, *Machine in the Studio. Constructing the Postwar American Artist*
(Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 124, cited in the text hereafter
as *MS*.

painterly. The emphasis on a "visual imprint" turned the design of such a painting into a logo for the Stella brand: " … there was no depth, merely visual information" (*MS,* 164-165).[290]

The execution phase, on the other hand, was modelled on the utilitarian world of the house painter, which is a less evident choice than it seems. Stella had learned the technique from his father, a physician who had financed his studies by temporarily working as a house painter (*MS,* 121-122). Executing a design with paint on canvas turned out to be fairly demanding work, a "chore". Stella painted the stripes by hand, without using masking tape, the way a house painter would paint a window frame. He used large brushes and industrial paint, straight from the tin. The painting technique missed any expressive touch, but for that very reason the work was exhausting and numbing, writes Caroline Jones, who also speaks of a "deadpan approach" (*MS,* 125-128).

In her reading of Stella's work, Jones emphasises the radical separation of intellectual and manual labour; yet she underlines not only the gap between these distinct aspects of his artistic practice, but also the logic of his way of bridging that gap. The gap and the bridging of the gap implied one another: she refers to "the original split necessitating that linkage [between worker and executive]" (*MS,* 121). Similarly, Stella himself made it all sound very logical:

> The remaining problem was simply to find a method of paint application which followed and complemented the design solution. This was done by using the house painter's technique and tools. (*MS,* 125)

But what is the connection between house painters and graphic designers in everyday practice? There seems to be none at all. Jones posits a class difference: the designer is a manager and executive, the house painter a "lower middle class manual worker" (*MS,* 122). She disregards the fact that a house painter, even if employed rather than independent, would never have a graphic designer as a boss. The very incongruity of their linkage

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[290]   See also Buzz Spector, *Objects and Logotypes. Relationships Between Minimalist Art and Corporate Design* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 1980).

causes the fissure in the production process of Stella's work to remain visible and thus to become an artistically significant factor.

After the *Black Paintings* of the late 1950s, Stella pushed the issue of the divide between conception and execution further, particularly in the *Benjamin Moore* series of 1961 (named after the manufacturer of the paint). Jones argues that these paintings, even more than the preceding series, were based on "clear, preexisting formats whose relation to the finished painting was that of blueprint to finished building" (*MS,* 177). The last traces of painterliness had disappeared from the work. The series was based on six square diagrams, executed in various pure colours and in two formats. The use of gloss paint on unprepared canvas resulted in a sharp linear structure, with no visible trace of the brush. Having reached this stage, Stella could in theory begin to delegate the manual work to assistants. If he still executed the *Benjamin Moore* series himself, this was, according to Jones, because he knew nobody else with sufficient command of house painting techniques to be able to apply the diagrams to the canvas accurately enough (*MS,* 177). From the mid-1960s, however, he did employ assistants, whom he allowed to use masking tape. The artist emerged as a full-blown manager.

> The fact that the paintings became ever more disconnected from even the workman's touch, and more and more like manufactured objects, only reinforced the sense of them as products of a corporate approach. Stella's eventual turn to masking tape and assistants as modes of increasing production around 1965, far from an incidental aspect of this development, became its most logical outgrowth. At that point the ideator-executive, having delegated to himself the task of painting earlier canvases, could now delegate the painting to others ... (*MS,* 157-58).

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In 1966, with conceptual tendencies already appearing on the art market, an interviewer made the following suggestion to Frank Stella:

> You're saying that the painting is almost completely conceptualized before it's made, that you can devise a diagram in your mind and put it on canvas. Maybe it would be adequate to simply verbalize this image and give it to the public rather than giving them your

painting?

Stella, who may have felt that this was a challenge to the uniqueness and the market value of his work – after all, he never "gave" his paintings to anyone – came up with the following answer:

> A diagram is not a painting; it's as simple as that. I can make a painting from a diagram, but can you? Can the public? It can just remain a diagram if that's all I do, or if it's a verbalization it can just remain a verbalization.[291]

The discrepancy between Stella's statements and his actual studio practice, already evident at the time of this interview, continued to grow. In the late 1960s and early '70s, as his production became larger in scale and more factory-like, his public statements increasingly emphasised the subtleties and sensitivities of the painting process. Although in practice he was fully delegating the manual execution, he started once again to claim personal authorship. By 1970, the rhetoric of the artist-manager or, as Jones calls it, "the executive artist" had completely disappeared.

> … Stella was at pains to emphasize the physical aspect of his labor in making the paintings, as if to forestall public awareness of his delegation of much of the routine work.

Increasingly, he became "jealous of the symbols of authorship as the bulk of production slipped ever further from his grasp" (*MS*, 180-81).

Yet there were more reasons for artists not to speak publicly about their work with the attitude of a production manager. Ironically, by the end of the 1960s a strategy for dismantling the sovereignty of authorship had led to the confirmation of another kind of authority – namely that of the capitalist, manager or factory owner.

> … by the end of the 1960s artists' claims of delegation to assistants, or aspirations to managerial status, were destabilized by their very contiguity with more generalized systems of control. They were analogized to claims for the ownership of others' labor (*MS,* 185)

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[291]   Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd", *Art News* 65:5 (September 1966), 60. Partially cited in Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 178.

In the political maelstrom of that time, such claims were suddenly quite dubious. It had become more socially acceptable to identify oneself with the worker than with the manager. "Thus the job of an executive artist may have become unappealing, to Stella as much as anyone else." (*MS,* 185)

Against this background, it starts to make sense that an artist like Lawrence Weiner avoided the imperative form in his work. For him, this was a clear and conscious decision. "My own art never gives directions, only states the work as an accomplished fact."[292] He made no secret of his political motivation. "To use the imperative would be for me fascistic... The tone of command is the tone of tyranny."[293] The form he gave to his *Statements* was not an instruction to do something, nor a description of something that had already been done, but an indefinite intermediate form that works both as inference and projection.[294] Strangely, the very thing that, in a grammatical sense, turns a text into a statement, namely the predicate, is incomplete. Weiner's statement *AN AMOUNT OF PAINT POURED DIRECTLY ONTO THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY* provides the information, the materials, for construing a variety of complete propositions: *AN AMOUNT OF PAINT* [will be/can be/could be/could have been/has been/has to be/is being] *POURED DIRECTLY ONTO THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY*. His rejection of the imperative form ("Pour an amount of paint directly onto the floor and allow it to dry") is in keeping with Caroline Jones' observation that artists in the late '60s preferred not to associate themselves with managers and other individuals who had subordinates do the dirty work. Weiner's reference to fascistic and tyrannical practices is, although somewhat overstated, consistent with the general image of the political and social context in which conceptual art flourished: anti-authoritarian movements, the protest against the Vietnam war, the resistance to patronising authorities – in short, "the spirit of 1968".

Yet, even within his own circle, Weiner received little support for his

[292]   Weiner, "October 12, 1969", 218.
[293]   Weiner (1972), cited in Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977", in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, xxii.
[294]   Ibid.

rejection of the instruction or imperative form. Other conceptual artists often used it as the perfect means to separate manual and intellectual work. Jones therefore overlooks something when she states that, towards the end of the '60s, "aspirations to managerial status" had lost their appeal for progressive artists. An artist could well involve other individuals in order to carry out a concept or an instruction, as long as he or she did not supervise or attempt to control the "quality" of the execution – or, to put it more generally, as long as the concept entailed an absence of interaction between "ideator" and "performer". Once the conditions and parameters of execution had been set, the rest would follow automatically.

Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* stated it clearly:

> In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art … is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.[295]

LeWitt's use of corporate and bureaucratic terms, such as "decisions" and "planning", implies that conceptual artists did actually aspire to a managerial status, as if they were designing and controlling the logistics and organisation of a production process. But they consciously refrained from the final step – the crucial phase of fine-tuning the concept on the basis of an evaluation of the initial results. The mechanical, blind nature of bureaucratic procedures was thus taken to its extreme: any result was a good result. Quality control did not pertain. Artists carried out their plans to the best of their abilities and presented the results as dryly as possible. This applied not only to those who delegated the production to others (John Baldessari), but also to artists who preferred to instruct *themselves* (Douglas Huebler). In the latter case, the artist divided himself in two – just as Frank Stella had done – on the understanding that the instructions could not be changed after the execution had begun, or rather, from the moment the instructions, often set down in writing, had been determined. No need was

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[295]   LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" [1967], in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 12.

felt for practice or training. Under no circumstances did the artistic content of the work depend on skilful execution.

As regards this last point, however, some variation was possible. In the case of artists like Ulay and Abramovic, who never rehearsed their joint performances, the strength of the work did indeed stem from their endurance and blind dedication during the performance. The opposite went for Bas Jan Ader: the failure of the execution was a programmed element of the concept. Other artists occupied a position midway between these extremes. Baldessari's idea of launching four balls in such a way that, photographed in mid-air, they would form a straight line (*Throwing Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line*, 1972-73) resulted in a series of 36 attempts, of which he showed only the four most successful. Then again, the results of Huebler's *Variable Piece #111* were so astounding that the question is whether the artist did not tinker with the rules – and whether that tinkering itself may not have been part of the concept.

Sol LeWitt's claim that conceptual art did not depend on the technical skill of the artist would seem to refer mainly to traditional crafts like painting and sculpting. But, again, it would be incorrect to distinguish in absolute terms the cerebral work of conceptual artists from the retinal work of painters and sculptors. For instance, around 1968-69, there was no more than a difference of degree between the artistic practices of Frank Stella and John Baldessari. Both artists produced paintings that were "designed" and both hired others to execute the design. Baldessari's 14-part series *Commissioned Paintings* of 1969 was carried out by Sunday painters whom Baldessari had approached at amateur art exhibitions. The visual material consisted of a number of 35 mm transparencies that he had made earlier, each showing a hand pointing to something.[296] The painters hired by Baldessari each had to choose one of the slides and copy it to the best of his or her ability within a marked out area on a standard canvas. The paintings were then taken to a sign painter who wrote the text "A painting by…" under each picture, followed by the name of the painter in question. As in the case

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[296] "The problem of providing interesting subject matter … was solved by a series [of slides] I had just finished which involved someone walking around and pointing to things that were interesting to him." Baldessari in cat. *John Baldessari*, 11.

of Stella's work, the *Commissioned Paintings* were meant to be shown together. "It was important that the paintings were exhibited as a group," Baldessari wrote, "so that the spectator could practice connoisseurship, for example comparing how the extended forefinger in each was painted."[297] In this strange mixture of professional detachment and amateur dedication, visual quality did play a role after all. Anyone who assumes that Baldessari's disengagement from his own work was more ironic than Stella's would be hard put to find solid evidence in their actual production.

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Hidden behind the professional approach of a graphic designer like Wim Crouwel is a rational, mathematical model of communication.[298] Communication is seen as a smooth, uniform conveyance of information between sensible and rational individuals. It ought to be possible to "address people without capitalising on their interests or desires".[299] The object of the conveyance – the content of the communication – is neutrally referred to as "statements" or "information" sent by one party and received by another. If a designer fulfils his or her task properly, no alteration or disturbance of the information occurs during the conveyance; what the recipient understands is identical to that which the sender intended. Communication is not disturbed by arbitrary decisions relating to form ("aesthetic noise"), nor by poorly attuned means of reproduction and transfer. The designer aims at eliminating everything that might threaten the integrity of the communication: misunderstanding, non-information and ambiguities. Hugues Boekraad recognises in Crouwel "a tendency to reduce ambiguity further and further".[300] Crouwel's cold and business-like image stemmed in part from all the facets of human communication that do not fit into this model.

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[297]   Ibid. According to Jan van der Marck, the *Commissioned Paintings* were made for the *Art by Telephone* exhibition, thus entirely at "long distance" by means of telephoned instructions. See Van der Marck, "Kunst per telefoon", 61.
[298]   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 177.
[299]   Ibid., 176, note 5.
[300]   Ibid., 177.

> The rational model of communication abstracts ... human imagination, fantasy, imagery and the fluid atmosphere of the conversation. It channels the stream of words, signs and knowledge into a fixed, lasting, "consultable", transferable form of writing.[301]

The general characteristics of this reduced model of communication seem to derive from the mathematical information theory developed in the USA during and after the Second World War by scientists Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener. Information theory as a branch of applied science originates in two pioneering articles published by Shannon in 1948.[302] He was at that time researching the problem of reliably transmitting information through an unreliable channel, such as a noisy radio or telephone connection. Shannon used statistical techniques to develop a method of calculating the information value of a source and the capacity of a channel; this "bit" (binary digit) became the new, quantitative unit of information. Shannon used this to draw up a theoretical model for counteracting the effect of noise in the channel by encoding the information. His second theorem, published in the *Bell System Technical Journal*, holds that, as long as the information flow does not exceed the capacity of the channel, it will be possible to use corrective coding to make the error rate as small as one wishes.

The great significance of mathematical information theory follows, among other things, from the widespread everyday use of such codings today: in CD players, video recorders, digital image and sound files like JPEG, MPEG, MP3, and so on. The functioning of these codes has to do with a phenomenon known as redundancy. Redundancy is a property of information caused by the fact that the formal or structural characteristics of a sign system always limit the freedom of choice of the sender. The redundant part of the message is the non-informative part – "the fraction of the structure of a message which is determined not by the free choice of the sender, but rather by accepted statistical rules governing the use of the

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[301]   Ibid.
[302]   See Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* [1949], repr. (Urbana/Chicago/London: University of Illinois Press, 1972) and Jeremy Campbell, *Grammatical Man. Information, Entropy, Language, and Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 17.

symbols in question".[303] The rules of grammar and spelling, for example, make the message recognisable and, to a certain degree, predictable: a Q is usually followed by a U, an article is usually followed by an adjective or noun, and so on.[304] It is possible to compress a message by reducing the redundancy – in other words, by removing part of the unnecessary, non-informative elements (as in a text written in "telegraphese"). With zero redundancy – only a theoretical possibility – the message cannot be compressed further; the information value is 100%: each communicated sign represents maximum unpredictability.[305] On the other hand, redundancy is important because it can help to reduce the effect of distortions (noise) in the communication channel.[306] From experience, the receiver knows the statistical characteristics of the language employed, so that missing signs are easier to fill in. Shannon's information theory pointed the way to methods for reducing the error rate in the transfer of information by an artificial increase of redundancy – which also increases the complexity of the communication system.[307] A simple example will explain why the use of coding to increase redundancy can make a message less vulnerable to disturbances. A telegram is sent; besides the text of the main message one also includes an indication of the number of words the message contains (entirely "redundant" information). The receiver of the message can immediately check whether words have been lost in transmission. Similarly, in the case of digital data traffic, it is useful to include in every series of bits an extra bit signifying whether they add up to an odd or an even number. By combining various codes of this sort in an intelligent way, one can ensure

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[303]   Weaver, in Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 13.
[304]   Campbell, *Grammatical Man*, 68-69.
[305]   Ibid., 72.
[306]   "When there is noise on a channel, … there is some real advantage in not using a coding process that eliminates all of the redundancy. For the remaining redundancy helps combat the noise." Weaver, in Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 22.
[307]   Campbell, *Grammatical Man*, 73: "The more complex the system, the more likely it is that one of its parts will malfunction. Redundancy is a means of keeping the system running in the presence of malfunction." Campbell then cites a statement by John von Neumann from 1949: "… a language which has maximum compression would actually be completely unsuited to conveying information beyond a certain degree of complexity, because you could never find out whether a text is right or wrong."

that errors are not only detected but even corrected automatically.[308]

After the introduction of the first micro-processor in 1971, the number of commercial applications of the mathematical models of information theory rapidly increased: modems, fax machines, video recorders, personal computers… Until then, the range of applications had been limited to expensive communications technology for space travel and military purposes.[309] In fact, it was in a military context that Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener had achieved the initial results of their research during the Second World War.[310] Techniques for noise reduction in data transmission were originally developed in order to increase the accuracy of radar images, for example. At M.I.T., Wiener was working on electronic techniques for improving the efficiency of British anti-aircraft defences against German bombers (and later V-1 flying bombs). The result was a guidance system that used statistical calculations to predict the position of a moving target at the moment the anti-aircraft shells would reach it. This innovation did indeed make British defences much more effective: after August 1944, the percentage of downed V-1 rockets rose from 10% to 50%.[311]

The success of information theory led to a considerable hype, particularly in the 1950s and – after a temporary setback – again in the '70s. The initial excitement about Shannon's theories inspired many scholars from other academic fields as well. During the third congress of the Professional Group on Information Theory (PGIT), held in London in 1956, papers were presented in the fields of anatomy, animal welfare, anthropology, computers, economy, electronics, linguistics, mathematics, neurophysiology, neuropsychiatry, philosophy, phonetics, physics, political theory, psychology and statistics. In the specialist journal *IRE Transactions on Information Theory* many articles appeared around this time which went far beyond the purview of science. Publications in the general press created the impression in the minds of a broad public that information theory would

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[308] Examples taken from Campbell, *Grammatical Man*, 78.
[309] Omar Aftab et al., "Information Theory and the Digital Age", *http://web.mit.edu* (2001), 20.
[310] According to Campbell, Shannon had worked on secret codes during the war. *Grammatical Man*, 67.
[311] Ibid., 25-31.

eventually unite all possible scientific and semi-scientific fields. The inevitable backlash soon came, bringing with it a stricter definition of information theory; in the '70s, however, the hype began anew, stimulated by developments in DNA research and evolution theory.[312]

The idea that the concepts and mathematical models of information theory could be applied to every conceivable domain and sub-domain once again reflects the post-industrial myth that every human action and all social intercourse can be seen in the perspective of information exchange, knowledge transfer and communication processes. This myth has been criticised by, among others, the cybernetician Heinz von Foerster. In an essay published in 1980, entitled *Epistemology of Communication*, Von Foerster rejected the proposition that the information theory developed by Shannon and his colleagues was a fully-fledged theory of information and communication. He argued that communication cannot be equated to a mere exchange of signals. "Exchange" would be the wrong metaphor, as it reduces human communication to a sort of pneumatic dispatch. ("This suggests that if we are at opposite ends of a dialogue and have successfully exchanged our opinions, I have your opinions and you have mine! Presto!"[313]) According to Von Foerster, it is no accident that information theory was conceived in a military context. It disregards the human capacity for dialogue and discussion and casts all forms of communication into the rigid format of a command:

> ... during wartime a particular mode of language – the imperative, or the command – tends to predominate over others (the descriptive, the interrogative, the exclamatory, etc.). In the command mode it is assumed that the following takes place: a command is uttered, it reaches a recipient, and the recipient carries out the command.[314]

However, only in trivial situations could it be upheld that the output is completely determined by the input (the emitted signal or command). Von Foerster accused his opponents of cherishing a behaviourist ideal, according

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[312]   Ibid., 19-20; Aftab et al., "Information Theory and the Digital Age", 8-9.
[313]   Heinz von Foerster, "Epistemology of Communication", in: Woodward, ed., *The Myths of Information*, 20.
[314]   Ibid., 21.

to which orders are carried out without a hitch. The difference between signal and information becomes clear when a recipient refuses to obey; only on such occasions are the conditions met for something new to happen. In Von Foerster's own, ethical view, communication implies that each participant perceives himself through the eyes of the other.

> Note that in this perspective of communicative competence, concepts such as "agreement" and "consensus" do not appear and, moreover, need not appear (and this is as it should be, since in order for "consent" and "agreement" to be reached, communication must already prevail).[315]

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This critique of the models and applications of the mathematical information theory has its parallel in the criticism meted out to Wim Crouwel in the 1970s. This came mostly from fellow designers like Jan van Toorn who rejected Crouwel's rational model of communication. Van Toorn's critique focused on the exhibition and catalogue designs that Crouwel was commissioned by Edy de Wilde to make for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Van Toorn himself was responsible for catalogue and exhibition design at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven under the directorship of Jean Leering. The quarrel between Crouwel and Van Toorn, which erupted in various publications and public discussion forums, took place against the background of an ideological battle between De Wilde and Leering concerning the cultural role of the art museum in a modern, emancipated society.[316]

Van Toorn reproached Crouwel for giving his exhibition designs such an aloof and sacrosanct character that they automatically forced the public into a passive role. He felt that the museum was presenting itself as a bulwark of professional expertise and hence as an untouchable authority that was not essentially interested in a dialogue with visitors. There was, it

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[315] Ibid., 27.
[316] For an account of a public debate between Crouwel and Van Toorn, see Paul Mijksenaar, "'n Rodeo voor ontwerpers", *Graficus*, 25 August 1972. See further Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design*, 91-92; Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 117-123.

was felt, "a one-way traffic in communication" that hindered "the formation of independent opinions on the part of the public". Van Toorn's own designs, on the other hand, were aimed at activating the public. As opposed to the "canonisation of a final situation" based on specialist criteria the general public was unfamiliar with, he advocated a presentation of the material that would stimulate visitors to take on the role of researcher themselves.[317]

The dispute between Crouwel and Van Toorn revolved around the neutrality of the "means of conveyance". The former believed in this neutrality as strongly as the latter rejected it. "Crouwel's fear of subjective intervention leads to uniformity, and the loss of a strong identity," Van Toorn stated in a debate in 1972.[318] Although they agreed that every designer arranges the material and works out a design on the basis of that arrangement or order, Crouwel was of the opinion that making an optimal design came down to realising or revealing an order that was already inherent in the material itself. With regard to designing for museums, he claimed: "All design within the context of an art museum should be aimed at showing the art to maximum advantage, so as to best serve both visitor and artist ...."[319] By contrast, Van Toorn argued that any arrangement of the material by definition reflects a position and is therefore always biased, arbitrary and more or less imposed. Instead of concealing this position behind an aesthetic or objectivised form of presentation, museums should make it explicit and clear. They should always provide insight into their own selection and classification procedures; the fact that an exhibition has a "man-made" character ought to be made immediately evident in the exhibition itself.[320] Crouwel's response was that everything not emanating from the art itself is redundant and distracting.

> If your aim as a museum is to allow your public to form an
> independent opinion about art, you should let the art speak for itself

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[317]   Jean Leering and Jan van Toorn, *Vormgeving in functie van museale overdracht* (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 1978), 2-3 and 10-13.
[318]   Cited in Broos, *Ontwerp: Total Design*, 91.
[319]   Wim Crouwel, "De vormgeving en het museum", in: Edy de Wilde et al., *Om de kunst* (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 1978), 15.
[320]   Leering en Van Toorn, *Vormgeving in functie van museale overdracht*, 20.

and you should refrain from acting, with all your good intentions, as a disturbing factor. When art becomes the victim of a radical communication theory, all this communicating amounts to little more than *noise*. The plea for visualising the operation of the museum is a model that mainly generates *noise*.[321]

The exhibition designs that Jan van Toorn created for Jean Leering, including *De Straat. Vorm van samenleving* (The Street. Forms of Communal Living), were characterised by a mixture of documentary and collage forms. They featured text panels with photographs in a setting of utilitarian materials, such as wooden planking and wire mesh fences, meant to evoke an atmosphere of concrete reality.[322] Whatever the subject of the exhibition, the main intention was to create a layered representation in which the decisive role of "stories and storytellers" would also become tangible.[323] Such politically motivated "realism" was at odds with Crouwel's abstract method of design. Yet, despite their differences, the two approaches did have one important thing in common: both relied on an ideal of transparency. Whereas Crouwel strove for transparency through formal reduction and purification, Van Toorn thought he could achieve it by accumulating material, offering only raw facts or samples and suspending definitive points of reference. The paradox is that, despite their conflicting approaches, both these designers were aiming at a zero degree of design: Crouwel by avoiding random applications of form ("styling"), Van Toorn by omitting all stages of reduction or translation in the communication process. Both Crouwel and Van Toorn thus produced an extreme version of *design that poses as non-design*. Each of the two regarded "the imposition of form" as the biggest sin for a designer: the one because it would testify to arbitrariness, obtrusion and unprofessionality, the other because it would be authoritarian and patronising. But each of them thought it was the other who was guilty of "imposing form".

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321   Crouwel, "De vormgeving en het museum", 16-17.
322   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 119-121.
323   Frans van de Ven, *Het verhaal van de Delta-Expo. Het activeringsmodel in de expositievormgeving* (Breda: Academie St. Joost, 2000), cited in Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 121.

There is little proof that, in the 1970s, Wim Crouwel was acquainted with
the mathematical complexities of information theory. Although his
inaugural lecture as professor of industrial design (1973) contained a plea
for "the preparation of form according to consistent mathematical
principles", what he really meant by this was the development of "clear
modular structures to improve the formal structure".[324] This mathematical
path was indicated not so much by Claude Shannon as by Buckminster
Fuller, the American designer quoted several times in Crouwel's lecture.
Crouwel's interest in mathematics concerned geometry, which he thought
allowed the application of modular principles – linkable and extendible
basic forms – to be taken to its logical conclusions. In a sense, this was his
answer to the political and ideological fixations of the period. Crouwel
proposed in his lecture that the designer should be content with the humble
and democratic role of a "preparer of form".

> The task of this preparer of form is therefore no longer to determine
> the final appearance, but to search for the logical basic components;
> the elements to be transformed. Then we shall have reached the
> point where everyone can determine the final form for themselves,
> instead of standing by helplessly.[325]

The paradoxical logic here is that Crouwel's aversion to amateurism – which
made him insist on the elimination of the designer's subjectivity – now led
him to the point of arguing that, in theory, a designer should do little more
than supply a range of possibilities, while the individual user, on the basis of
his or her personal creativity, would have the final say in "design decisions".
The conviction that design is a specialist profession that, like any other, has
to be approached in a business-like way, led via this kink to the ultimate
conclusion that everyone could be their own designer.

> The invention and production of artefacts should be monitored
> critically, even when it concerns architects, designers and engineers,
> who are supposedly qualified for it. All too often design results in a
> sort of immutability, a dead end for creativity. We need to have the

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[324]   Crouwel, *Vormgeving – door wie?*, 13.
[325]   Ibid.

opportunity to express at least our most basic creative impulses, so as to help shape the identity of our surroundings. Design that leads to an unchangeable form has had its day.[326]

In Crouwel's rational model of communication, the primacy lay with information. "Relevant and essential information is fully original in itself; the designer has nothing to add!"[327] So ran the formula with which he hoped to bring his main spectre under control – the spectre of random applications of form. The idea that a designer might take a step or make a choice for which there was no rational, logical justification undermined his self-image of professional competence and expertise. The entire design philosophy of Crouwel – and of Total Design – seems grounded in this idée-fixe. He preferred to leave the final choices and decisions to the user, rather than run the risk of making an unfounded choice himself. Crouwel gave users – at least according to the theory outlined in his inaugural lecture – room to determine their own priorities and criteria; users, after all, are laymen, so they don't commit any professional sin when taking an ill-considered or arbitrary decision. Crouwel thus succeeded in completing the professionalisation of the design trade in his own mind by leaving the non-professional element completely to amateurs. In so doing, he unconsciously employed a tautological definition of professionalism: professional designers are those who let others take all non-professional decisions.

As already mentioned, there are no indications that Crouwel was familiar with the mathematics behind information theory. His claim that relevant information was already "fully original in itself" failed to appreciate the importance that had been attributed to redundancy in information transfer ever since Claude Shannon's 1948 publications. According to Shannon's information theory, any message that is not to some degree predictable within the sign system employed, will, by definition, be incomprehensible; only a small part of any given message is not determined by the formal restraints of the language and can thus be regarded as "free". In the suppression of noise, which for Crouwel was crucial, the redundant, non-original part of communication plays a major role. Redundancy reduces

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326   Ibid., 3.
327   Crouwel, *Ontwerpen en drukken*, 13.

the error rate during the transfer of information.[328] In this context it would once again be interesting to make a comparison with conceptual art. In a sense, conceptual artists raised the very spectres that graphic designers were attempting to exorcise.

A 1966 work by Dan Graham, known as *Schema* (originally *Poem Schema*), is among the works that Graham made in the second half of the 1960s in the form of independent contributions to magazines. *Schema* consists of instructions for filling a given page in a given magazine. The instructions were supposed to be carried out by the editor of the magazine, who was to complete and execute the work by filling in the requested data in the schema.[329] This concerned not only the regular properties of the magazine, such as the page dimensions and the weight of paper, but also the printed text of the schema itself in its finished form (typeface, size of type, number of words, number of lines, percentage of area occupied by type, and so on). The editor entrusted with this work had to face the problem that each item entered changed the schema's text and thus influenced all the other items. No matter how factual the requested information might be, this problem could not, it seemed, be solved without arbitrary choices or "subjective" interventions. "If a given variant," explained Graham,

> is attempted to be set up by the editor following the logic step-by-step (linearly) it would be found impossible to compose a completed version as each of the component lines of exact data requiring completion (in terms of specific number and percentages) would be contingently determined by every other number and percentage which itself would in turn be determined by the other numbers or percentages, *ad infinitum*.[330]

From the perspective of information theory, this piece is reminiscent of examples of encoding that increase the redundancy of information and hence the reliability of the transfer. The procedure followed is almost literally the same as in the case of a telegram that states the number of words it contains. The crucial difference is that in *Schema* the code was

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[328] Campbell, *Grammatical Man*, 71-72.
[329] The work was realised in various publications, including *Aspen Magazine* (1967), *Art-Language* (1969), *Flash Art* (1972), *Studio International* (1972) and *Interfunktionen* (1972).
[330] Dan Graham, "After Thoughts / Schema", *Interfunktionen* 8 (January 1972), 29.

applied to itself. The editor realising Graham's work had to confront the problem that the full text of the "message" was only finalised after the encoding had taken place. The distinction between information and non-information, between text and layout, between layout and layout instructions, completely collapsed; the ideal of a rationalised and undistorted transfer of information failed due to internal contradictions. The point of *Schema* is not only that pure noise merges with pure information, but that the generation of noise follows a protocol which, at the same time, serves as the content of the communicated message. What applies to Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* and to the "instruction pieces" and "event scores" of other conceptual artists also applies to *Schema*: the work consists of a script that, instead of describing something, sets something in motion; and what is set in motion is the rewriting of the script itself. The script is an instruction for internalising external conditions; in order to be "performed" it needs to be reproduced with the means made available in the environment in which it manifests itself.

If one were to place a work like Dan Graham's *Schema* next to the telephone directory designed by Total Design, the following conclusion could be reached. Graphic design and conceptual art encountered each other in the 1960s as two converse genres of "graphic art".[331] This did not involve the blurring of boundaries between an autonomous and an applied form of art; the encounter could better be described as a parallel development in two fields separated by discursive barriers. Graphic designers and conceptual artists alike acted as self-confident *designers of a communication process*. Both groups subscribed at that time to the idea of man as "an information-processing, decision-making, cybernetic machine whose value systems are built up by feedback processes from his environment."[332] Designers and conceptual artists, each in their own way, testified to the conviction that the design process was something that had to be "managed" and integrated into the large-scale information and media

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[331]   Cf. John Chandler, "The Last Word in Graphic Art", *Art International* 7:9 (November 1968), 25-28.
[332]   Van Rensselaer Potter, *Bioethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), cited in the editor's introduction of Woodward, ed., *The Myths of Information*, xviii.

industry. To this end, and on the basis of a well-defined yet strictly limited responsibility, both groups developed objective and repeatable protocols that, nevertheless, possessed a highly idiosyncratic character.

In the 1960s the social position not only of designers but also of conceptual artists was "a derivative of professional communication".[333] This raises the question of whether the essential difference is that the work of conceptual artists, in its capacity as autonomous art, is self-referential, whereas the work of graphic designers is not. The examples dealt with here – including, most evidently, Crouwel's poster for the *Vormgevers* exhibition – make it clear, however, that the work of designers likewise reflected upon the conditions in which it came into being. Like Dan Graham's *Schema*, the telephone directory designed by Total Design can be read as an allegory of its own production process – a quality that is often seen as typifying (late-)modernist forms of art. "This is what is often called the autoreferentiality or self-designation of the modern," Fredric Jameson writes, "and the way in which modernist works can so often be seen, implicitly or explicitly, to be allegories of their own production."[334] In this respect, it would be incorrect to state the difference between autonomous and applied art in absolute terms. Even if one agrees with the proposition that artistic autonomy is a prerequisite for any sort of self-reflection,[335] there are no grounds for ascribing less autonomy to graphic design, a professional discipline with its own institutions and its own mature discourse, than to visual art.

In any case, self-referentiality need not be the only allegorical dimension of the work. As Jameson himself argues, "it constitutes one allegorical level … among many others."[336] An example is the incorporation of bureaucratic procedures and structures, as mentioned above, which occurred in both conceptual art and graphic design of this period and was of an allegorical rather than ironic nature. The way in which designers and conceptual artists formally limited their own professional responsibility was

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[333]   Huygen and Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 175.
[334]   Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London/New York: Verso, 2002), 159.
[335]   See Frank Vande Veire, "De paradoxen van de ideologiekritiek. Over *Essays historiques II* van Benjamin Buchloh", *De Witte Raaf* 41 (January-February 1993), 7.
[336]   Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 159.

not the least of their bureaucratic or semi-bureaucratic traits.

This opposing delineation of responsibility – information versus visualisation – helps to determine a more substantial difference between artists and designers. The collective production of conceptual artists – however difficult to define[337] – can be interpreted in retrospect as a composite allegory of the obsession with an optimal, undistorted transfer of information founded on rational planning and decisions. In contrast to the transparency that designers were aiming at (in Wim Crouwel's case by filtering out the "noise", or in Jan van Toorn's by exposing the ideological agenda of the client), there was the deliberate redundancy of conceptual art. Many works by conceptual artists are about the redundancy or circularity of a design method such as Crouwel's, who pretended to "only reveal" an order which he had actually first imposed upon the material himself. Mel Bochner's *Axiom of Indifference* (1972-73) can thus be regarded as a dismantled version of a Crouwel design. The work embraces an order that is lucid, systematic, rational and above all self-evident, but which on closer inspection clarifies or explains nothing at all – and makes no secret of the fact. Permeated by simulations of logic and mathematical simplicity, this order passes off verifiability as transparency. Once the viewer has discovered (or even suspects) the logical principle of the distribution of the coins, there remains little else to do than to verify the consistency of the execution. In so doing, the viewer repeats every single step previously taken by the artist in the "design phase", and thus reproduces for himself the redundancy of the creative process.

In an analogous way, Dan Graham's *Schema* can be read as a self-destructive version of a design by Jan van Toorn. The work provides only raw ingredients and does not hide behind a stylised form. It shows all the options and explicitly refers to its context. It pretends to activate its audience but in fact it is fully preoccupied with the *process* of activation, mediation and conveyance – and is frank about it. In the final analysis, this

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[337] Cf. Camiel van Winkel, "The Obsession with a Pure Idea", in: cat. *Conceptual Art in the Netherlands and Belgium 1965-1975*, ed. Suzanna Héman et al. (Amsterdam/Rotterdam: Stedelijk Museum and NAi Uitgevers, 2002), 28-47. For a genealogy that does justice to the complexity of this "movement", see Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977".

model turns out to be no less empty and circular than the functionalist alternative.

The overt redundancy of conceptual art was connected with the refusal of artists to accept a strict separation between message and noise. While other professionals in the field of communication focused on the elimination of ambiguity, conceptual artists were not afraid to be misunderstood. Their rhetoric derived part of its strength from the scientific premise that redundancy is inherent in the functioning of communication systems. Thus, they challenged something which they at the same time fully embraced: the presuppositions of professional communication and efficient information transfer.

¶

In the 1980s, when Jeff Koons reinvented conceptual art and gave it a new hedonistic veneer, everything was the same and yet different. Critics and other professional viewers recognised the split between conception and execution that lay hidden beneath his work's kitschy aura of wholeness, reconciliation and total communication. This insight enabled them to pronounce a perhaps not so obvious judgment. At the time of the *Banality* series (1988-89), Jean-Christophe Amman wrote:

> There is no denying that a strategy underlies Jeff Koons' work, a strategy whose theoretical foundations and potential may be more interesting at this point than the work it begets. ... Jeff Koons' sculptures are obviously conceptual. ... [W]hat appears to be a sample of ready-made kitsch is in fact thoughtfully contrived.[338]

While endorsing the view that his work was conceptual, Koons carefully dissociated himself from the "dry" version of conceptual art practised in the 1960s and '70s. He reproached the artists of that period for having alienated the public. "The ideas are wonderful but they can be presented without that alienating effect," he said in 1988.

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[338]   Jean-Christoph Amman, "Jeff Koons. A Case Study", *Parkett* 19 (March 1989), 56-58.

> My work strives for a dialogue with the viewer to help fight off that alienation. I want to keep the public so that they can get the ideas.[339]

The alienation Koons referred to did not stem from the fact that conceptual artists had often left the execution of their ideas to others, but it did stem from their tendency to accept every outcome of this. As discussed above, the historical version of conceptual art represented both a product of the managerial revolution and a critical commentary on it; paradoxically, however, the critical element resided in the very *absence* of any evaluation of the process and its results. These artists' wish to restrict their responsibility to the planning phase meant that they tended to regard any result as a good result. For Koons, such a phlegmatic attitude was unthinkable and disgraceful; he felt it had made the public lose faith in the integrity of artists and the quality of their craft. Koons' own mission has always been to restore that faith; he wants to enable viewers to regain their faith in art.

> I believe in art morally. When I make an artwork, I try to use craft as a way, hopefully, to give the viewer a sense of trust. I never want anybody to look at a painting, or to look at a sculpture, and to lose trust in it somewhere.[340]

Like his predecessors, Koons has set himself up as a manager-supervisor, the designer of a communication trajectory; the difference is that he takes responsibility for the whole process: not only for the concept, but also for the visualisation – not only for the design, but also for the execution. His production is characterised by a colossal aspiration towards quality control. He had the life-sized wooden and porcelain sculptures of the *Banality* series manufactured to his own design in an edition of three by artisans in German and Italian knickknack workshops. Rather than instructing them over the telephone, Koons took charge on the spot from beginning to end, determining what was to happen and how the work was to look, right down to the smallest details. He was not interested in any creative contribution on the part of the workers, let alone in productive misunderstandings.

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[339]   Cited in Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Jeff Koons: Conceptual Art of the '60s and '70s Alienated the Viewer", *Flash Art* 143 (November/December 1988), 114.
[340]   Sylvester, "Jeff Koons Interviewed", 22-24.

> ... I could not give these people that freedom. I mean, how can I let them do it; these people aren't artists. So, I had to do the creating. I did everything. I directed every color; I made color charts. This has to be pink, this has to be blue. Everything! Every leaf, every flower, every stripe, every aspect.[341]

Since Koons did not entrust himself with the manual work, the gulf between conception and execution persisted. The way in which he established his authorship of these works was also ambivalent. He had them signed on the pedestal by the artisan who executed the model, but also placed his own signature – invisibly, underneath.

> The way it works is that one of the factory artists makes the model and signs it. I sign underneath the piece with the date and number of the edition. I have them sign it because I want them to give me 100%, to exploit themselves. I also like not being physically involved because I feel that, if I am, I become lost in my own physicality. I get misdirected toward my true initiative so that it becomes masturbative.[342]

With the porcelain pieces from the series, such as *Naked*, the signature of the ceramist is baked into the clay, while Koons' signature was applied separately to each individual piece. This double signature suggests that the artisans remain imprisoned in their provincial straitjacket of folklore and ornament, while the master planner not only organises the distribution of the work across the Western hemisphere, but is the one who endows it with true authenticity.[343] Jeff Koons may pretend that he is challenging the alienation of the viewer, but he leaves intact the division between manual and intellectual labour – for Marx the fountainhead of alienation.

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[341]   Burke & Hare, "From Full Fathom Five", 47.
[342]   Ibid.
[343]   The *Banality* series was inaugurated simultaneously in three galleries in New York, Cologne and Chicago in 1988.