Undergraduate Texts in Mathematics

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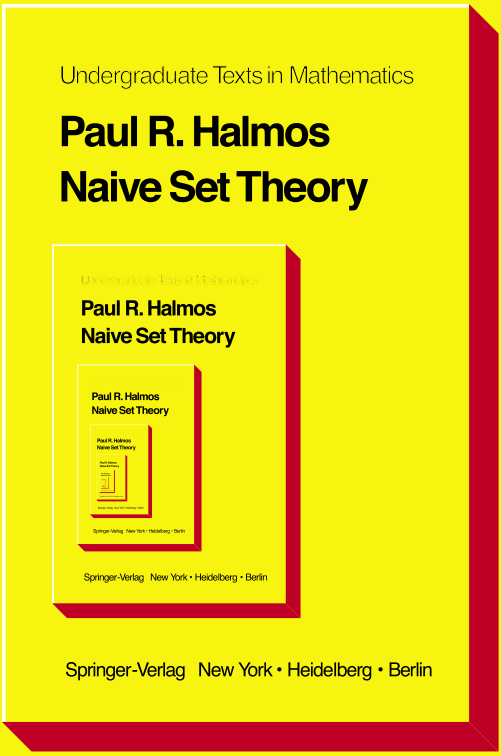
Naive Set Theory



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NAÏVE SET THEORY

by Anthony Huberman

See Figure 1 (p. 52). To Summarise:

1. A total absence of information about a given subject usually solicits no curiosity: without an awareness of its existence, we can't possibly care about it.

2. When we come to realise the existence of something we never knew was there before, our curiosity is sparked: What is it? How does it work? What should we call it? Why is it there? But we remain in the early stages of our ability to recognise and read it.

3. We attempt to accumulate information and, while additional research provides many answers, it also reveals additional questions, fuelling more curiosity still.

4. At a certain point—at the top of the bell curve—we come to a place where effective discussion and debate is possible, but much still remains speculation. It is a moment of intense scrutiny and educated hypothesising when questions, answers, contradictions, controversy, desire, violence, disappointment and determination make up a complex system.

5. Little by little, though, speculation gives way to consensus. The power structures that make up the socio-political fabric begin enforcing their choices. The many questions gather around common answers, and information becomes more and more organised, making the transition into the understood.

6. Sinking into the understood, our given subject provokes less and less curiosity.

7. Eventually, we have a dictionary definition.

This progression is also a loop: thanks to scientific, artistic or intellectual pioneers—from Copernicus to Duchamp—common assumptions about the world are second-guessed, challenged, and the understood once again becomes no longer understood, prompting the cycle to begin anew.

I presume few would argue that the experience of art thrives at the top of the bell curve in a place of speculation (and not consensus), hypotheses (and not conclusions) and belief (and not knowledge). To stay at the top of the bell curve corresponds to a state of sustained curiosity that provokes us to change something about ourselves in an effort to understand. To stay at the top of the bell curve, as our diagram clearly shows us, requires *stopping* information.

Now more than ever: the efficiency, quantity and immediacy of information and information-systems has placed art and the artistic gesture at risk of being identified, categorised, digested, cannibalised and made into information before it has a chance to begin being art. Curiosity is being castrated by information.

In her essay "Against Interpretation", Susan Sontag saw much of the art in the 1960s as being motivated by a "flight from interpretation."[1] Ultimately, good art from any era successfully does that without it being a motivation, much less a strategy. In the 1960s, however, artists addressed the problem of interpretation and content head-on, and Sontag identified various strategies of doing so (art can become parody, abstract, merely decorative or non-art). It is equally true that all good art stops information, without the artist making it a self-conscious strategy. In recent years, though, artists have also been formulating specific strategies that short-circuit the mechanics of information's lifespan and cause it to malfunction. This essay proposes four ways artists are doing so.

No

In Figure 2 (p. 53), arrows run from too much to dispersed (since to disperse is also to multiply) and from not enough to private (since to

make private is also to reduce). But before examining each pole, it is worth noting what is in fact missing from it, namely *no information*. One provides no information either through secrecy or through refusal. For an artwork, secrecy will solicit no curiosity since viewers need to know it exists in order to care about it. Refusal is the punk strategy: *fuck you, I owe you nothing, I make my own rules, leave me alone, I'll do my own thing*. It is also the Situationist strategy: to avoid definition, to strategically withdraw, to never work. As with most subversive acts, this approach of non-participation, refusal and overt opposition has been co-opted by the capitalist machine and is now a fashionable, marketable and historical style. In effect, no-information is its own kind of information, and a highly commodified one at that. After all, Hollywood loves the Sex Pistols.

Aware of the double bind between refusal and complicity—inextricably linked, the former is unable to prevent the latter—many contemporary artists have chosen a more balanced relationship between disruption and compliance. Practically speaking, artists are saying *yes* as a way of saying *no*. As writer Michael Taussig notices in an essay on shamanist magic, "the real skill of the practitioner lies not in skilled concealment but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment. […] Hence, power flows not from masking but from an unmasking which masks more than masking does."[2] Art hasn't lost its subversive edge, but saying yes has revealed itself to be an effective means of saying no.

Too Much

A case in point: saying yes to too much information can become a way of obstructing the path of information. A familiar example is from 71 B.C., when the leader of the Roman army was keen to identify Spartacus, the leader of the slave rebellion. According to legend, each slave stepped forward, one by one, announcing "I am Spartacus." In this case of selfless resistance, the overabundance of information—rather than its absence—is what complicates the process of identification. Too much complicity, in this sense, is potentially more subversive than none at all. A resistance of yes, of sorts.

Creating an overabundance of identity is a strategy used by many artists in their attempts to remain elusive and hard to pin down. To do so by way of a pseudonym is an immediate example: Charles Rosenthal (Ilya Kabakov), Norma Jeane (Luca Forcolini), Storm van Helsing (Gareth James) or John Dogg (according to rumour, Colin de Land and Richard Prince) are a few examples. More complicated still is the use of more than one pseudonym: Stéphane Mallarmé published the journal *La Dernière Mode*, writing all the articles himself but signing each one with a different (female) name. Richard D. James, an electronic musician, goes by Aphex Twin, AFX, Blue Calx, Bradley Strider, Martin Tresseder, Caustic Window, Gak, Soit P.P., Polygon Window, Power-Pill, Q-Chastic, The Diceman, Tahnaiya Russell and DJ Smojphace. Marcel Duchamp had several well-known pseudonyms, but I suspect he had others that remain undetected to this day. Even more difficult to identify—and to which information has an enormously difficult time clinging to—is the creation of a single name that itself represents "too many" conflicting identities: Reena Spaulings, for example, is a character in a collectively written novel, the name of a commercial New York gallery that represents a dozen artists and, finally, the name of an artist—in reality, a collaborative artist-duo—who makes paintings, flags and sculptures.

Other artists choose to remain in clear view, without hiding behind scrims of alternate identities. John Armleder, following the Warholian lesson that ubiquity is a form of absence, uses too much information as a way of remaining always out of reach and beyond the grasp of identification. His recent book of drawings is entitled *About Nothing* and is 1,248 pages long. His recent survey exhibition at the Kunstverein Hannover and the Rose Art Museum was called "Too Much is Not Enough", and included everything from surfboards, silver Christmas

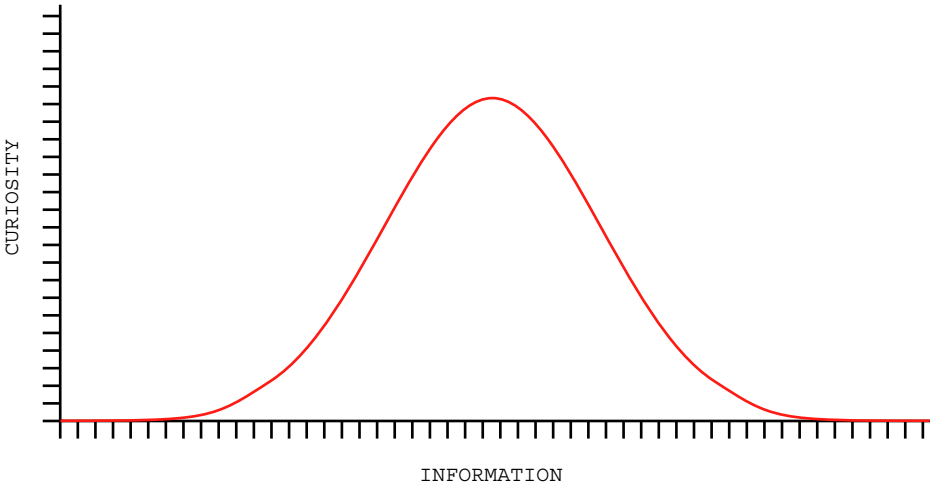

Figure 1. Curiosity as a function of information

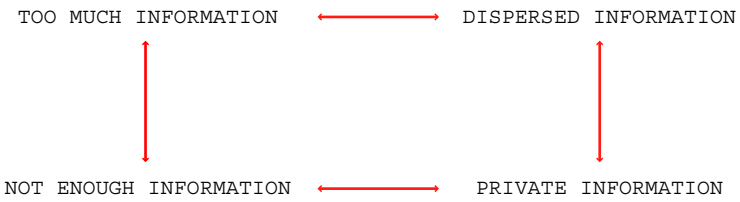

Figure 2. Four ways of stopping information

trees, furniture sculptures, mirrored skulls, neon lights, polka-dot paintings, wallpaper, etc. Armleder often talks about his fantasy of one day coming across a work that he doesn't recognise or remember as actually being his own.

In a broader sense, the strategy of too much can incorporate this aversion to signature styles. In recent years, many have written about the rise of the so-called multi-tasking artist, he or she who works in all media, who disregards the boundaries between all disciplines in an attempt to claim an open field of production. Artists who paint also write; those who photograph also sculpt; those who draw play music; sculptors moonlight as dancers; many who make things also run art spaces or publish magazines. The multiplication of roles and areas of activity has indeed been a defining characteristic of art-making in the past several years, and the list of examples would be too long: Amy Granat, Fia Backström, Matt Keegan, Richard Aldrich, Fritz Welch—and that's only counting friends of mine living in a small section of Brooklyn.

Not Enough

The *not enough* strategy acknowledges the necessity of participation, but only to a point. This approach is more historical than particularly contemporary, and the work of the conceptual artists in the 1960s and 70s are good examples: while they are very forthcoming with providing information about their decision-making process, their deadpanning leaves their viewers without interpretative tools. Ed Ruscha tells us he is taking pictures of various small fires or gas stations, and does exactly that. Sol LeWitt gives us precise instructions for what to draw on the wall, hiding nothing. For his piece *Jump*, Bruce Nauman jumps. The information is there, but it has nowhere to go.

Recent curatorial practices have also employed the not-enough strategy in attempts to elude the overbearing nature of thematic exhibitions and to permit works of art to remain unburdened by curatorial claims. For instance, Bob Nickas curated a series of red shows, where he simply selected red artworks by a wide range of artists including Steven Parrino, Sherrie Levine, Alan McCollum and even Donald Judd. In 2001 he curated "W" at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, an exhibition of artists whose last names begin with W: Kelley Walker, Jeff Wall, Dan Walsh, Andy Warhol, John Waters, Weegee, Lawrence Weiner, James Welling, Franz West, T.J. Wilcox, Christopher Williams, Jane & Louise Wilson, David Wojnarowicz, Christopher Wool and several others. In both cases, the curator chooses a system that allows him to make selections; he provides his audience with information about that system, but not enough for a theme to parasite the active pursuit of looking at and appreciating art.

Dispersed

From kindergarten, most of us remember the Broken Telephone Game. One person whispers a word or a phrase into the ear of the person next to him. That person, in turn, repeats it quietly to the next. And so on until, at the end of a long line of people, the language finds itself transformed.

Dispersed information is information spread too thin. In efforts to stop information, younger artists have made their work to operate inside of a Broken Telephone Game, generating a slippage of meaning and welcoming processes of mistranslation.

In 2002, Seth Price wrote the short essay "Dispersion," a text that captured an important spirit in art making in the midst of post-Fordist capitalism.[3] In it, he identifies the predominance of distribution networks and points to artistic practices—from Marcel Duchamp to Dan Graham—that use production, repetition, re-packaging and the dynamics of dispersion to turn an art object into, quoting Marcel Broodthaers, "a situation, a system defined by objects, by inscriptions, by various activities."[4] To disperse information is to launch it into a complex constellation of relationships, causing

it to intersect with a series of fierce interferences: power, politics, capital, speed, desire and technology. These interferences puncture information, throwing it off-course, making it leak and compromising its authority.

A rumour, for example, is a piece of punctured information. As a phenomenon, the rumour probably dates back to antiquity, but in a time of hyper-efficient information distribution systems, the rumour reappears as a promising strategy for contemporary artistic practice. Most famously, Orson Welles caused worldwide panic with his radio play *War of the Worlds* (1938). Conceptual artists in the 1960s and 70s made works that were meant to exist only as rumour. More recently, Francis Alÿs located the heart of his performance *When Faith Can Move Mountains* (2002) in the stories told by the indigenous participants in an endless local folklore that might be orally passed on through the generations, gaining new distortions—and, therefore, relevance—each time the story is told. Although publicly announced and staged, Pawel Althamer's performances remain rumours, since the performers are indistinguishable from passers-by on a street corner. At the Serpentine Gallery, Rikrit Tiravanija organised his retrospective in 2005 as a rumour-machine by replacing artworks with radio broadcasts of people recalling their own experiences and memories of having encountered the artist's works. And the master of punctured information himself, David Hammons leaves unanswered the questions around the presence of that ugly Miles Davis painting in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, or leaves unacknowledged and undocumented his piece for the 2007 Skulptur Projekte Münster, a weather forecast (a rumoured rumour). Even so, we all talked about the weather.

Private

Or there is private information, where artists choose to limit its circulation, generate smaller quantities and involve more isolated audiences. In order to have access to private information, one needs to be interested and committed to it. In fact, it is precisely this need for active and persistent engagement that makes this strategy appealing to artists. It demands real action. It's the opposite of the internet.

As an artistic practice, the act of making information private is relatively unexplored. Guy Debord is perhaps an early and extreme example: his Situationist International took shape around tables at Chez Moineau and Le Tonneau d'Or, and its information-bulletin circulated only via a gift economy. Gradually, he would exclude member after member from the already-modest conferences in an attempt to avoid any compromises, until only he remained. The SI self-consciously refused to become a mass-movement and saw itself as a "general staff that does not want troops [but] will only organise the detonation."[5] Although perhaps more due to Debord's own temperament than to a thought-through approach that prevented information from compromising their revolution, its spirit continues to influence artists today.

In recent years, many artist or curatorial collectives have sought out a reduction in scale. News about their activities is often distributed only to friends. Artist-run spaces such as Scorched Earth (NYC), Galerie Meerrettich (Berlin), Galerie Nomadenoase (Hamburg), Bar Nova Popularna (Warsaw) and Castillo/corrales (Paris) don't even have websites. These projects aren't exclusive and are open to anyone who is interested in their activities, but their existence doesn't rely on being connected to a global network. They don't reject that network as much as express confidence in their autonomy from it. A conversion into private (or less dispersed) information is a political and aesthetic position against information, in favour of art. It's about standing for production rather than reception. It's about artists taking matters into their own hands.

Although not completely politically or conceptually motivated, but born out of a mixture of practical and financial reasons, this partial

privatisation or calculated isolation represents a significant response to post-Fordist capitalism, and an effective means for preventing information from dragging art into "the understood." With one foot outside of the information superhighway, art has a chance to stay dangerous, provocative, unruly, independent and curious. Working at a slowed-down and smaller (but human) scale potentially allows artists the focus to perfect a skill, to sharpen a single idea, to deeply pursue an obsession and to find an invested audience. Call it post-post-Fordism … information *after* dispersion.

Things I Don't Understand

Clearly interlaced and inter-related, each of these practices seeks to loosen information's grip on art. In the mid-1960s Susan Sontag urged art to reject content and interpretation. In 1999, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack's exhibition "Things we don't understand" urged art to reject understanding and to allow insecurity to act as a catalyst for change. Today, an emerging post-post-Fordism places an increased importance on smaller and more isolated networks of active and engaged actors and ideas, or what urban theorist Yona Friedman calls an "urban village."[6]

Overall, these approaches to withstanding information's flow—by either overwhelming it or withdrawing from it—signal both a pedagogical and a political urgency. In a recent *Artforum* article, Daniel Birnbaum prefaced his thoughts on the state of art education by stating that "most of us have a lot of unlearn."[7] In a recently published lecture on the future of art and design education, Stuart Bailey calls for a pedagogy of "progressive reflexivity" that favours a porous system of authority and trust between student and teacher, echoing Paulo Friere's "authentic pedagogy" and Jacques Rancière's ignorant schoolteacher and "equality of intelligences."[8] In his forward to the exhibition catalogue of "Things we don't understand", Dietrich Karner succinctly points to the political implication of the project: "it is not always easy to be confronted with situations that invalidate entrenched patterns of understanding. The value of this confrontation is directly proportionate to our ability to convert the crisis of insecurity into the fertile potential of change."[9] To stand for the importance of things we don't understand is to stand for an active and reactive pursuit of knowledge. To favour the curious mind over the informed one is to make room for experimentation and risk-taking. To stop the path of information is to reject the passive consumer and to require, instead, an active engagement of a motivated and implicated audience of participants. In the end, art that stops information is art that creates space for a viewer to *experience* it.

And

There are things that we like that we like (i.e., we like the fact that we like them).
There are things that we like that we don't like.
There are things that we don't like that we like.
And then there are things that we don't like that we don't like. Those are the ones that stay poignant and relevant. Those are the ones that we don't understand.

NOTES
1. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001)
2. Michael Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic", in *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006)
3. Seth Price, *Dispersion*, distributedhistory.com, PDF download (2002)
4. Ibid.
5. Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005)
6. Yona Friedman, *MANUELS Volume 1* (Paris: CNEAI, 2007)
7. Daniel Birnbaum, "The Art of Education", in *Artforum*, Summer 2007
8. Stuart Bailey, "Towards a Critical Faculty", in *On the Future of Art School: A Primer* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2007)
9. Dietrich Karner, "Foreword", in R.M. Buergel and R. Noack (eds.), *Things we don't understand* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1999)

This is a compressed version of a text previously published in *Afterall*, Issue 15, Spring/Summer 2007 as "I ✖ Information".