

Algorithms and Allegories

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I was writing and thinking about the algorithmic and the allegoric. I've been struck by how so much contemporary art practice has been informed by the algorithmic. Having done work in information engines and various net art pieces using algorithms for the display and organization of information, I was equally intrigued by what we get after we've deployed all these little engines and are outside the event of instructions. Do we start from outside or inside? Even though the boundary of these things blur, from the outside I began to think of the idea of allegory. Allegory isn't really used much today - let me read you a definition.

"Allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and settings presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear." [from Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*]

I've become interested in the idea of the algorithmic that opens up to a re-reading of the notion of allegory and so want to present to you the pleasure of the play in the valence of these two notions.

So let me present a few examples of work, new examples that I hope can be seen as visual topologies, that though visual, I can imagine as being scores for computational music or sound.

Much contemporary art practice has been informed by setting up a structure comprised of instructions for the production of certain kinds of events. These may range from computational instructions for generative and emergent music, or A-Life forms to instructions for visual works, written works, participatory works to instructions for audiences in performative works.

Let's start with the latter, for example a performance by Yoko Ono where from a stage she passes a large ball of yarn into a seated audience, an audience whose task it is to untangle the yarn and there by entangle themselves with it. If this simple instruction were repeated again and again, we can be certain, that each time, it would yield a different visual topography. One toss might right away propel itself into a sort of tight "s" curve right onto the very rear of the auditorium. Another toss might quickly get entangled in the first few aisles and meander greatly from side to side; it would be very wide but very short. Another might go from front to back and back again folding in the center and appear as an infinity sign or figure "8". Toss after toss would bring varying results but within a range.

Now imagine this same toss being akin to a kind of augury, a toss whose very shape were to tell us something of the future, something of an allegory of the moment in time, or a predictive future. The figure "8" a long life, the meandering line, a short full life, and the "s" curve a narrow long life of few adventures.

One thing we can be certain of, is that the toss itself, its trace of flight is only that, a traversing, a tracing, a point that becomes another point. Once we give it a mapping, and see the whole view has shifted we move from let's say the algorithmic to the allegoric. From propulsion to trajectory to flight, or should we say, flight pattern. Another way to imagine this is as a continuum, from the discontinuous to the continuous. But a continuum suggest a duration and I think duration adds a whole other level of complexity, so let's wait on that.

Some of you may be familiar with Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, *A throw of the dice does not abolish chance*. The poem is a distribution of words emphasizing the blank space between phrases. Imagine a sheet of paper where words do not run continuously but are splayed in clusters across the page where emptiness is as pronounced as text. This is another kind of visual topography, where silence and emptiness speak as much as the letter forms. In Mallarmé's work the sheet of paper defines the field of distribution as much as the auditorium defines the space of the event described in the Yoko Ono piece above. One can imagine that Mallarmé experimented with a great many variations of placement and spacing of words on paper.

What would be the size of the page? Where would a word be placed as distinct from a word inscribed? Would words make lines horizontally, vertically? Where would one line end and the other begin? Would subsequent words or lines cascade down? Or should they be placed trilling upwards? Would lines constitute sporadic paragraphs or blocky clusters? What would be the distance between them, the periodicity of their soundings; proximate cousins, distant lands, foreign bodies or contaminations? As markings, how would they sound the page, or is this time to be seen as beats not to be measured or measured by the sound of its silences?

How do you score language? How do you score sound? What is the envelope of its event? In Mallarmé's case, the envelope was the sheet of paper. Metaphorically we might say his throw was the algorithm, the dice his computation engine. His throw of the dice, his placing of words on the page, yet his intention did not eliminate chance. In fact, the fixedness of the throw of the letterforms on the page was one particular throw. Is it the perfect throw, or is it just a throw, one of many possible throws or tosses? It's these questions that Mallarmé pondered with each placement. What does it all mean?

What was the sheet of paper - a universe, the universe, silence, emptiness, calm, plenitude, void. In the empty page, what was Mallarmé seeing, what was he imagining? I suspect some thing more than the procedures of music concrete - he was thinking big things - he was wrestling allegorically. He was thinking perhaps of the meaning of the event. In fact his markings were a transcription of the event of the universe and silence. He was in some sense playing with sound music where words and meanings are not the same thing. I think that's what those words in looking back to him said. That the names of things don't tell us what things are. They are only gestures, utterances in relief from the void. This was all quite serious stuff.

All of this back and forth, letter forms reaching back to something prior to codified meaning, the emptiness of the page, the silence, placing in doubt any kind of representation - and I have not even spoken of any of the words in the poem -

the minatur and so forth - well this back and forth - is, I think, this shifting of registers between the throw of the dice, the algorithm, (not to say that algorithms are not more precise, but certainly emergent and generative algorithms can be thought of as throws of the dice) - well this shift from the throw to the meaning of the throw - is this the movement between the algorithmic and the allegoric. The place were the two meet. The allegoric is that standing back and listening to what it all means - or writing a hermetic meaning into something, to mean more than what appears to be said.

If the universe is just a set of varied instructions - why do we struggle so hard with what it all means? Perhaps because we can imagine ourselves at times, both inside and outside the event, the event of time, the event of duration, the event of utterance, the multiplicity of all these engines running there programs. What are they up to? We don't any longer really like to think about this and in turn that's why no one talks about allegory any more, just metaphors, metonymy and other rhetorical tropes.

A little more on time and duration, instead of a sheet of paper, imagine a strip of film. Exposed at certain frames, and not others, varied pulses of light flicker on the screen. Such a strategy was used by Peter Kubelka in his short film entitled, *Arnulf Rainer*. Just as blasts of light project on the screen, sound markings on the magnetic tape produce a similar effect on the aural track, where discontinuous bursts of sound pepper the ears as a kind of sniper fire emitted from the projector.

Absolutely algorithmic, this simple set of instructions, applied to the surface materiality of the film is a kind of time-based variation of Mallarmé's splaying of the page. But here all is reduced to darkness and light, sound and silence. This configuration, the advent of structuralist film making, this punctuating of on and off, through the duration of time, time as the movement of film frames chugging through the gate of the projector, at intervals whose periodicity is akin to noise, is an absolute instruction set that could be varied and altered in any number of permutations. It might also be read as an allegory. But never mind that.

Let's move along and jump ahead to Sol Lewitt, the conceptual artist. Sol Lewitt, as many of you know, works with varied lines, shapes, a fixed set of shapes and lines become his repertoire, and these varied lines and shapes are given to a number of artisans to cover entire rooms with his algorithmic instructions. They act as a swarm, an army of ants, a mobile factory. Sometimes the works are done in graphite pencil, sometimes in wide swaths of vibrant reds and yellow. But the swarm need not pay attention to all that, just set about and enact their instructions. They are always inside the event. They need not step back and see how it looks. The variations are narrowly confined but sprawl and no doubt could go on and on and on slightly altering themselves giving forth greater and greater complexity but not from the point of view of the artisans, not even Sol Lewitt, he just sets the program to go.

In the tradition of minimalism, the lines are there own meaning, they don't map anything, they just are. The complexity is performative, a rendering of instructions. It does not illustrate anything; it does not want to - it is simply mass and volume, repetition and difference, or there-ness, here-ness. Here pattern is pattern. It's sort of like paint is paint. It refers to and is itself. There are no other

orders of complexity. It does not relate or refer to anything outside itself. It is not a map, it is a territory. Or its territory is its map.

Let's move now from image to sound. What would be the sound of pure instructions? Or how would one make the sounding of instructions, something that wasn't music, wasn't noise. I guess this is something we would simply call sound. Sound that just is. But is there any sound that just is - or is all sound always a mapping, an index of a gesture, a desire.

In the case of Sol Lewitt, a conceptual artist, though his thought is instantiated in shapes, forms and color, he eradicates all gesture leaving us with only markings, a kind of deadpan tracings. In a sense his work is performance and what he leaves us is the execution of code compiled. In relation to Mallarmé, Lewitt's work is all about the spaces and the markings without any of the allegorical angst. Or so we think. At least on the face of it.

Conversely the improvisational pianist and poet Cecil Taylor negotiates this space of instruction and meaning in a rather complicated way, moving seamlessly between, sound, noise, meaning, sounds, vocables, audition, allegory and algorithm. It is as if he traverses the universe and incants his senses of sensing all of its sounding. His algorithms come from the allegory he has made of the world, the world as spirit and magic and he, the diviner of its movement.

To sum up and move to a close, as I am sure we are running out of time. Out of duration. And as such maybe ask, well, what's it all mean.

Perhaps Lewitt's algorithm is his allegory. There is the old adage about history repeating itself. Why does history repeat itself? It's algorithmic, its recursive. If the universe is a set of instructions, it really doesn't need to know its allegory. Or does it, I don't know. In the life of the algorithm there really isn't any allegory. It is its allegory. Or perhaps it's that even older adage, "I am that I am." Five words that could be varied and nicely move between allegory and algorithm.