The word system, like any other technical word taken from colloquial speech, has many meanings; it is imprecise. Though this lack of precision in a technical word might initially seem dangerous, it is, in fact, often useful because it allows ideas to flourish while they are still vague; it allows connections to be made between ideas yet to be explored; and it allows those ideas to be extended and broadened instead of circumscribed and confined by a premature definition and precision.

—Alejandro Puente, 1968

Argentine artist Alejandro Puente (La Plata, 1933-2013) was interested in two (of the many) definitions of the word system: “system as totality” and “generating system.” According to Puente, “in the first case, the word system makes reference to a holistic consideration of a given thing. In the second, the word system makes no reference whatsoever to things, but rather to the interplay of parts and rules of combination capable of generating many things.” Puente’s distinction of system is directly on point. Another way to refer to these two aspects of a system could be: openness and closedness, autonomy and dependency, outwards and inwards.
In the 1960s and 1970s, the use of new technologies—early computers, video art, cybernetics—by artists was a way to transform the traditional object-based artistic practices into new, system-based ones. In 1968, the American critic Jack Burnham identified a shift: "the cultural obsession with the art object" is being supplanted by an awareness of systems and the functional relationships between art objects. He continues, “These new systems prompt us not to look at the skin of objects, but at those meaningful relations within and between their visible boundaries.”

It is not pure coincidence that these ideas emerged during the Vietnam War and during the worldwide protests of 1968. With more intensity than other times in history, artists were questioning their own practice: how does art serve society? How to blur the boundaries between elite art, popular art, and art of the masses? What emerges is a sense of a moment in history when artists—working with and without high technology—were engaged in a post-representational, post-object practice concerned with provoking an awareness of the real as an extensive, relational, dynamic network of processes. In other words, systems referred to the art that is not only concerned with itself, but rather interested in social and political issues.

The art object (or at least the term “art object”) was not sufficient to convey the production of art, its context and discourse. The distinction between the individual, the institution, and the status of the artwork became blurry with hope that the “system” would draw boundaries within a more complex field. Although “systems art” moved towards the interdisciplinary and informational, the question that seems pertinent to me here is whether systems demand a turn outwards or inwards. According to media scholar Mitchell Whitelaw, a systems approach “demands a turn outwards [that] raises questions about the intervention of art in the world of agency [that] threatens to spill out into everyday life, beyond culturally sanctioned and government funded forms, and so to evaporate completely, or rather to become imperceptible.” However, I would argue that systems move both outward and inward. The openness of systems is apparent but there is also a self-protective mechanism of the system, a sense of retreat and defensiveness, an armor of the subject and a desire for a safe space.
In Argentina, “arte de sistemas” (“systems art”) was first associated with conceptual art developed in an international context. If systems were to draw boundaries within a complex field, then the Argentine businessman, author, and curator Jorge Glusberg had a major role in doing so. He institutionalized the arte de sistemas by first articulating a communication network among Latin American artists and critics and their Argentine counterparts, and also by presenting this “new” art from Argentina globally, to consolidate and legitimize this regional art to international tendencies. Already in Glusberg’s actions there is a movement outward (internationally) and inward (regionally). The case study of arte de sistemas in Argentina gives a sense of the complexity of the notion of systems in general. Although somewhat autonomous, systems always relate to another—more established—system. Glusberg wanted to define the avant-garde art in Argentina; but to do so he needed the rest of the world—or, the art world, at least.

In the late 1960s in Argentina the dictatorial censorship was rampant and violence increased. One of the main art institutions, the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, closed as a consequence, leaving a sense of emptiness in the city that needed to be filled. It was in this context that the Centro de Arte y Comunicacion CAYC in Buenos Aires was born, under
the leadership of Glusberg, who remained the director of the institution until his death in 2012. It was presented as an interdisciplinary space favoring not only the relationship between arts, but also between art, science, and social studies. The CAYC formed an artist collective called “Grupo de los Trece” (Group of Thirteen) then called “Grupo CAYC” made up of Jacques Bedel, Luis Fernando Benedit, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Guinzburg, Víctor Grippo, Jorge González Mir, Vicente Marotta, Luis Pazos, Alfredo Portillos, Juan Carlos Romero, Julio Teicha and Horacio Zabala. Glusberg declaimed that the artists in this group were invested in their social context, leaving behind painting—which was already “dead”—and instead working with new and dynamic media. Although the group intended to define itself under a common denominator, the notion of arte de sistemas seems to harbor too many species under its name. Perhaps the very word “system” was more useful in an international context: in other words, to export and import art from and to Argentina.

The terms "ideology" and "systems" were so predominant in the CAYC discourses that the artists themselves adopted these terms for the titles of their works. In 1966, the Argentine chemist and artist Víctor Grippo (Buenos Aires, 1936–2002) wrote a short text under the title “Sistema” outlining the circuit of artistic production where there is a re-contextualization of daily life fragments or portions. Grippo wrote this text in terms of the TRANSMITTER—the artist with his/her surrounding; CHANNEL, “the artwork as a fulfillment from everyday objects that by modifying certain variables create another meaning”; and RECEIVER, the audience, the one that gives his/her support to the artwork as a "valid recipient."[1] In Segmento de línea recta, Juan Carlos Romero presented the fragment of a map of Buenos Aires, on which he had drawn a straight line linking four points identified by the letters A, B, C and D. He accompanied this work with a text that served as a key to decode the body of the documents produced.[2]
In July 1971, the exhibition Arte de sistemas opened at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires, organized by Glusberg and CAYC. The show included works by Vito Acconci, Luis F. Benedit, Mel Bochner, Christian Boltanski, Don Celender, Dan Graham, Victor Grippo, Hans Haacke, Allan Kaprow, On Kawara, Dusan Kilmes, Joseph Kosuth, David Lamelas, and many more. The inclusion of many American artists demonstrated that arte de sistemas looked outward for international recognition as much as it addressed any local politics and concerns. The re-reading of conceptual art, transforming it into an art of systems that can operate not only as a system in itself, but as a factor of change in the prevailing social and ideological structures, remains an ambitious desire, as pertinent today as it was for a group of artists in Argentina in the ’70s.

—Ionit Behar


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