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THE SHAPE OF INFORMATION

To explain what I mean by *info-aesthetics*, let me start by noting something simple but nevertheless quite significant: the word “information” contains within it the word “form.” For a while now social theorists, economists, and politicians were telling us that we are living in a new “information society.” The term was first used already in the 1960s, even before computer revolution got underway. Today, a few decades later, what was once a theoretical hypothesis became a practical everyday reality that can be easily observed by anybody leaving in any developed country. All kinds of work became reduced to handling data on one’s computer screen – in short, processing information. As you walk or drive past office buildings in any city, all offices regardless of what a company does look the same: rows of computer screens and keyboards. Regardless of their actual profession, financial analysts, city officials, secretaries, architects, accountants, and pretty much everybody else engaged in white-collar work is actually processing information. And when we leave work, we don’t leave information society. In our everyday life, we use search engines and retrieve data from databases; we rely on “personal information appliances” and “personal information managers.” We complain that there is too much information to keep track or make sense - while the libraries and museums around the world constantly add to the global information pile by systematically digitizing everything they got. We turn our own lives into an information archive by storing all our emails, SMS, digital photos, and other “digital traces” of our existence. One day we get tired from all this so we start planning to take “e-mail free” holidays – but even this requires information work: searching for best deals on the internet, comparing fares, inputting credit card information into a reservation web site. In short, “information society” is where the citizens of the developed world live today, experiencing it in their everyday practice.

The question that I have been interested in for the last five years is this: What is “the shape of information”? What are the forms contained within information, so to speak? To put this more explicitly: has the arrival of information society been accompanied by new vocabularies of forms, new aesthetic sensibilities, and new iconologies? And can there be forms specific to information society, given that software and computer networks redefine the very concept of form? (Instead of being solid, stable, finite, discrete, and limited in space and time, the new forms are often variable, emergent, distributed, and not directly observable.) Can information society be represented iconically, if the activities that define it – information processing, interaction between a human and a computer, telecommunication, networking – are all dynamic processes? How does the super-human scale of our information structures – from 16 million lines of computer codes making Windows OS, to forty years which would take one viewer to watch all video interviews stored on digital servers of the Shoah Foundation, to the Web itself which cannot be even mapped as a whole – be translated to the scale of human perception and cognition? In short, if the shift from modernism to informationalism (the term of Manuel Castells) has been accompanied by a shift *from form to information flows*, can we still map these information flows to forms, meaningful to a human?

When I started looking at contemporary culture from the perspective of these questions, I decided that I need a term to label my future findings. *Info-aesthetics* is the term I chose. *Info-aesthetics* project scans contemporary culture to detect emerging aesthetics and cultural forms specific to a global information society. I don't mean to suggest that there is some single *info-aesthetics* style that already exists today or may emerge in the future. Rather, *info-aesthetics* refers to various new contemporary cultural practices which can be best understood as responses to the new priorities of information society: making sense of information, working with information, producing knowledge from information. And while I think that these responses already occupy a prominent place, I should make it clear that the whole eco-system of diverse styles and forms in contemporary aesthetics should not be simply correlated to the shift to information society and key role played by information management in the social, economic, and political life of contemporary societies. Various other factors such as economic globalization, the ideas of complexity, emergence, and evolution, the ecological thinking

(manifested in such paradigms as “cradle to cradle” manufacturing, or recyclable and sustainable design), the new materials and new manufacturing processes are as important.

So what are some of the ways in which the forms we create today are information-driven? The most obvious example is the new field of information visualization. Designers, computer scientists, and artists working with information visualization create new forms which are no longer related to a human form (classical art) or abstract from it (modern art) – instead they represent quantitative data of all kinds, helping us to understand it – and sometimes simply anesthetizing it.

There are many other less obvious ways in which new forms in our culture are the result of our new information powers. We could store, index, and manipulate exponentially larger amounts of media (video, audio, etc.) than it was possible even recently; we can also record altogether new kinds of data (such as GPS); and we can also map recorded data into numerous other formats. These capacities are utilized by architects, graphic and industrial designers, filmmakers, media artists. Many architects including such leading figures as Koolhaas/OMA, UN Studio, NOX, Hadid, and others (and of course many architectural students who grew up with computers) record, analyze, and map information flows, and then utilize resulting records and diagrams to drive the design of architectural forms and spaces. Media artists and designers create new types of representations that combine different media recording of the same space into a new type of representation (for instance, Masaki Fujihata combines video, GPS data and 3D virtual space in his elegant and poetic *Field Works* series.) The ability to record and store media data on a new scale makes possible new forms of cinematic narrative (*Timecode*, *Russian Arc*) and new forms of portraiture (*MyLifeBits* project by Microsoft.)

The recently launched DVD publishing label reel23 (www.real23.com) features the following statement on its home page: “Life is data, progress is optional.” I would like to add the following question: If life indeed became data, what are the new forms that will help us make sense of it?

