The Continuation of Cold War Systems

Date: Last Week of February (exact day tbc)

Venue: University of Westminster

Organized by John Beck (Westminster) and Ryan Bishop (Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton)

The purpose of this workshop is to address the ways in which Cold War ‘systems thinking’ continues to shape contemporary life and culture. From the late 1940s through the 1980s systems analysis, cybernetics, and information theory came to shape military, business, government and academic thinking on a wide array of subjects. The influence of such thinking is also evident in the arts, from the so-called systems novels of the 1960s and 70s, to minimalist and electronic music, conceptual art, and the emergence of electronic media. The end of the Cold War did not end systems thinking; indeed, given the phenomenal expansion of computer technologies into every aspect of contemporary life it can be argued that we are now living in a world imagined and engineered during the Cold War. This workshop aims to make connections between Cold War material and conceptual technologies and current tendencies in the arts, politics, and society. How, for example, do contemporary social media connect to a RAND corporation assignment to design a communications system that can survive nuclear attack? What is the relationship between current course offerings and subject divisions within the university and government funding for military-based research agendas in the 1940s and 1950s? How did nuclear targeting inform urban design, the rise of the suburbs and the gated community? What were the concerted military-industrial efforts that led to the digital computer? How does game theory influence business strategy? What are the specific cultural-historical-technological processes that produce ‘the global’ as a concept? How does the current interest in conceptual art of the 1970s relate to contemporary practice? How far is current ecological thinking based on Cold War systems analysis? How deep is the connection between ongoing battles over privacy and surveillance and Cold War models of state security? How is contemporary warfare shaped by the cybernetic dreams of Cold Warriors?

Papers might focus on individual works, artists, theorists, objects, designs, or ideas. We welcome practice-based as well as scholarly contributions. The aim is to develop a collection of essays to be published as a special issue of a high impact journal or as an edited book.

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