

AN INTRODUCTION TO
ELECTRONIC ART THROUGH
THE
TEACHING OF JACQUES
LACAN

Strangest Thing

Electronic art offers endless opportunities for reflection and interpretation. Works can be interactive or entirely autonomous and the viewer's perception and reaction to them may be challenged by constantly transforming images. Whether the transformations are a product of the appearances or actions of a viewer in an installation space, or a product of

binaries work very differently in the Imaginary and in the Symbolic. In the Imaginary, binaries are point-to-point, or, as set theory teaches us, Imaginary binaries are one-to-one. In the Symbolic, binaries are point-to-points, or, as set theory teaches us, Symbolic binaries are one-to-many. For me, the importance of this simple distinction cannot be overstated. Yes, the Symbolic involves binaries that are often seen as bits of information: 1s and 0s do provide the basic material for signification and they would seem to be point-to-point illustrations of the Imaginary. But 1s and 0s are absolutely not of the Imaginary. Imaginary, point-to-point (or one-to-one) structures always depend on representations/embodiments of a sensation that either connects or separates the subject from the other—the voice of the self connected to or distinguished from the voice of the (m)other, the image of the ideal self (mis)recognized by the face in the mirror, of the (m)other.

The binaries of Freud's *fort-da* game derive not directly from the binaries of presence and absence of the mother (with all of the dimensions of misrecognition discussed by

Lacan), but from the knowledge of her absence and an impulse to master it. Language takes the place of that which has always-already been lost. In the space of that loss, signifiers point to signifieds creating signs that are necessarily less than everything, and more than nothing. It is within the space between less than everything and more than nothing that the one-to-many signifiers of the Symbolic play.

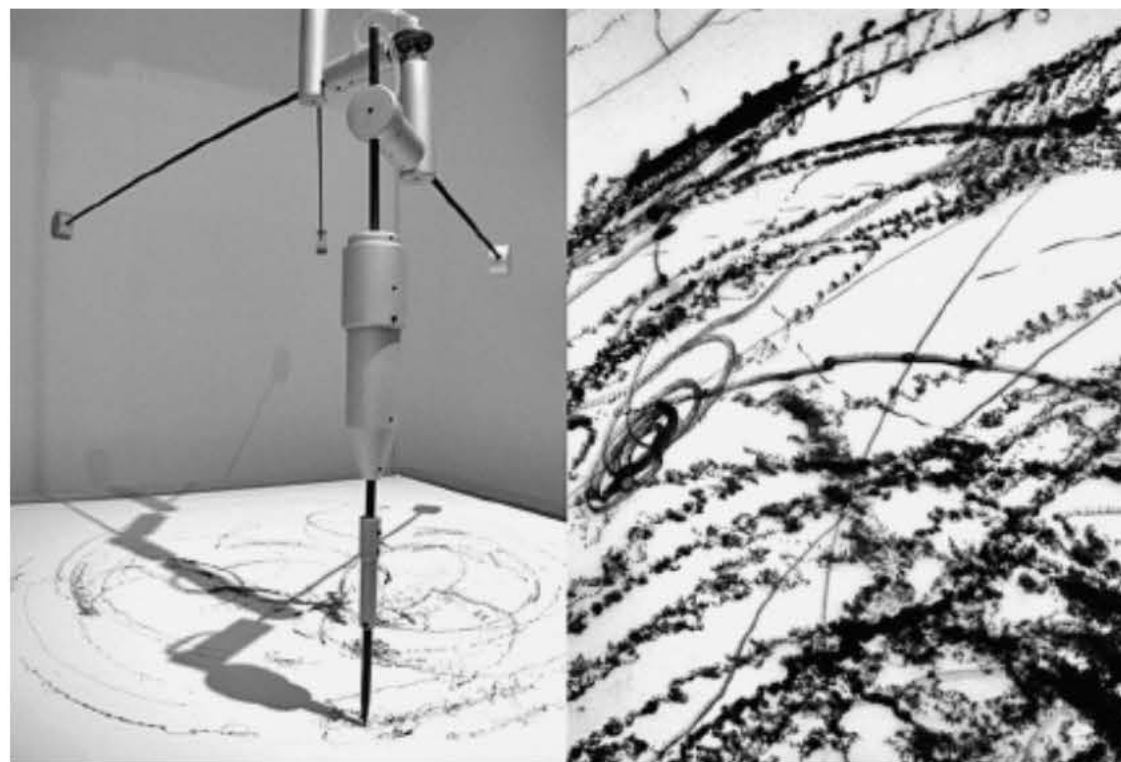
² To summarize: although this distinction will become troubled throughout this chapter, its precision in outline must be maintained: the binaries of the Imaginary are one-to-one; the binaries of the Symbolic are one-to-many.

The Signifier and the Subject

Fernando Orellana did a work entitled *3.1415926* vol. 2 (2008).

³ The number refers to π —the number that represents the numerical relationship between the circumference and diameter of a circle; see [Figure 4.1](#).

Vibrations from computer-coded software in addition to vibrations from data gathered from a microphone in the installation space cause the motions of the device that produce the marks of the work. These marks on the page are the result of the will of the artist, the program that he wrote for transforming the vibrations of the machine in the material conditions of the installation space, and the vibrations produced by sounds made by those who move through the installation space. It is an automated system, combining in its function predetermined as well as spontaneously generated parameters.



*Figure 4.1 Drawing
Machine 3.1415926
by Fernando*

Orellana, 2000.
Used with
Permission.

In a paraphrase of a well-known Lacanian expression, the work is structured like the unconscious. But first, what does Lacan mean when he says that the unconscious is structured like a language? He clarifies one aspect of this simile in the following:

Set theory bursts onto the scene by positing the following: let us speak of things as One that are strictly unrelated to each other. Let us put together objects of thought, as they are called, objects of the world, each of which counts as one. Let us assemble these absolutely heterogeneous things, and let us grant ourselves the right to designate the resulting assemblage by a letter. That is how set theory expresses itself at the outset ... You let slip by the fact that I said that the letter designates an

assemblage ... They are very careful to say that letters designate assemblages. Therein lies their timidity and their error—letters *constitute (font)* assemblages. They don't designate assemblages, they *are* assemblages ... You see that by still preserving this “like” (*comme*), I am staying within the bounds of what I put forward when I say that the unconscious is structured *like* a language. I say like so as not to say ... that the unconscious is structured *by* a language. The unconscious is structured like the assemblages in question in set theory, which are like letters.

(Lacan 1998: 47–48, original emphasis)

But Orellana's work involves inscription that veers around the signifier as explicit element of communication; Lacan's notion of

llanguage can account for such a signifier.

4.

To account for the spoken dimension of language located in the body and culture of the speaking subject, Lacan coins the term *llanguage*:

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Following the thread of analytic discourse goes in the direction of nothing less than breaking up anew (*rebriser*), inflecting, marking with its own camber [slightly rising arch]—a camber that could not even be sustained as that of lines of force—that which produces the break (*faille*) or discontinuity. Our recourse, in *llanguage (lalangue)*, is to that which shatters it (*la brise*).

(Lacan 1998: 44)

But *llanguage* is not just the spoken

dimension of language as opposed to the written dimension:

Llanguage serves purposes that are altogether different from that of communication. That is what the experience of the unconscious has shown us, insofar as it is made of llanguage, which, as you know, I write with two 1's to designate what each of us deals with, our so-called mother tongue (*lalangue dite maternelle*), which isn't called that by accident. If communication approaches what is effectively at work in the jouissance of llanguage, it is because communication implies a reply, in other words, dialogue. But does llanguage serve, first and foremost, to dialogue? As I have said before, nothing is less certain.

(Lacan 1998: 138)

For me, 3.1415926 vol. 2 bears the inscrutable mark of *llanguage*—a space between the signifier as vehicle for communication and the signifier as source of *jouissance*.

Random International did a work entitled *Temporary Printing Machine* (2007); see [Figure 4.2](#).

The video documentation of this iteration of the work reveals the slowly revealed text: “Don't/leave me/this way./Nothing/stays/forever.” Just as slowly as the text appears, the text disappears—an illustration of the second half of the text denoting the loss that accompanies the passage of time. The work evokes the image of disappearing ink and the mysteries of writing that vanishes as soon as it is written. Disappearing ink is believed to have been used to convey secret messages during World War II and is in common usage as a trick. The ink in the video documentation of *Temporary Printing Machine* is light purple in the image online and reminds me also of the print of mimeograph machines from the late twentieth century. Print fades, of course, over time; as