Peter Halley

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New Concepts in Printmaking 1

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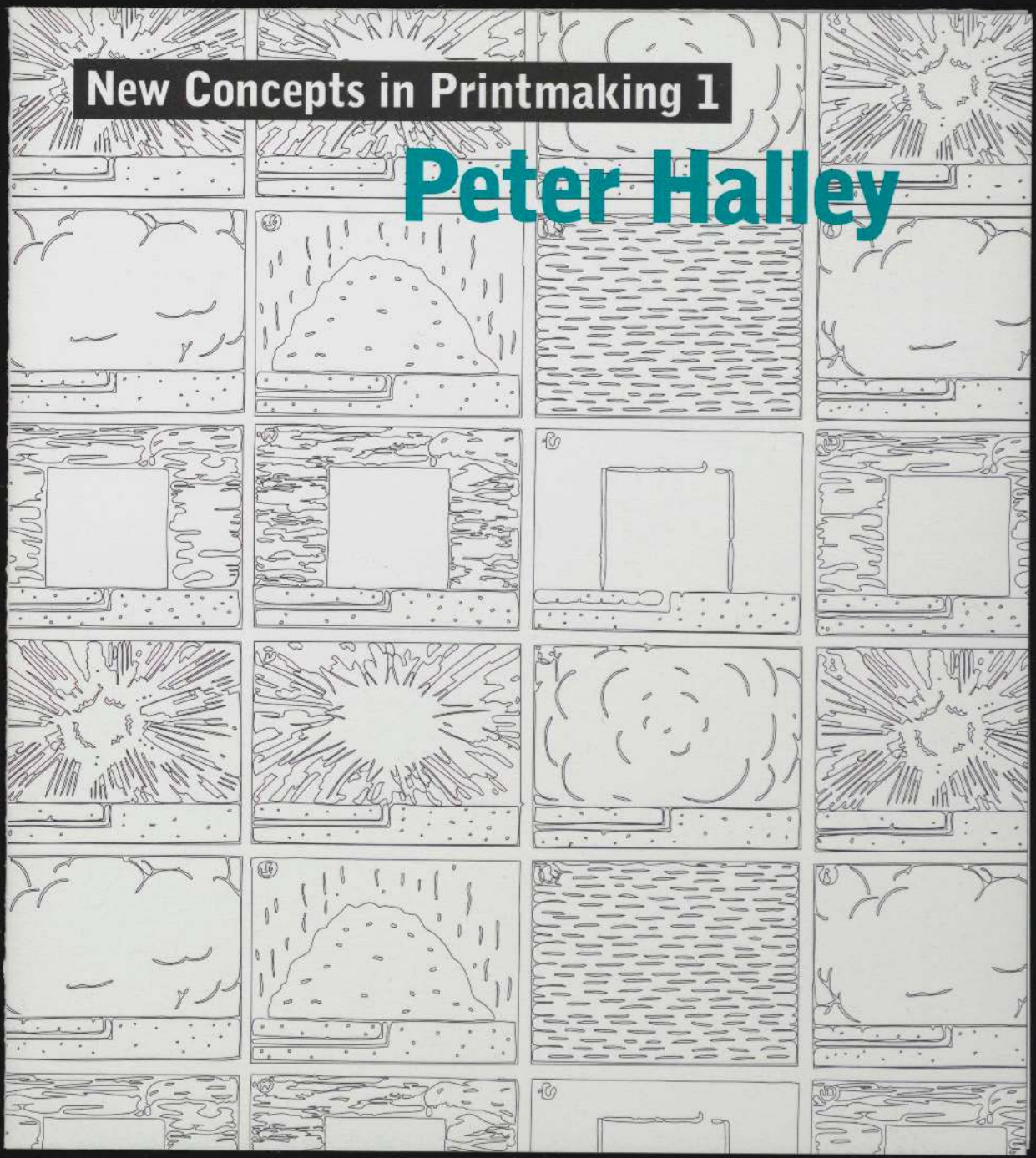


New Concepts in Printmaking

This exhibition is the first in a new series that will present the work of contemporary artists who expand the boundaries of traditional printmaking. Each will be based on a recent acquisition to the collection. The major components of the current installation by Peter Halley are wallpaper and two flowcharts, all generated from digital files on a computer disk that the Museum acquired in 1996. Whenever these works are to be included in a site-specific installation, a silkscreen printer uses the disk to print the wallpaper on large sheets of newsprint paper, and a vinyl-maker fabricates the flowcharts as press-on vinyl to be transferred directly to a wall. Here, Halley's wallpaper and flowcharts are installed alongside examples of his more traditional prints and one painting. Halley's technology-derived abstractions, together with his startling color combinations, produce a dense, dynamic environment that serves as a metaphor for the electronic saturation that has come to characterize the information age.[1]

Geometry as Social Space

Peter Halley is best known as a painter, and since the early 1980s he has made reductive images that treat geometry as a reflection of social rather than formal space. Halley refers to the rectilinear constructs he paints as "cells," and they are usually shown connected to one or more incoming or outgoing circuits, or "conduits." The images are meant to evoke the hidden systems and ideologies that govern activity in postindustrial society. Emphasizing the relationship between computer technology and contemporary social structures, Halley has called his paintings "digital fields" and likened them to "the simulated space of the video game, of the microchip, and of the office tower."[2]

While Halley's paintings are inherently object-based and involved in critiquing issues of modernist abstraction, his prints often contain more illustrative and recognizable imagery. He has frequently used printmaking to communicate what is happening in the hermetic, coded world of his paintings and to provide evidence for the theoretical underpinnings that inspire and inform his art.[3] For example, Halley has made press-on vinyl or silkscreened wall works that replicate, in enlarged format, flowcharts found in psychology, sociology, and computer science textbooks. Designed to map and model behavior, whether animal or mechanical, these diagrams represent the same kind of organizational spaces Halley treats in his paintings. Disassociated from their original texts, Halley's flowcharts take on the character of absurdist poetry. (One of the Museum's two flowcharts has been re-created, in a different color scheme, as the fold-out in this brochure).

In other print projects—most notably in the various versions of one of his trademark cells in the process of exploding—Halley has capitalized on the narrative possibilities inherent in printmaking. These serial images convey that his geometric cells and conduits are not simply abstract compositions, but symbolic, diagrammatic representations of architectural or social bodies. Halley's first print of an exploding cell was *Narrative*, a 1992 diptych in twenty-four-frame comic-strip format, in which a cell first appears on an empty landscape, then mutates from a unified whole into states of contamination, explosion, meltdown, and finally emptiness or static. He made some related prints in 1993, but the idea was most dramatically realized in a 1994 suite of nine monumental color screenprints titled *Exploding Cell*. The Museum's wallpaper, first created in 1995, is a simplified, black-and-white version of the nine color screenprints.

Technology and Tradition

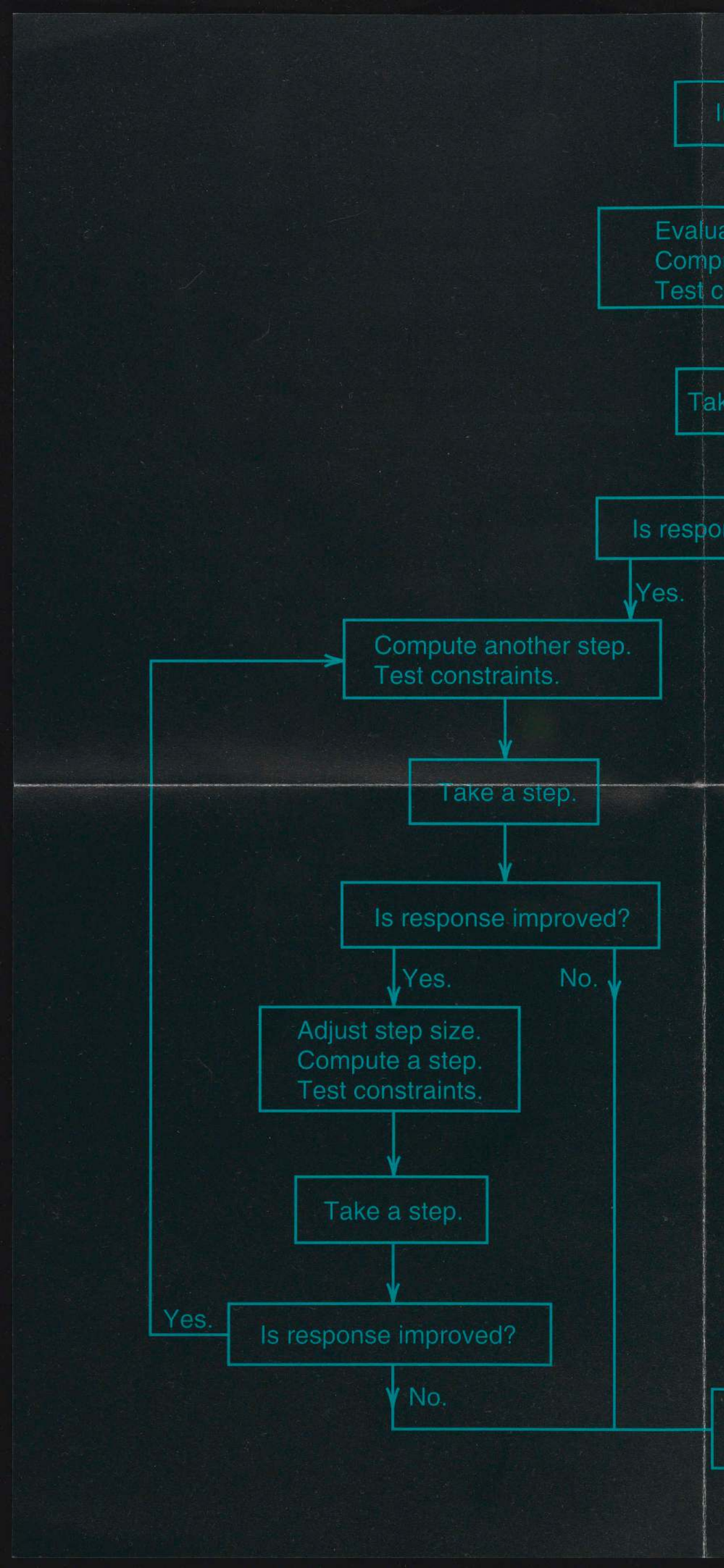
For this exhibition, Halley has generated his nine exploding cell images yet again, as part of an interactive project that demonstrates the computer's role as a tool in printmaking. A terminal in an education area of the print galleries has been programmed with the digital files containing the wallpaper images. Visitors may select one of the images, reduced in size for this project, and then follow a series of instructions to choose colors for different areas of the picture. Once printed out, the resulting composition represents a collaboration between Halley and the visitor. Halley has also used the same images for a special project on the Museum's World Wide Web site (www.moma.org).

Halley's re-creation of the exploding cells in different traditional and digital techniques reflects an appreciation of the possibilities for altering the elements of an image—by changing the colors, adding layers, or reworking lines—that have always been intrinsic to printmaking. Digital files are comparable to traditional etching plates or lithographic stones, which can be used, stored for future use, then revised and used again. New technology has expanded these possibilities, allowing for an unlimited number of changes without any sacrifice to the original or to any subsequent generations of an image, each of which can be saved as its own file. For Halley and other artists, the wide dissemination of images and ideas through the potentially infinite replication of digital files may also be seen as an extension of the populist appeal printmaking has always had.

Working on the computer similarly represents a continuation of Halley's preference for processes with commercial or mass-printing origins. Among the other techniques he has used are relief halftone, a common technique for illustrations in books and magazines, and screenprint, which was primarily used for commercial advertising before being championed by the Pop artists in the 1960s. Regarding his involvement with the computer, Halley has said, "I use the simplest, most obvious software products. I also like that sort of low-budget aesthetic that is associated with Warhol."[4] It is not the computer's promise of high-tech solutions that appeals to Halley, but its association with the machine-made look of inexpensive, mass-produced objects.

Following the example of other artists including Gretchen Bender, Sherrie Levine, and Ronald Jones, Halley began to manipulate some of his images on the computer in 1992. He first used a computer program to work out the colors for his exploding cell prints; he used another program to plot new proportions for his paintings. In 1993, Halley made a computer print for a site on the Internet known as *The Thing*,[5] and he also began to re-create his found flowcharts on the computer. It was around this time that he became interested in creating and distributing digital images themselves, not just in using the computer as a tool for making traditional artworks.

During the last twenty years, digital technology has become increasingly pervasive, notably as the basis for consumer electronics. It has been incorporated more gradually into the fine arts, mostly those mediums that also have commercial applications, such as video and photography as well as printmaking. Until the mid-1990s, most pictures that artists made on the computer were transferred for printing to traditional plates, such as those used for photolithography, photogravure, or screenprint. More recently, some print publishers have devoted themselves to the new process of Iris printing, which allows for an exceptionally high level of resolution and color saturation in the printing of digital images. In turn, Halley and other artists have begun to make editioned works in this technique.[6]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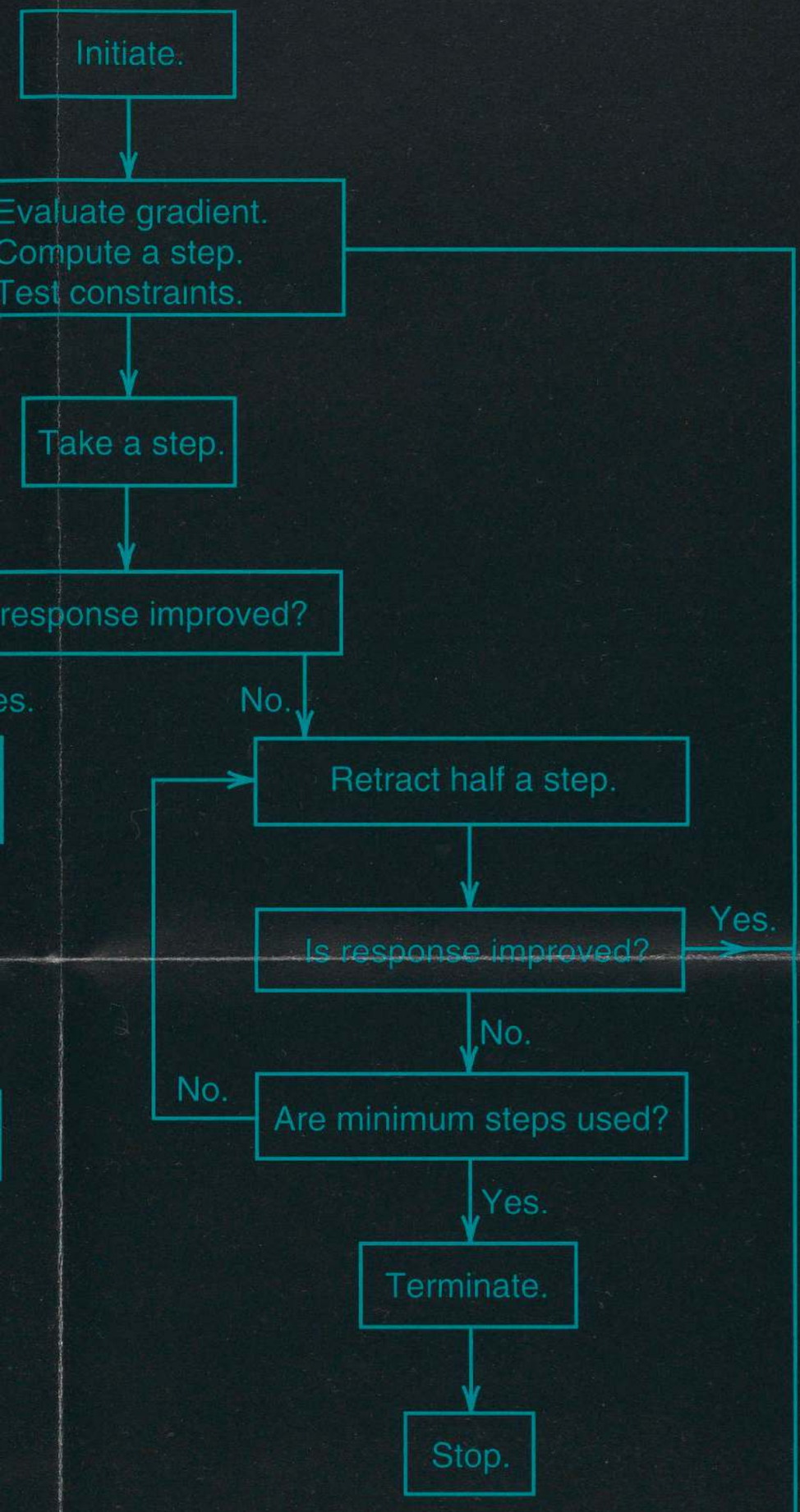
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Compute a step.
Test constraints.
Take a step.
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Is response improved?
Yes.
No.
No.
Are minimum steps used?
Yes.
Terminate.
Stop.
Return to last
position.

Although Halley has made a fortuitous marriage between computer-generated techniques and technology-related imagery, his attitude toward the computer is more ambivalent than all-embracing. While the computer has become the means for ever-faster and wider-reaching communications, its ramifications also include the mechanization and paradoxical isolation of the individual. In addition, Halley suggests through his work that the computer can be seen as a metaphor for the many hidden networks that structure society. The combination of fascination and skepticism that Halley feels toward the computer is reflected in the seductively vibrant yet jarring power of his environmental installation.

Starr Figura
Assistant Curator

Notes

1. This exhibition is the fourth of Halley's environmental installations, each one a different combination of his wallpaper and flowcharts with more traditional prints and paintings. The first was on view at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1995.

2. Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1984), p. 114.

3. Among the theoretical texts that have most influenced Halley are Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., Columbia University, 1983) and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Baudrillard's notion of "hyper reality" involves a world in which an image no longer represents a real object, but refers instead to another image, then another, in an endless sequence. Simulation is therefore not the pretense of a "real experience," but is itself the only kind of reality there is. Foucault's writings probe the meaning of culture and seek to identify the basic principles that underlie the creation of social institutions. *Discipline and Punish* addresses the development of the prison system.

4. Interview with the author, July 18, 1997.

5. Artist Wolfgang Staehle created *The Thing* as a site on the Internet where information on contemporary art could be exchanged. Many artists have created original works for the site. Halley's edition was unlimited, but others have been limited to between twenty-five and ninety, with prices ranging from fifteen to forty dollars. A buyer downloads the selected image onto his or her own computer, and the cost is automatically charged to his or her credit card. The owner can then print the work as often as desired.

6. The Iris printer was introduced in 1987 and has been used mainly by graphic designers. Among the workshops that have encouraged artists to make Iris prints are Nash Editions, Manhattan Beach, California (est. 1991); Cone Editions, New York and East Topsham, Vermont (began producing Iris prints 1992); David Adamson, Washington, D.C. (began producing Iris prints 1994); and Muse X Editions, Los Angeles (est. 1995). The terminology used to describe digital printing processes is still evolving. The terms "digital ink jet print," which refers directly to the process of releasing ink in minuscule jets, and "digigraph" have sometimes been used; more often the name given is simply the brand of the output printer, with Iris and Cactus being the most familiar.

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Cover: *Exploding Cell.* 1995. Nine digital images (repeated). John B. Turner Fund and Howard B. Johnson Fund
Fold-out: *Is response improved?* 1994. Digital image. John B. Turner Fund

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