

Peter Halley at the Museum of Modern Art

Even when he was working exclusively in paint on canvas, Peter Halley's affection for electronics was never in question. Battery cells and connecting circuits—along with prison cells and connecting corridors—were the associations meant to be evoked by his work of the early '80s. More recently he has moved his involvement with electronics into areas that are decidedly less theoretical, while making excellent use of a previously controlled tendency to visual overload.

Halley's installation at the Museum of Modern Art was built up in distinct layers of imagery—hand-made, mechanically reproduced and electronically generated—and was accompanied by a Web project. Two major motifs prevailed, both based in the language of digital communication. One involves a cartoony progression that takes an exploding cell through nine stages, from intact through combustion to TV-like static. Most of the room was wallpapered in a computer-generated, ink-on-newsprint rendering of this sequence; each frame of the series appears as a single panel, so they can be rearranged at will. The images are seen again as color screen-prints in Crayolaish shades of red, violet, mustard and turquoise. The same sequence also came up in screen-printed views of a past Halley installation. Finally, in one further appearance on the Web, viewers could select a frame from the series, custom color it and print.

The other dominant motif at MOMA was that of flow charts. Two large works, executed as vinyl press-ons, occupied the installation's biggest wall, which was painted a screaming lemon yellow. One chart offers a model of various personality characteristics, the other of decision-making processes; both analyze human



behavior according to the stupefyingly simple and commanding binary logic of electronic communication. These works are funny and demeaning in equal measure, making it hard to know whether Halley really believes that the human condition in postindustrial culture is analogous to electrical impulses traveling the circuitry of microchips.

Also on view was a large, heavily textured painting, in neutral, corporate shades of metallic and pearlescent acrylic paint; its variously textured geometries evoke Frank Stella's reliefs of the early '70s. Rounding out the show, there were a few dozen small graphs, timetables and drawings, both historical and original. The historical material, all from Halley's collection, included renderings of 18th-century sewers and drains, early 19th-century Concord Mail Stage waybills, and illustrations from an 1851 encyclopedia of British and French military fortifications. All, of course, have suggestive relationships to Halley's work, and show the artist to be an erudite and resourceful collector. Whether they are meant also to comment ruefully on the 19th-century archive as a model of organizing information is one of those tart questions that Halley's work raises without ever quite answering.

[A related exhibition, "The Peter Halley Project," is on view at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., through July.]

—Nancy Princenthal