Serial Unreading

Zachary Tavlin

In 1967, Mel Bochner distinguished seriality from work "'in series,'"[1] a distinction later elucidated by Briony Fer as the basis of a new attentional aesthetic that foregrounds experiential dislocation and discontinuous temporalities.[2] Seriality properly conceived does not reduce to or supervene upon sequence; in fact, it is conceptually opposed to it. In what follows, I develop a theory of serial reading rethought as a theory of serial *un*reading, a processual form of attention directed toward virtual principles of production, whether a procedure, formula, operation, algorithm, or even an obsessive compulsion. But I argue too that serial unreading ultimately regrounds the epistemic art of criticism, conveying how concepts achieve causal solidity as built features of the artwork that emerge in and through the series.

Series resist close reading, but that does not mean serial reading is not close. Rather, the closeness of the serialized object or text becomes an issue to be resolved as reader becomes unreader and vice versa. The specificity of the series' parts matters insofar as the concrete detail suggests its own unwinding, the virtual and nonlinear path to its current state. In other words, the value or facility of serial unreading includes rediscovering the rules governing the production of the work. Thus, unreading is not necessarily an end in itself. In fact, by dispersing and expanding our attentional field, acts of unreading make us better readers of nonserial works. In drawing our attention to their supervisory rules, operations, or patterns of production, serial

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1. Mel Bochner, "The Serial Attitude," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 22; hereafter abbreviated "S."

2. See Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (New Haven, Conn., 2004), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *I*.

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works generate a primary principle of criticism: the impulse to reverse engineer the object.

To show how this works, I examine three twentieth-century *items*—one series of minimalist drawings and two poetic works. I have neither the space nor the expertise to approach (let alone chart) all the tributaries of twentieth- and twenty-first-century serial aesthetics. Seriality governs popular media as much as (and probably more so than) the avant-garde movements I draw from. But that is a different kind of seriality. The television series, for instance, in its most common network mode, is premised on continuation and the possibility of further installments—at least until the end of a series finale—but what ultimately governs the writing, shooting, and complete production of any individual unit is not a strict logical principle. The shape of the whole series can change drastically in the process of its run, whether on creative principle or as the result of ratings and audience response, without damaging our sense of that whole. I oversimplify here, to be sure, and popular screen culture has changed dramatically since the heyday of network television (though one might argue that prestige television, where an entire series or season is often shot all at once before airing, gets us further away from seriality by making divisions between the units more arbitrary). But recognizing how much the popular series, from the sitcom to the police procedural to the superhero comic, is governed by external pressures on its narrative paths rather than a feel for internal necessity at least gives a general sense of why I am focusing on avant-gardes.[3]

By choosing a small cluster of examples, I aim to mimic the oscillations of serial unreading, the way audiences are required to move from one member of the series to the transtextual techne that produced it. Rather than the diastolic and systolic movements so long associated with Romantic poetics

3. For a more nuanced take on television seriality, in particular the show *Crime Story*, see Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory after Television* (Durham, N.C., 1994), pp. 69–78. See also Kathryn VanArendonk, "Theorizing the Television Episode," *Narrative* 27 (Jan. 2019): 65–82.

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(and often internal to a poetic structure, especially of the Romantic long poem), serial art guides our attention back and forth from the unit to its phenomenologically absent summative principle. By withholding or abjecting the single finished object (often projecting divergent endlessness), serial art projects its governing intention in terms of techne—which subsists or insists virtually along with the actual work as its formal and efficient cause—rather than deep expression. Serial unreading, then, is a critical technique for understanding how conceptual art is continuous with skilled art labor rather than in ontological breach of it.

Moving quickly among individual serial works, I try to show how the feeling of navigating their expanded, multidirectional fields leads us on a cognitive path (whether we take it or not) toward criticism. Because series reveal rather than conceal their seams and joints, they call for the critic to appear, to finish the job, to give them back the concepts they initially withheld. They clear cognitive space for the critic's standpoint, oriented now toward the conceptual stages inherent to all artwork. Those stages shine forth through the series' cracks and gutters that join its units. The principle or principles that set the process in motion act like invisible caulk sealing the work's seams without appearing between them. And those principles were made by a maker, as much a part of a techne as the skilled application of paint or the adroit construction of a surprising end rhyme. Techne is typically associated with handicraft; so, what could it possibly mean in this context?

Serial Techne Theory

Bochner's "serial order," he claims, "is a method, not a style" ("S," p. 22). The serial attitude, adopted by Eadward Muybridge and Thomas Eakins along with Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt, "is a concern with how order of a specific type is manifest" ("S," p. 22). Bochner contrasts serial order from work that simply produces several versions of a specific type or theme, like Giorgio Morandi's bottles or Willem de Kooning's women. He lists out three principles separating serial work from work "'in series'":

> *1—The derivation of the terms or interior divisions of the work is by means of a numerical or otherwise systematically predetermined process (permutation, progression, rotation, reversal).*
>
> *2—The order takes precedence over the execution.*
>
> *3—The completed work is fundamentally parsimonious and systematically self-exhausting.* ["S," p. 23]

Serial art's constraints (the "systematically predetermined process" for deriving "the terms or interior divisions of the work") are working microcosms on the practitioner's side of more recent quantitative critical attempts to read

through individual texts to find workable units of analysis.[4] What matters is the set rather than its members. That's how one might align one's reading with the maker's making.

There would be something very traditional about the distinction Bochner makes in his second point, with "order" and "execution" mapping onto the Italian Renaissance distinction between *invenzione* and *disegno*—concept and design as different stages of the creative process—but serial art seems to enter when such distinctions become untenable. The order is the execution, in a way, which is why it takes precedence. Artists make workable sets of terms, which is the extent of their own work. As Bochner says, serial order is a method, but that method involves learning how to serve the algorithm, which is now the artist's (and by extension, the reader's and critic's) master.

I do not mean that to sound particularly ominous. All artists serve masters. Apprenticeship is not just a relic of the guilds. That's one of the implicit insights of Henry Staten's recent turn to "the techne standpoint," a call to seeing art like an artist on her or his "endless quest to deepen her own knowledge of art-making—her own *techne*."[5] Technai are not exactly pure algorithms for producing art, as they work through bodily incorporation, distributed throughout the "brain, nervous system, tendons, muscles, and viscera" (*T*, p. 10). Think of butchers—usually an insult when used to describe an artist (or critic)—achieving mastery at their craft once muscle memory retains the correct techniques for each cut. A techne involves both know-how and knowing-that, sensorimotor understanding and theoretical knowledge. But a techne can be learned and transmitted because it is archivable, in "virtual machines or programs in which is encoded the know-how human societies discover over time" (*T*, p. 10). These virtual machines are the real agents in the evolution of genres and forms. Indeed, expressive theories of artistic creation—very generally attributed to Romanticism—are Staten's bêtes noires. Still, the techne program, whether articulated in artistic transmission through

4. A case in point is Franco Moretti's impulse to replace "serial" reading with "distant" reading as both title and formula of his influential 2013 volume: "That fatal formula had been a late addition to the paper, where it was initially specified, in an allusion to the basic procedure of quantitative history, by the words 'serial reading'. Then, somehow, 'serial' disappeared, and 'distant' remained. Partly, it was meant as a joke; a moment of relief in a rather relentless argument. But no one seems to have taken it as a joke, and they were probably right" (Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* [New York, 2013], p. 44). The joke is that the use of *distance* rather than *closeness* turned out to be less funny than wittily apt. In his "somehow," we are given to imagine that Moretti thought *serial* and *distant* to be rough equivalents for what he was getting at: that both terms adequately describe a similar critical stance toward literary objects rather than the form of literary objects themselves. He does not know exactly how "serial" reading turned into "distant" reading, but it is a happy enough contingency for branding purposes.

5. Henry Staten, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (New York, 2019), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *T*.

handbooks, tips, manifestos, role models, or just through examples studied (and sometimes transcended) by the artists themselves, must be handled, activated, and valued by human makers in expert possession of the right tools for their trade or practice.

Applying techne theory does not mean distant reading. Rather, it's hyperclose even as it loosens its focus from the individual artwork as a stable, complete thing. It means mimicking the oscillating absorption and distance of the maker in question, like a painter who is at one moment wholly engaged with the brushstrokes, the next moment taking a step back to get a renewed view of the whole canvas, and once again back within arm's length ever so slightly changing her or his direction. It's not so much seeing through the art to a large-scale network that surrounds it as working backward along the grooves or grain of the work as it was made, reversing the process to better understand it while remaining close to its surface. This, despite my saying so, is not "surface reading" either (in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's formulation), as it is not content with the object as it presents itself *now*, in the duration of a reader's encounter.[6] As a formalism, it sees form in motion, as *formation*, a moving surface of carefully controlled and organized flows.[7] The techne in question is "not a unitary form, impermeable to contingency, and it does not produce unitary forms. It is an assemblage of techniques and devices which can be variously combined on different occasions" (*T*, p. 80). The work of art is one of the assemblage's footprints, one of the products of an open-ended exploration in what Staten, adapting evolutionary terminology from Daniel Dennett, calls "technosocial design space" (*T*, p. 183).

Artists move around in design space among the taskscapes inherited via lengthy processes of cultural evolution. To do otherwise, to attempt to create the world anew through one's art (as impossible as it begins to sound despite the influence of residual Romantic rhetoric), would mean declining culture's affordances. If it is a universal principle of techne that artists inherit a series of moves and grooves in "technosocial design space," the most ambitious and

6. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

7. Abigail Zitin articulates a literary formalism consonant with techne formalism more generally, grounded in eighteenth-century British thought and aesthetics, by pulling from Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" an important inflection of the word *form*: "First, form is a verb; more precisely, it is as much a verb as it is a noun, which directs our attention to forming as an activity" (Abigail Zitin, *Practical Form: Abstraction, Technique, and Beauty in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics* [New Haven, Conn., 2020], p. 7). Not only is form conceived as formation from the techne standpoint, but—as Zitin concludes, despite reservations about any easy translation between different arts like literature and painting—"if a reader or beholder hopes to experience beauty from the standpoint of a practitioner, she has to think like a practitioner; she has to meet the artist halfway" (p. 182).

forward-thinking cases involve searching out new forms adjacent to those that already exist. Though what *adjacency* means in this context is more capacious and historically general than Kenneth Goldsmith's notion of "uncreative writing"[8] or Marjorie Perloff's "unoriginal genius," at least as a guiding concept for art-textual creation.[9] Goldsmith's program is meant as "an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today," the condition of "an unprecedented amount of available text."[10] What distinguishes "my writing from yours," and thus my work from every other, is how "I make my way through this thicket of information—how I manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it."[11] Technosocial adjacency shares a deflationary sense of creativity, but it describes a process of any artmaking whatsoever rather than a contemporary internet-age ethos. Techne must account for Goldsmith's "uncreative" transcription of a day as reported by the *New York Times* as well as Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" or William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and a techne analysis would thus be able to consider the advances in craft involved in each underlying process.

Some art forms or movements, though, reveal aspects of their techne more clearly than others. Goldsmith's appropriative poetry, for instance, reveals acts of parsing, organizing, and distributing and means to reveal nothing (or very little) about the techniques of meter and rhyme. Meter and rhyme are not part of Goldsmith's techne. I submit that serial art reveals its surrounding design space in a special way. Serial art is good for that in a way other art forms are not. We can call this conceptual product, as Rosalind Krauss does, an "expanded field" (re)produced in the making.[12] We might also call it, as Michael Fried does, "theatricality."[13] But let us stick with Krauss's formulation.

Krauss's impetus for thinking sculpture's "expanded field" is the possibility that the "motley" collection of things called sculpture throughout the 1970s means "the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable" ("SE," p. 30). Almost. Because for Krauss, like "any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they

8. See Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York, 2011).

9. See Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago, 2010).

10. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 1.

11. Ibid.

12. See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44; hereafter abbreviated "SE."

13. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (Summer 1967): www.artforum.com/print/196706/art-and-objecthood-36708

can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change" ("SE," p. 33). Not very *much* change, so at least some, but slowly. Sculpture as a monumental (and vertical) form, Krauss argues, has faded from practice, for instance. But sculpture's expanded field, its claim to a certain "sitelessness" produced by taking the base as a formative element of the artwork's autonomy, is itself a "historical event with a determinant structure" ("SE," pp. 34, 44). In other words, it is the result of a series of moves in technosocial design space, including the works—Constantin Brâncuşi's, Robert Morris's, Carl Andre's, Richard Serra's, Robert Smithson's—referenced in Krauss's essay. Not all of her examples are members of series (indeed, some of them actively resist the possibility). But her emphasis on expansion, on thickening the field of our critical attention to match a widening underway in modern sculpture's techne logic, models the way serial unreading follows from the historical dehiscence of certain once-peculiar, once-unclassifiable objects.

Take Fer's reading of Piero Manzoni's serial works. For Fer, a particularly significant move in gallery art after modernism was antipictorialism, which Manzoni helped to articulate in his infinite lines and "achromes." The latter term "established a negative relation to the already negative relation the monochrome established to the image" (*I*, p. 27). Manzoni's bumpy, creased, fluffy, and fibrous works are not exactly minimalist, even as they are no longer pictures of anything. They are better for marking a shift not to minimalism from modernism but "from a collage aesthetic to a serial one" (*I*, p. 2). Fer's definition of seriality is more expansive than Bochner's in the number of cases it includes but fuzzier in its boundaries and therefore less obviously procedural. Taking inspiration from Gilles Deleuze's formulation of difference and repetition, Fer claims that series consist "of a number of connected elements with a common strand linking them together, often repetitively, often in succession . . . [but which] rarely exist singly and are usually mutually interwoven" (*I*, p. 3).

As for Deleuze, serial interweaving opens the work and the reader-viewer onto different temporalities, the artwork's expanded field "dramati[zing] the temporal" by "animating and transforming the most everyday and routine habits of looking" (*I*, p. 3). Most importantly, Fer's readings demonstrate that "the phenomenological encounter with the art object as it occurs in time is a starting point—against which a range of other temporal modes are set in play" (*I*, p. 4). For one, the serial work allows for combinatory repetitions dislocated from any original sequential or propositional chain. Manzoni's infinite line is not a "thing" one can follow but "precisely what escapes being a thing. . . . a form of inflation" (*I*, p. 37). But instead of the expanded spatiotemporal field of the installation, as Fer goes on to explore, I want to examine the way seriality pulls us—as if we were stubborn, insubordinate dogs on our

master's leash—through our limited apprehension of the complex domain of textual presentation, into the virtual field of living, breathing techne.

Seriality is not just any art that could plausibly go by the name *serial* or *serialism*. I have mentioned television and other popular serials, but even amongst the avant-gardes, serial music is arguably the most influential of all the twentieth-century experimental forms and also reveals a legitimate challenge presented by the terminology. Karlheinz Stockhausen's *serielle Musik*, for instance, was meant to mark a difference between his generation's serialism and twelve-tone composition, even though "serial music" is often meant to cover all music composed via tone rows.[14] But twelve-tone composition is a helpful reference point for the serialisms developed by the artists I discuss below. A tone row is an ordered arrangement of the notes of a chromatic scale and when combined with a set of simple postulates establishes the piece's constraints while dispensing with others (including the convention of establishing tonal centers). The tone row is a constructed and readable virtuality that insists in and sits astride the music one hears when performed. It is possible that at some point in the history of serial music, perhaps somewhere in the weeds of the Darmstadt school's statistical fields and number tables, music became algorithmic to the extent that its most intricate compositional principles were hidden from most listeners by design. The crucial thing for serialism as I present it, though, is that reading, viewing, and/or listening to a work unfold links us to the process of the artist's conceptualization and brings the serial aspects of experience in line with a structure of cognition—or a constructed principle, formula, or constraint that guides thinking as it proceeds in a particular direction—that establishes the order or sequence of the work. Whether or how much the work is serial by this definition, then, depends on whether and how much its constructed conceptual constraints inform the sequence, order, or process of working out the rest—which ultimately, perhaps, diminishes twelve-tone music's serial credentials, as the tone rows determine the sequence of pitches only and not more general processes in the score, which remain motivated by generic principles like the sonata form.

Thomas Mann's Faustian composer Adrian Leverkühn asks the expected question about serial art: "The entire disposition and organization of the material would have to be finished before the actual work could begin, and so the question then is: Which is the actual work?"[15] But Leverkühn is wrong

14. For a discussion about the variety of terminology associated with different serial musics, see M. J. Grant, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-War Europe* (New York, 2001), p. 5.

15. Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. John E. Woods (New York, 1997), p. 207.

to assume that we, as critics, have to decide whether the work is in the idea or the idea is in the work. Serial art and poetry (and music, though I leave that to others as well, for now) prove that those are only relative distinctions. There is work behind the concept and there is work behind its execution and there is work in processing how both come together in an act of reading that is also unreading. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein, serial art teaches us how to go on, but how and where we go is not always up to us, or only us.[16]

Wall Drawing #1085 (1968)

My first example can be found installed at Dia Beacon on the banks of the Hudson. Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #1085* (1968), upon first seeing it come upon you—which is what it's like, though it does not move—feels like the apex of the sacred in a world gone secular (fig. 1). Like a Byzantine icon, LeWitt's wall drawings conceal the bodily gestures of their maker(s). Unlike an icon, there is no single point or vortex around which the work's energies circulate. But here, the artist stands behind the work as God stands behind his servant craftsmen, never deigning to wield the graphite used to draw any of the serial units. In fact, by marking the work as a product of 1968, we locate the creative effort before any part of the drawing was actualized. In 1968, LeWitt conceived the score; not until 2003 was it actualized in traces of graphite on a wall. LeWitt gave instructions to a team of assistants who drafted the matrix on site. Ultimately, the work, according to LeWitt, is in the concept, not its execution:

> In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. . . . It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.[17]

So how does one make a concept? What is the place of techne in an art form where execution is "a perfunctory affair" and "the skill of the artist as a craftsman" usually does not figure? Does LeWitt not relate to the wall drawings located on the interior walls of Dia Beacon the way a foreman relates to the products his laborers make? Don't the fruits of (artistic) labor belong to the workers? We seem to have passed beyond all reasonable applications

16. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden, Mass., 2009), § 185.

17. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5 (Summer 1967): www.artforum.com/print/196706/paragraphs-on-conceptual-art-36719

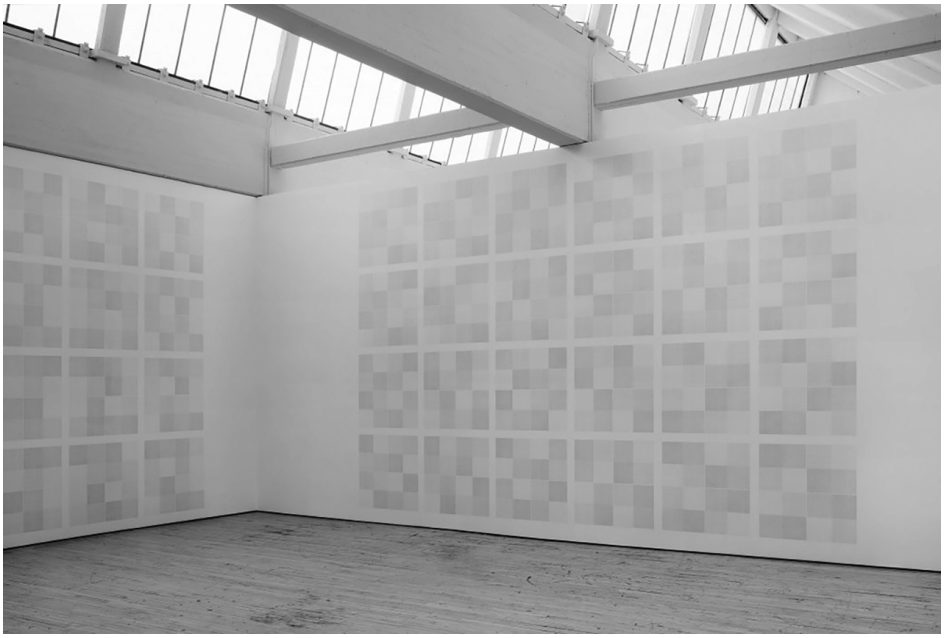

FIGURE 1. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1085: Drawing Series–Composite, Part I–IV, #1–24, A+B*, 1968. Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy and the Martin Bucksbaum Family Foundation. © The LeWitt Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, www.diaart.org

of a theory of material craft. Most poets and composers, even the most experimental, conceptual, and performative, at least held the stylus that recorded the first marks on paper or some surface that other people later recite or perform.

But of course LeWitt put his instructions down on paper too. Only a mystic could believe he relates to the actualized drawings as God relates to creation through his Logos, hands totally clean. However Renaissance masters and lead architects pass their visions onto their underlings, they do so via inscription of some kind, whether through first sketches or demonstrations or written instructions or verbal instructions. All of which are stages in the work's production. One of the great values of *Wall Drawing #1085* (and LeWitt's metaseries of wall drawings more generally) is not that it goads us to rethink serial art as pure idea but that it even more firmly grounds our understanding of the complexities of a techne. It forces us to include concepts as made things. It expands rather than contracts the value of techne knowledge on the part of viewer and critic.

Although the labor expended by LeWitt, Andy Warhol, and Marcel Duchamp differ, the former's conceptualism offers a version of a problem we have been trying to solve since at least the display of *Fountain* in 1917. Responding to Warhol's 1964 *Brillo Box*, Arthur Danto argued that the material

form of the object in question underdetermines its status as art.[18] Arthood is rather bestowed on the object by the art world's governing (and historically changing) definitions of art. Thus one art object can in principle be indistinguishable from another that never attains the status of art. Warhol's Brillo boxes are in; others that come straight off the factory line onto a retail shelf are out. Though LeWitt's drawings are not ready-made (and neither are Warhol's handmade boxes, to be sure), Danto's point might be thought to hold about him; if anyone can produce his drawing with enough time and discipline (an effort in its own right, I hasten to add), there is nothing about the graphite traces on the wall that makes them art a priori. Staten bristles at the notion, defending his techne theory from such implications: "The concept of techne is rooted in, but not limited to, the model of handicraft. Techne means both skill of hand and the knowledge that guides it; but the knowledge is the fundamental thing, and knowledge of one techne might guide other approaches to the making of works, including purely conceptual approaches."[19] LeWitt's wall drawings are an intervention into the techne of drawing. They intervene primarily at the conception stage, which is a legitimate part of the techne Danto ignores—implicitly assuming that, at earlier stages of cultural history, it was immaterial to the work of creating an art object—and a form of labor in its own right. Likewise, Andre's minimalist Equivalents—installed sculptures that do not require the artist's handicraft and are sourced purely from industrial materials without being reshaped along the path to exhibition—reveal an often-ignored aspect of the sculptor's techne, the sourcing and selecting stage.

According to LeWitt's definition, serial compositions

> are multipart pieces with regulated changes. The differences between the parts are the subject of the composition. . . . The entire work would contain subdivisions that could be autonomous but which comprise the whole. The autonomous parts are units, rows, sets or any logical division that would be read as a complete thought. The series would be read by the viewer in a linear or narrative manner even though in its final form many of these sets would be operating simultaneously, making comprehension difficult.[20]

In the work I am considering, LeWitt's subdivisions are units working out one possible permutation of the guiding concept. This type of series, what

18. See Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (Oct. 1964): 571–84.

19. Staten, "The Wrong Turn of Aesthetics," in *Theory after 'Theory,'* ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (New York, 2011), p. 233.

20. LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen* 5–6 (Fall/Winter 1967): www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/serialProject.html

Charles Haxthausen calls a mode of "internal seriality," is what LeWitt himself sometimes called systems.[21] They complete an idea by exhausting it, all the while suggesting the vertiginous expansiveness of conceptuality. Each unit, in the statement quoted above, completes a thought, a concept actualized in thought before it is translated onto the wall via the artist's instructions, which include schematic keys or diagrams. The wall then becomes a prosthesis for thinking, an environmental materialization of a mental process that cannot stay inside the head. LeWitt's diagrams unfold in stages as a concept attaining worldliness.

When you step up close to the wall drawings and you see the intricacy of each cell working out its abstraction, you might not think of worldliness. You might think of bloodlessness instead. But I think that would be a mistake. Even as we struggle to imagine the specific project LeWitt had in mind, we unread his mind. We are swept up by the process, both of LeWitt's conceptualization and his amanuenses' meticulous realizations, cramped hands and all. We exit the interior of the mad genius' brain and enter its negotiations with writing pads, sketch paper, and blank canvases. We feel the pressure of a concept's need to externalize itself. We work backward from the realized system and think serially. We imagine the obscure path traveled. We relive the working out of serial form, not merely absorbed by the beauty of its attainment. We experience the first tug of the artwork beyond its bare existence and facticity toward a critical stance, which requires that we understand something about how it was made. Anyone wondering why LeWitt would have done such a thing—even if out of sheer ignorance and mocking disdain—is opening up to the task of criticism.

Writing about poems that "exhibit a practice toward intransitive attention," Lucy Alford describes meditative practices where "process overtakes [desired] outcome as a point of focus, and, with repetition, process itself recedes into the attentional background."[22] At these moments, as in the use of a mantra, the direct objects of attention recede and a negative space is opened up, intentional action replaced by "a passive mode of *being acted upon.*"[23] I think this is a great definition of meditation and the exact opposite of what happens when one spends time with LeWitt. Because then we go the other way. We begin as passive observers before the elements of a series that runs faster and further than our minds can follow. Then as the units come into focus, we find a new direct object to latch onto: the system itself. And

21. Charles W. Haxthausen, "Thinking about Wall Drawings: Four Notes on Sol LeWitt," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 14, no. 1 (2014): 48.

22. Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York, 2020), p. 155.

23. Ibid.

the system is not just a sublime behemoth beyond the reach of our imagination, the way we might refer to the singular abstraction—the system—of a totality that was in fact made over time and can potentially be unmade or at least first rewound and understood. But systems hide the traces of their construction. So we begin with one part and build our critical knowledge from there. That goes for art and poetry as much as for any other product of human labor.

Discrete Series (1934)

George Oppen's 1934 *Discrete Series* is a seminal work of twentieth-century experimental poetics that will help me better explain what I am calling virtuality. In LeWitt's case, the virtual entered into the actuality of the work's handicraft through his instructions. Having first looked at a piece (somewhat misleadingly) dated 1968, I follow Oppen in constructing a (retrospective) chronological gap. After publishing *Discrete Series*, he did not write poetry for at least two decades. Oppen's early style seems to fade into the long silence. Elliptical, spare units owe much to Poundian imagism, Williams's object-oriented poetics, and Zukofsky's hard-won restraint. Oppen's most famous description of the principle behind the work comes from an interview with L. S. Dembo:

> My book, of course, was called *Discrete Series*. That's a phrase in mathematics. A pure mathematical series would be one in which each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements.[24]

Oppen repeats nearly the same statement elsewhere and does not elaborate on it much, so one finds his reference to the mathematical concept behind the title much as one encounters a unit in his own series, as a suggestive but incomplete picture of a larger process.

The values of a discrete series are distinct and countable rather than continuous over a specified range. The frequency of each value of the variable is given. The values are thus spaced out. In Oppen's words, "empirical" or "imagist" statements are discrete fragments. But if they are values of a series, they must be related. They are related through the established operation of the

24. George Oppen, "Interview by L. S. Dembo," in *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets*, ed. L. S. Dembo and Cyrena N. Pondrom (Madison, Wis., 1972), p. 174.

series, the infinite sequential addition of quantities to an originating value. A series may converge at a limit or diverge without limit, heading more and more rapidly toward a point or shuffling endlessly onward. In either case, each value or unit owes its existence to the summative principle of the series, not to the value that came before it.

Thus the mode of relation among values is virtual. The series hangs together through its principle of summation. Individual units are like monads, related to each other like separate spokes on a wheel. The wheel's hub is the principle behind the series (its summation, what in math one would draw in sigma notation). Metaphorically speaking, the series' sigma notation subsists in every value like an absent force, a law of mathematical gravity. Virtuality as such is an ontological principle, referring to the way the existential possibilities of an entity or process are structured, or the systemic states' variables tend to approach in the form of (what dynamical systems theory calls) attractors. As Deleuze explains it, "The reality of the virtual consists of the differential elements and relations along with the singular points which correspond to them. The reality of the virtual is structure. We must avoid giving the elements and relations which form a structure an actuality which they do not have, and withdrawing from them a reality which they have."[25] Without grasping the virtual structures that circumscribe (though do not necessarily determine) organisms, objects, and events, we cannot fully understand the way those beings are organized. But the virtual is never actualized as the governing structure it is. We only glimpse the surface of its workings in the states of affairs materially produced. The virtual can be grasped only through the actual.

The problem is that Oppen does not give us the poetic version of a summation or sigma notation of his series. The virtual principle of *Discrete Series* is never named or represented. We have to work backward from the imagistic values on the page to reconstruct the series, reading them first as members of a sequence while being careful not to see them as engaged together in horizontal causality. One leads to the next through incessant dialogue with the techne principle established from the beginning, before the first unit even appears. As Joseph Noble observes, accurately to my mind, one sees discreteness "not just in the way the individual poems of *Discrete Series* are grouped, but also in the nature of Oppen's use of language itself in the poems, a modus operandi that was to be with him throughout his career," even on the other side of his silence.[26] So that is where you start. Here is the first discrete term (poem) of the series:

25. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, 1994), p. 209.

26. Joseph Noble, "George Oppen's *Discrete Series*: Things among Others," *Paideuma* 40 (2013): 258.

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
saying, but of boredom
Is—aside from reading speaking
smoking—
Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
wished to know when, having risen
"approached the window as if to see
what was really going on";
And saw rain falling, in the distance
more slowly,
The road clear from her past the window-
glass—
Of the world, weather-swept, with which
one shares the century.[27]

By beginning his series with reference to a Henry James character (from "The Story in It"), Oppen generates momentous pressure at the edges of the individual poem. Perhaps upon reaching "Maude Blessingbourne" you turn to your mental storehouse of literary names or whatever search engine is available. Perhaps you read on. But the tension between poem and series, interior and exterior pressure is set in motion, evidenced above all in Oppen's decision to begin his collected poems with it too, and to quote from it much later in section 37 of "Of Being Numerous." Stretching back to James (and his Maude who indeed "approached the window as if to see what was really going on") and forward to the unraveling of the series, Oppen's first discrete unit is referential without being obviously (or simply) representational.

Bonnie Costello writes that Oppen "aimed to show us this knowledge [of the "weather-swept" world] out the window, beyond the 'glass' of Maude's bourgeois encasement," that he would proceed in the following poems to "obliterate the glass that separates her from 'the century.'"[28] Costello's critical judgement, as reasonable as any, is the hypothetical beginning of a techne theory. How, we should ask, does a discrete series in particular achieve those aims? What is the facility of serialism in this case? Once you see the glass as the boundary separating the bourgeois interior from the "weather-swept" world one "shares" with the century (with the worst storms still to come), you think of the lyric unit—to invoke Romantic, expressive convention—as the inside and the serial summation as the "road," the path "past the window-glass."

27. Oppen, "The Knowledge not of Sorrow, You Were," in *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York, 2002), p. 5.

28. Bonnie Costello, *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008), p. 5.

In poems to follow, glass and road recur: "The evening, water in a glass / Thru which our car runs on a higher road";[29] "Closed car—closed in glass—/ . . . / Hardly an exterior. / Moving in traffic / This thing is less strange—/ Tho the face, still within it, / Between glasses—place, over which / time passes—a false light."[30] Between glasses, in the poetic series, are the poems, the "place" through which time passes. And time is recorded as the frequency of the series, the discrete spacing of a clock out of continuous duration. The "place" of the poem, produced in the series as the temporary termination of its perpetual spacing, appears in "a false light," a flash in a pan.

The flash of momentary language is a false light not because it is somehow untrue but because it is sustained by a virtual principle that remains unknown. "Ultimately, it's impenetrable," Oppen says of the world. "At any given time the explanation of something will be the name of something unknown. We have a kind of feeling—I described doubts about it—but we have a kind of feeling that the absolutely unitary is somehow absolute, that, at any rate, it really exists."[31] The summation of the series is doubtful, even unknown, because not given in advance, and yet "at any rate"—through the *rate* at which the units of a series appear out of the void—"it really exists." I have mentioned the alternating dichotomy of car and window—a version of Oppen's oscillation between inside and outside (Costello's lyric interiority and historical exterior), but other members of the discrete series offer different possibilities for a governing pattern, what Perloff calls "a set of related dialectics—man and machine, the one and the many, the mental and the erotic," all of which resolve into the image of the car plunging onward down the road.[32] The shapes of Oppen's poetic units undulate like a road still being built into the empty white space of an unknown territory. It does not flow seamlessly. It is under repair yet serially bound, stop-and-go but not quite bumper-to-bumper. The mystery of the poems' paratactic sparseness, their underdetermined modifiers and abbreviated syntax, unravels our reading at each turn of the page, returning us repeatedly to the absence in the margins—intimately exterior to the poems, real without being actual—leading us ever onward.

Asymmetries 1-260 (1960)

Jackson Mac Low's Asymmetries, of which there would be 501, are short poems numbered in a discrete series. As a whole, they take Oppen's serial

29. Oppen, "The Evening, Water in a Glass," in *New Collected Poems*, p. 8.
30. Oppen, "Closed Car—Closed in Glass—," in *New Collected Poems*, p. 13.
31. Oppen, "Interview by L. S. Dembo," p. 176.
32. Perloff, "The Rescue of the Singular," review of *New Collected Poems* by Oppen, *Contemporary Literature* 43 (Autumn 2002): 563.

method further, at least logically. Mac Low's serial units are generated by an "acrostic method":

> This involved drawing words, word strings, and in one case, syllables from current reading matter (or in a few poems, from the environment in which the poems were written). Usually an initial word was found in a text (or in the environment) and words (or strings) having its letters as their initial letters were then found by reading along in the text (or by careful perception of the environment). After the first line, the words or strings of which acrostically "spelled out" the first word, words beginning with the second and subsequent letters of the first word were found to begin the second and subsequent lines.[33]

Mac Low's found index word gives way to a reading process recorded throughout the poetic unit. Here is "Asymmetry 1," as an example:

Pain available ingredient.
News
ARTHRITIS rule through *hand* ritual
impelling through.
infinite
Three impending stretching
if fell
now,
'office,'
wasn't[34]

The index word "Pain" leads Mac Low to read through his source until he finishes a line with a *p-a-i-n* acrostic. Then he begins a new line with the second letter of the index word (*a* begetting "ARTHRITIS") and turns that new first word into the root of another acrostic. But the original index word still governs the poem-length pattern. At the beginning of the series, typography follows the punctuation of the original text, so that any word that includes punctuation forces a line break. Initially handwritten, indentation is guided by the paper he was using, although Mac Low maintained a stanzaic form along the left margin to keep the acrostic spine in place.

Is Mac Low's acrostic method craft? Are procedural poems a la Oulipo or Cagean compositions examples of a techne? Without yet digging further, we can identify three stages of Mac Low's process for getting his poetic units

33. Jackson Mac Low, "Introduction," in *Thing of Beauty*, ed. Anne Tardos (Berkeley, 2008), p. 80; hereafter abbreviated "I."

34. Mac Low, "Asymmetry 1," in *Thing of Beauty*, pp. 81–82.

onto the page: (1) creating the constraint, seemingly out of nothing; (2) reading the texts (whether print publications or environmental) and drawing the words and strings out of them, expanding the acrostic as he reads on; (3) transferring, translating, and arranging those samples typographically on the page. The movement seems to be inward-outward-inward in the classic Romantic sense, from mind to world to work. That comparison alone suggests that we remain in the world of poetry proper, not in some unfreely mechanized domain outside of it (as if we were somehow still a few miles above Tintern Abbey, not in Wordsworth's horrid London).

The critical commonplace is that procedural, constraint-based composition takes expressive, lyrical agency away from the maker. It mechanizes artistry. In one sense that's entirely true. In another sense, it merely reveals the way all composition is machinery of a sort. Even Wordsworth's famous line, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," is followed by the less quoted technical claim that the right habits of mind for poetic production are produced "by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits," as if the spontaneous overflow must be channeled through an unfeeling physiological and prosthetic machine for the poet to be able to translate anything of lasting and communicative value.[35] Whatever inarticulate emotion flowers into the poem, it must deconstruct in the process. As Jacques Derrida showed in his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, the medium or midwife of poetic self-expression adulterates the precious immediacy of auto-affected feeling.[36] Some struggle between the inside self and outside self, feeling and language, occurs in every poetic act via the forms of the techne, and ultimately the outside wins if and when the poem is produced.

Mac Low's Asymmetries might even, in the series title, reference such a lopsided relationship between the inside poet and outside poet. Certainly, the title also references the shapes of the lines, arranged much like William Carlos Williams's stepwise variable foot lines in *Paterson* and elsewhere. But I have not yet mentioned that Mac Low included a program for performing the poems as a series, introducing yet another asymmetry into his method: the way the units are made do not correspond directly with how they are supposed to be read. It is as if Mac Low planned to reveal, by creating separate procedural methods for composition and performance, an asymmetrical relationship between making and reading. And as we read the poems and glance

35. William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York, 2014), p. 79.

36. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1997).

sideways at the poet's "Methods for Reading and Performing Asymmetries 1–260"—the paratext that refuses to stay paratextual—we jump that gap, back and forth.

Paradoxically, when performed, Mac Low's individual asymmetries—small serial units spit out by a man-machine program that has carefully dimmed (though never eliminated) the freedom of its content choices—return us each time to the site of lyric enunciation. Or they return us to the idea of primitive expressive enunciation, so that we measure our present distance from it just as the acrostic method did while it worked the poems out. I have never seen Asymmetries performed, but I am led to imagine it happening by Mac Low's program notes. A group of people (that is how I choose to imagine it, but it can also be a single person) "realize[s]" in a successive series each Asymmetry "in a randomly selected or individually chosen series of the poems" ("I," p. 80). Mac Low tells the performers to do things they would have done anyway, like "decide their own reading speeds" ("I," p. 80). The rub is that all individuals, assuming there are more than one, will perform simultaneously, in a way similar to what Maya Deren, musing on a serial film that was never made, called "staggered simultaneities" in time phrases.[37] The *now* of lyric enunciation is layered in several directions: the serial orders and groupings are rerandomized so that the lyrical patterns and movements toward completion do not cohere; the enunciations cross aurally like on a randomized mixing board; and the positions of vocal enunciation occur dispersed in space, overheard not from an evanescent point of mental abstraction but from several points at once.

Like Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), which I have seen performed—a serial work also made up of short units, also composed for an indefinite number of performers, and also with an aleatoric element in terms of which performer plays which (melodic) unit and at what time—there may be moments when enunciations merge, when the lyric *now* emerges out of diffuse serial overlap. Such expressive communication is really not expressive at all, emerging as much by chance in the *Asymmetries* as the written units originally did, even with a minimal level of agential control operating. The typical, artful illusion of lyrical form—that it is a mind overhearing itself in the evanescent *now*, what Jonathan Culler describes as the activation of "discursive time" out of "empirical time"—that conceals the material support of methodical techne craft which brought the enunciative event into being is here inverted.[38] The ground of the reading-listening experience is controlled automation, not lyric overhearing, and we follow the procedural constraints along the grooves of the series' poetic units. There are moments when some higher consciousness,

37. Maya Deren, "Notes, Essays, Letters," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 27.
38. Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," *Diacritics* 7 (Winter 1977): 67.

some coordination of genius, seems to be directing the program. But that is immediately revealed to be a fiction. The next member of the set, referring to a new text, punctures the lyric illusion.

I have said all this without looking closely at any of Mac Low's Asymmetries. They are much less interesting on an individual basis than Oppen's discrete poems. One could spend an hour on one of Oppen's units; Mac Low's reward maybe five minutes of close attention each. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between openness and emptiness. But that's one way to find out you're working through a proper series. The acrostic method is not by itself of much interest either—what makes for a good constraint as opposed to a silly one, I wonder?—but the access space where the method churns without determining the way the poet responds to it is very interesting indeed. That's where the poem touches the social world and its packaged forms. And the acrostic constraint's specifications change over time in response to how the poems turn out and how they're performed as scores, so Mac Low projects an endlessly shifting system joining method, text score, and performance in feedback (or feedforward) loop. We see choice emerge in the transitions between poems, or blocks of the series, turning authorship into a question not of diction, rhyme, or meter but of rhythmic variation, a primordial element of poetics that precedes even quantitative measure. Any one poetic unit, read or performed, could alter the asymmetry system, as when Mac Low moves to found word strings in "Asymmetry 25" in order to expand the textural influence of the world on the poem or when he tweaks his system just slightly to record a luminous encounter with the shape of a sequence:

> This
> is a large flag
> homes
> it glows
> southwest
> city and
> it glows
> This
> is a large flag
> homes
> on the wall.
> Each band[39]

In the billowing of "Asymmetry 265" I experience the crack in the system through which the beauty of that same system shines. The poet builds a

39. Mac Low, "Asymmetry 265," in *Thing of Beauty*, p. 89.

machine but keeps his eyes and hands on it as it spits its products out into the world that takes and tests. As Wallace Stevens writes of the poem, "It must change."[40] The series is techne revealed, in visible motion, not hidden as it usually tries to be. Series disclose their stitches but do not explain them. Gaps between the units insist on a meaning that refers solely to something unarticulated in the present state of the work but begged by it at the same time. In a word: to the concept, built or found, that motivates the creative force of the artist-machine's echoes in formed language, traced graphite, captured light. So, we read or see and then unread or unsee to find whatever it is hiding in the blanks or the gutters, in the nonspace that spaces the work and gives it whatever coherence it possibly has. Serialism, conceived as conceptualism revealed as techne, as conceptualization in process and on its way toward system or structure, is revelation of a particular sort. It is the revelation of our critical standpoint, reading as unreading.

40. Wallace Stevens, "It Must Change," in *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1990), p. 389.