Serial images: The Modern Art of Iteration

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Chapter Seven

Seriality and Modernism

The notion of modernism is used so extensively to define the art of the early to late-middle twentieth century that it has become a monolithic concept.¹ Its invocation homogenizes such a diversity of styles, schools, practices, and experiences, that the different artists I analyze are each considered representative of aspects of this dominant tradition.² The art of Degas, Mondrian, Bacon, Schiele, and Warhol not only spans the broadest reaches of the modernist epoch (1880's to 1980's), but includes a number of the varied styles and projects contained within the rubric of modernism. On my analysis, these artists form a specific modernist trajectory, even though on the usual

¹ See Flam for why modernist art is not monolithic; see Poggi for the view that modernism should not be a monolithic concept but is. I borrow the term from these authors.

² The heterogeneity of modernism was first recognized by feminist analyses, postcolonialist theories of race and ethnicity, queer theory, and analyses of the class structures modern art reinforces. It was particularly emphasized by the postmodernist foregrounding of the cultural embeddedness of practices, forms, and reception. These analyses at once bring out the diversity within modernism and show that modernism is a hegemonic discourse which excludes many artworks, practices, and experiences. For an account of postmodernism, see Harvey, Huyssen, and Owens and . For feminist analyses, see Pollock, Elliot. For analyses of class structure, see Pollock, Jameson, and T.J. Clark. For analyses in queer theory, see Meyer (1994) and Meyer (2002). For postcolonial analyses, see Bhabha and Spivak.

228
accounts their only connection is that they are considered to be mainly aesthetical, minimally political. Their relation to the world is most often understood to be representational, so that, for example, Schiele is read as expressing fin-de-siecle angst, Bacon post-World War II trauma, and Warhol rampant consumerism. Their art is not the critical and resistant engagement of German Expressionism, Futurism, or Dada. Even when Schiele’s images or Warhol’s persona are considered to have political significance, their interventions are characteristically interpreted as subjective and self-expressive.

Yet critics still find these images troubling. For instance, there is endless debate about the meaning of Degas’ series of female nudes and Warhol’s series of everyday icons, while a relatively wary silence is maintained about the meaning of Bacon’s images. It is not the modernist visual discourse of the artists that troubles critics. The real source of critical difficulty is the iterative seriality that characterizes their work.

Degas’ and Warhol’s serial images are considered to be modernist, autonomous objects produced by the signature hand of their maker. Yet the iterative seriality of their images is most often understood in terms of models of mass production and commercialism. Degas is seen either to commodify the female nude or reactively to

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3 These artists are also sometimes connected by the modernist rubric that privileges white, Western male artists. For modernism as a hegemonic tradition, see Elliot and Wallace, and Jameson.
individualize it. Warhol is thought either to slavishly mimic the model of mass production or to criticize it. Analyses of Warhol’s series of everyday icons and objects are further caught in debates about consumerism. Critics claim he is either criticizing consumer society or passively reflecting it. Because Schiele’s self-portrait series offers so many images, it is considered obsessive, and not only an existential exploration of the self. All of Mondrian’s serial images are attacked on account of their “utopian vision”. McNamara summarizes the most common take on Mondrian’s work when he claims, “Only in the contiguous, seriated form ... was a synonymic universality revealed ... This precision of the ‘same’ unfolded within supposedly concordant sets of relations which yielded ultimate mastery and conceptual certitude” (73). Due to the comparative scarcity of critical interpretations of Bacon’s images, Hatch may well be right when he says Bacon’s images “have frustrated critical analysis because meaning is so tightly woven with technique” (174, n.17). Kuspit argues that


5 De Duve, Buchloh (1989), Crone, and James hold the first view, Crow, Crimp, Meyer (1995, 2002) and Foster (1996a,b) hold the second.

6 Crimp, Meyer (1995, 2002), Ganis hold the first view, Cook and James hold the second.

7 See Comini, Danto, Knafo. This view was also presented in the exhibition “The fractured Form: Expressionism and the Human Body”, at the Galerie St. Etienne, New York, November 15-January 6, 1996.

8 See Krauss, Buchloh (1986).
Bacon's images are hysterical, Nochlin claims they present spastic but deliberate destructiveness. Even van Alphen and Deleuze's analyses limit the structure of Bacon's activity to ongoing physical forces.

My analysis challenges all these characterizations of the artists' work. The iterative accounts of the activity of actualization that their work offers are expressly concerned with the nature of social relations, with engagement, participation, and response. The works embrace what are understood to be modernist conventions, but critically respond to them.

These five artists are, in fact, closely related by concerns and concepts included in the "monolith" of modernism. In different ways, they each prioritize authenticity because they present their images to be read in terms of their formal property of serially iterative structure. Each artist's work renders novelty as a primary value, for intrinsic to serially iterative structure is the construction of something new out of the past. This structure can be understood to represent a modernist break with the past, tied to previous traditions but ultimately distinct from them. The artists share a commitment to the surface of their works as the site of meaning. Thus they prominently display their own activity of making on the surface as part of the meaning of their images, emphatically showing themselves to be real creators or makers of objects. By presenting their objects as unique, they share the modernist resistance to the industrial model of mass production and to the mass consumption patterns of late capitalism.\(^9\) This feature of

\(^9\) See Greenberg on this as a defining feature of modernism. See Lukács for an opposing view.
modernist practice is particularly relevant here, for the artists' activity is not merely presented in oblique 'traces'. Rather, their activity is identified with the dynamism presented in the structure of their images, such as Warhol's printing accidents, Bacon's wipes and smears, Degas' brushstrokes, Schiele's active body and facture, even Mondrian's ordering process. The artist is reflected and implicated in the serially iterative structure of his images.

The artists' productions are meaningful objects in their own right and are insistently autonomous: the images present their structure, not as vehicles for its representation, but as definitive of their subject matter. Hence the images solicit the viewer's participation. They situate the viewer in a constructive relationship with the artwork, as one who is both affected by the images and actively engaged in their realization. The viewer is led to identify with Degas', Schiele's, and Warhol's figures, to enact Mondrian's structure, and to actualize Bacon's figures. Thus the viewer becomes implicated in the structure and defined by it. This relationship of engagement is presented as a model for engagement with the world. In Degas, Bacon, Schiele, and Warhol, the mundane subject matter is representative of things in the world. In Mondrian, the painting's structure maps onto the world and onto any feature of it. The relation between art and life is integral to the meaning of these artists' images. The viewer is implicated in a participatory relationship with the images, and without the viewer's participation the images are vacuous structures. While the artist's activity informs the image's active structure, it must be activated by the viewer's looking activity. In consequence, the
images are essentially communal, and present themselves as sites of shared cultural value and concern.

There can be doubt, then, that modernist principles inform the serially iterative work of Degas, Mondrian, Bacon, Schiele, and Warhol. I maintain, however, that the iterative seriality of these artists states a set of ontological concerns which have profound implications that go well beyond standard and often heavily ideological accounts of modernism.

Against other critics, I have argued that the serial images of these artists are not to be read as pointing to the transcendental or otherworldly. The serially iterative structure of their work presents an account of the activity of actualization which makes mundane activity the basis of their images. Activity is immanent, familiar, and only found in its instances. There is only the realization of each act, and each act is unique. This is the ontological culmination of the modernist principles these five artists uphold. For the utterly unique and underivable iterative activity of actualization presented in the works underscores not only the authenticity of the artist’s creative production and the novelty and uniqueness of the artwork, but, above all, the freedom which is basic to all these artists’ serial images. Novelty, autonomy, and authenticity could not be more powerfully presented. This makes performativity or enactment – an activity each artist directly requires of the viewer -- mean something other than mere repetition; it means actualizing oneself in intimate relation to someone or something else. Hence when the artwork urges the viewer to perform or enact the structure of the image, the

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10 For examples of opposing analyses, see Cheetham on Mondrian, Comini on Schiele, and Krauss.
viewer not only performs the actualization of another, she performs her own actualization in terms of the other. The viewer is led to put herself in the position of the other, acting like the other while remaining uniquely herself. This account of performativity has profound and unexpected consequences when it is connected with the other themes each artist explores, namely subjectivity, community, and history.

The serially iterative account of the activity of actualization is not abstract and disengaged. The artworks implicate the viewing subject in their structure, and lead the viewing subject to enact serially iterative, free constructive activity. The viewer is defined and realized in terms of the structure. Hence the images provide models of subject-formation. For instance, I have shown how Mondrian's *Victory Boogie Woogie* guides the viewer's visual activity into the structure of the image. Caught within its matrix, the viewer is at the same time shown to be its principle of free constructive activity. The viewer shapes the order of relations of the matrix by the way she moves around it. Each act of construction performed by the viewer changes the structure of the matrix that she is in. Yet her activity does not destroy either the matrix or her previous constructions. Each construction is preserved and defines the matrix's order of relations or dynamic structure at any given point. However, while the constructed relations are fixed, their order itself is revisable. As the principle of free construction, the viewer is free to re-order past relations and with each new construction to change the significance and meaning of the past.

Mondrian interpellates the viewing subject as a free and constructive agent. She can choose to do nothing and allow herself to be defined as an element of the matrix she
inhabits, political or discursive or whatever. Or she can choose to act and define the structure of that matrix. On this reading, Mondrian presents a model of free constructive subjectivity that is effectively engaged with the world. Freedom is not a matter of interstitial gaps in the matrix. Instead, it is the unpredictably free activity of the subject which is derivable only from itself. Mondrian's last painting provides perhaps the most perspicuous model of freely constructed subject-formation, which previous chapters have shown to be articulated in different ways in the work of each of the artists discussed.

In the works of all these artists, the subject is shown to be an essentially participatory, public subject. The free subject is not atomic, isolated, or closed. For example, the activity of actualization presented in Degas' figures is shown to belong to figure and viewer alike. It makes the figures what they are, but not without the participation of the viewer. The viewer enacts with the figure the figure's actualization, both within an image and across series of images. The viewer is emphatically not separate from or acting against the structuring activity of the figure. The viewer performs the figure's activity of actualization, and like the figure acts on its own terms. As

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11 For this reason, these artworks act differently from those that exemplify the ideas of both Butler and Bhabha, who argue that freedom is only found in the gaps, "in-betweens" (Bhabha), or excess (Butler) that formative matrices generate when they shape individuals into subjects.

12 Bacon's images suggest a generalized interpretation of the subject as an independent center of activity, for some of his painting are images of inanimate objects. Though only violent or painful in relation to human subjects, his objects, like Mondrian's, possess a dynamism that is their own.
I have shown, the viewer is not situated in relation to Degas' figures as a threatening or limiting force. Viewers are given an open and participatory model of interaction, in which identifying with the other is not a matter of objectifying the other.

Schiele, Warhol, Bacon and Mondrian present similarly participatory subject relations. Schiele presents the viewer with a specular enactment of the self, where the viewing subject is called upon to perform with the figure and is shown to share the same structure as the figure. Schiele's model is explicitly communal, as is Warhol's. With Warhol, the model of free, public and communal subjectivity is best exemplified in Warhol's own projected image: he presents himself as an instance of the serially iterative free constructive activity he articulates in his images. Bacon's images likewise offer a model of interactive and participatory subjectivity but, in contrast to Degas', this is presented as a site of violence. Like Degas, Bacon shows that the activity of actualization is an open, communal process in which others are engaged. Yet Bacon interprets communal engagement as strenuously affective. Interaction involves participating in the activity of the other, affecting their actualization, and receiving the affect of the other. Bacon clearly shows the violence and pain of such interactive engagement, and presents them as an integral element of the very sympathy and mutual concern that give rise to them. Mondrian's open structure, by contrast, emphatically presents a mode of engagement which maintains the subject's free activity in all its interactions. Mondrian's subject is a principle of free activity that is only realized within a matrix. In the images of all these artists, the subject is understood to be free and irreducible, but to share with others a structure of
affectivity and interaction. The ways in which viewers are brought to participate in and interact with the images are models for participating in and interacting with the world.

Seen in this way, the iterative seriality of these artists provides a particular account of the nature of historical change. The structure of serially iterative activity is an historical structure. Each artist shows that the temporal process of visually moving through an image becomes a process of moving with the image, relationally constructing its order. This process is historical because serially iterative activity is a process of constructing novel events out of previous orders of relations. This means the past always informs the present, but present acts freely actualize out of their past. History does not determine the present, it only informs it. History cannot be un-constructed once it is constructed: events occur and they become part of our history. Yet while the past cannot be un-constructed, it can be re-constructed.\(^\text{13}\) The order of relations structuring the past is revisable with any new act of actualization. As Mondrian's image explicitly shows, the activity of actualization is not a closed scheme. The past is open to re-interpretation, the present is not fixed until it is

\(^{13}\) In this sense, the serial analysis I provide is congenial to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive analysis of Gerard Titus-Carmel's serial artworks. Yet Derrida's deconstruction operates like Deleuze's sensation and Butler and Bhabha's freedom. Derridean deconstruction shows that the process of realizing something, such as meaning, is a process of realizing the differences and the incompleteness of the object analyzed. This process is a destabilizing force and the differences are gaps or fissures which make things susceptible to new realizations. By contrast, I interpret the process of realization as the activity of actualization, where the irreducibility of the act is not a negative gap but a positively free act.
actualized, and the future is entirely open to new events. The structure of serial iteration provides an account of history in which history is always open to new meanings. This is presented with particular clarity in Warhol’s series of spontaneous, differentiating accidents. There is no determinate order to the serially iterative structure. Although each moment of serially iterative actualization is based on previous moments, the importance or relevance of any moment in the past is interpreted in terms of how it is brought to affect the present. The past is fixed only in that it was once actualized; the significance of historical events can be changed or re-examined.

The analyses provided here reveal what I hold to be a fundamentally under-recognized minor tradition in modernist art: the tradition of serial iteration. Critical accounts of the role of the grid structure in modern art come closest to recognizing this tradition. Yet these accounts not only restrict the grid’s interpretation to the history of linear perspective and to the utopian systematization of the European avant-garde, they also limit its meaning to a stultifying “antinatural, antimimetic, and antireal” transcendentalism (Krauss, 9). I have shown how this kind of analysis misses the mundane activity that is the very basis of serially iterative structures, such as Mondrian’s. More importantly, these accounts only consider grid-like structures, as found in De Stijl, Bauhaus, and Purism, in their analyses of seriality. Shifting the interpretation from grids to serially iterative structure

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14 For linear perspective, see Damisch’s account of Neo-plasticism, referred to in my Chapter Three on Mondrian. For the avant-garde reading, see MacNamara. For the transcendental reading, see Krauss.
reveals important and meaningful interconnections between the various deployments of that structure.

The artists whose work I analyze employ serial iteration to present a specific structure of ongoing, freely differentiating activity. Each presents this structure as a feature connected with the world, whether by representing everyday subject matter or by an iconography which traditionally represents the nature of reality. They all emphasize the surface by denying traditionally linear perspectival depth, whether by using skewed perspectival schemes or by a complete denial of perspectival space. And each artist’s work leads the viewer to take an interactive, performative role in relation to the images. Thus the structure of the activity of serially iterative actualization presented by each artist’s work reveals that its significance extends beyond aesthetic interests to models of immanently free subjectivity, to interactive or participatory models of subject-relations, and to a non-determinist model of history.

There is no common school, style, or programme out of which these artists could be said to emerge, nor is there any indication that these artists especially influenced each other. While they all adhere to conventional modernist principles, the concept of modernism is too broad to be anything more than generally informative in respect of its specific applications. However, they can be understood to form a tradition in terms of the serially iterative structure of their art. For the history of art is itself an order of relations which can be re-ordered. The significance of past art is revisable in relation to the art that comes after it, for the meaning or importance of previous traditions is re-interpreted according to its impact on present ones. And in this respect, recognition of the
different presentations of serially iterative structure by Degas, Mondrian, Bacon, Schiele, and Warhol is not simply a matter of noting the significance of their interconnections. Fully to grasp their significance in the history of art, we must look to the present: to new media art.

Algorithmic looping, doubling, bifurcation, and differentiation are processes argued to structure the practice of making new media art and the experience of viewing it.\(^{15}\) Thus serial iteration is central to new media art in terms of both its creation and its presentation.\(^{16}\) Its materiality derives from digital code. Loops are iterative algorithmic forms structuring almost every code at its most basic level. Graphic display is manipulated by algorithmic code and is also the site of the semantic construction of the algorithm by the active intervention of the agents making up its audience. Automatic algorithmic operation and constructive activity are related by serial differentiation, particularly when the code's graphic display is activated by users. This relation of operation and construction – structure and agent -- in the iterative series of differentiations is complicated by the involvement of different users and interfaces, leading to different ways of configuring algorithms.

My analyses of serially iterative modernist art suggests a "preposterous" affinity between the art I have

\(^{15}\) For two different and compelling accounts of the process of new media, see Hayles and Manovich.

\(^{16}\) See Rush, Lunenfeld, and Hayles, Druckery.
discussed and these new media processes. This is not only because the two types of art share a basic structure of serial iteration. It is also because they have been subjected to the same interpretive ideology: like the trajectory of serially iterative modern art I locate, new media art is primarily analyzed in terms of its technological and formal structures, explaining the art in terms of its algorithmic data codes. The relation of those structures to the subjects who construct them as creators and as viewers is largely ignored. To bring a serial analysis to bear on the serially iterative structure of new media can shift its interpretation from what are best described as "antinatural, antimimetic, and antireal" purely algorithmic readings, to analyses of the constructive activity which is the basis of its structure. For new media can be said to be the first art form to have the reflexive capacity to enact and instantiate its own processes of realization. Because artists, artwork, and audience-users are immanent elements in the structure of its serial differentiations, new media art not only mimetically represents the iterative, durational processes of its own aesthetic reception, but thematizes them as representing an order of creative construction. When new media art is brought into relation with modernist structures of serial iteration, theorists of new media will have to consider the fact that its serial logic constitutes not a formal logic, but a logic of actualization, a logic of constructive activity. For seen in relation to the

17 I borrow this term from Bal (1999). The term preposterous means inverting an order by placing last that which should come first; I argue that present art shapes the significance of past art as much as past art shapes that of the present. This "preposterous" inversion is the structure of serial iteration, or the serially iterative activity of ordering relations.
serially iterative structures of modernism, new media installs within its own movement what its modernist predecessors could only grope toward: it places itself as a universal exchange of differentiating iteration. Thus it not only opens up a new paradigm of representation, but mimetically enacts the nature of representation in and as a serial ontology of iterative events. In doing so, it renews and reinterprets the significance of the serially iterative art that came before.

The meaning and importance of serially iterative modern art is thus inscribed in new media’s reinterpretation of it. It opens the analysis of new media, allowing new media art to be seen to reconfigure the structure of the free activity of serial iteration. New media art mobilizes the participatory, performative, and open structure of serial differentiation by making the audience an integral element of its active construction. The authentic acts of the artist are carried over and shared with the viewer: the novel and constructive act of actualization becomes a public event. The modernist engagement with surface is radicalized by the immaterial code of the new medium, achieving a disjunction between medium and artwork which underlines the inadequacy of physicalist interpretations of serially iterative activity.¹⁸ This contemporary reworking of serially iterative structure reinforces the relevance of modernist concerns while critically responding to them. New media art confirms, reinterprets and renews the significance of serially iterative modern art as a distinct and important tradition in art history.

¹⁸ For the disjunction between medium and artwork, see Manovich.