Reading the simultaneous

*Literary narrative and musical progression in the art of Sol LeWitt*

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**Abstract**

A major trope of modernist art criticism and theory of the 1950s and 1960s was “all-at-onceness”: the notion that the successful two-dimensional *visual* artwork can be seen in one single instant. From the second half of the 1960s onward, various artists defied this presumed intrinsic property by adopting progressive structures from literature and music in artworks that acknowledge the spatio-temporal nature of visual art. This article focuses on early works of Sol LeWitt that challenged viewers’ expectations of nonlinearity by introducing linear order into visual art, remarkably at a time when various authors and composers had been freeing themselves from a determined uni-directional order, some benefiting from the simultaneous presentation made possible by the static visual medium.

**Résumé**

Un des traits les plus récurrents de la théorie et de la critique de l’art moderniste des années 1950 et 1960 était la figure de l’immédiateté: l’idée qu’il était possible de percevoir en un seul instant le tout d’une œuvre d’art visuelle bidimensionnelle. Vers le milieu des années 1960 plus d’un artiste a commencé à critiquer cette prétendue propriété intrinsèque de l’oeuvre d’art en adoptant des structures séquentielles venant du monde de la littérature ou de la musique, afin de souligner par là les aspects spatio-temporels de l’image. Cet article examine les œuvres de jeunesse de Sol LeWitt qui mettaient à l’épreuve les attentes du spectateur en matière de non-linéarité en introduisant un ordre linéaire au sein des images. Ces expériences étaient contemporaines des tentatives de plusieurs écrivains et compositeurs qui voulaient se libérer de tout ordre unidirectionnelle et qui dans certains cas s’inspiraient justement des qualités de simultanéité offertes par le médium visuel statique.

**Keywords**

All-at-onceness and simultaneity in visual art; linearity and duration in art, literature, and music; serial and systems art; Sol LeWitt
“For the cultivated eye, the picture repeats its instantaneous unity like a mouth repeating a single word.”

—Greenberg, “The Case for Abstract Art”, 1959

“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.”

—Sol LeWitt, “Serial Project No. 1”, 1966

Upon entering the room in which Sol LeWitt’s Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes (1974) is exhibited, viewers see a forest of units of equal height, each consisting of geometrically arranged white wooden bars, placed on a low platform on which a grid has been painted (fig. 1). At first glance, one senses that the arrangement of the units is systematic, but one does not immediately note that the work is constituted by all 122 possible variations of 3 to 11-barred, incomplete open cubes, incomplete in the sense that none of the variations has all 12 bars of the complete cube. Nor does one realize at first that everything that is not 3-dimensional, such as variations with only 1 or 2 bars, is excluded, so that each unit retains the cube as its unrealized complete state. Likewise, one does not immediately recognize that the units are arranged in a sequential order, from variations with 3 bars in the front row to variations with 11 bars in the back rows. Viewers will probably begin to perceive the concept, or system, underlying this artwork only after they have read the title, studied the photographs of the units on the wall, or spent time analyzing the units and their spatial arrangement. They are then more likely to notice that it is useful to read the 3-dimensional and photographic manifestations of this absurd concept—all variations of
incomplete open cubes—*linearly*, from left to right and from foreground to background. The system behind the work can be analyzed only after this reading process has taken place, *in time*: after the viewer has looked at the individual units in a *uni-directional* order, one by one, as if the units were words making up a linearly-ordered book.

Before 1974, various art critics and theorists had attempted to define what is inherent to static, visual art, what distinguishes it from art forms like literature and music, traditionally characterized by progressive structures that invite a linear reading or listening process. Based on their observations of then-recent artworks, which in their eyes embodied some of the essential properties of the medium, some came to argue that successful visual art emphasizes the intrinsic property of simultaneity. Clement Greenberg had deemed unified paintings that can be absorbed “in an indivisible instant of time” as particularly valuable: “a picture … does not “come out” the way a story, or a poem, or a piece of music does. It’s there at once, like a sudden revelation” (Greenberg 80). Starting in the second half of the 1960s, LeWitt began to challenge this presumed intrinsic property of “at-oneness”, defying viewers’ expectations of nonlinearity by (re-)introducing the progressive order of traditional literature and music into static visual art. His systematically organized artworks of that time can best be comprehended by looking at the individual units in a uni-directional order. Viewers not following a linear viewing process have a hard time detecting the structure of LeWitt’s serial works: their comprehension will be obstructed by the viewing conventions of beholders of static art, who are not inclined to analyze what they see in a determined, sequential order.¹

At least two issues are raised by the tension in LeWitt’s works between sequential ordering and viewer expectations: on the one hand the question of whether an essential feature of static visual artworks is indeed that they can be observed in one instant or if the instantaneity is a mere convention, and on the other hand the question of why visual artists like LeWitt began introducing sequences, linearity, and duration in their work precisely at a moment when various authors (Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Georges Perec) and composers (John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen) were attempting to free themselves from a progressive order by introducing indeterminate, permutational, and directionless structures in their work.² In order to address these issues, a further analysis of a selection of early works by Sol LeWitt will follow first.

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¹ Pamela Lee has also noted that viewing LeWitt’s work progressively, over time, aids comprehension of its structures, its “processes of variation” and repetition, linking the duration of the viewing process to minimal music’s technique of phasing (Lee 2001: 56-57).
² Many other visual artists could be mentioned in this context, including Jasper Johns, François Morellet, Mel Bochner, and Alighiero Boetti. It is not a coincidence that kinetic art, performance art, video art, and land art—the temporal dimension of which is explicit and undeniable—were being developed in this same period. Robert Smithson may well have been the artist who explored temporality most intensely in the 1960s and early 1970s. See Lee 2004: 48-50, 218-56.
The linearity that characterizes *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* also structures LeWitt’s earlier *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)* (1966), which consists of a large grid that provides the base for a set of closed and open rectangular prisms of various sizes (fig. 2). The schematic plan accompanying the work demonstrates that the grid of *Serial Project* carries 4 sets of nine multi-part units. Every unit is comprised of 2 out of 12 possible parts, each of which has a square base: a small, open square-shaped frame, a small solid square, a large open square, a large solid square, a small open cube, a large open cube, a small solid cube, a large solid cube, a tall and open rectangular prism, a tall and solid rectangular prism, a low and open rectangular prism, and a low and solid rectangular prism. Four of the 12 parts are 2-dimensional (the squares); the remaining modules (cubes and prisms) are 3-dimensional. Within the 4 sets, the individual units are arranged in three rows, in each of which there are three differing parts and three identical parts. Each set mirrors another, with the taller pieces in the center (LeWitt, “Serial Project”).3 The linear system that regulates the interrelation of the constituent units of *Serial Project* and *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* has been called “serial.” While this adjective has been used in art criticism and art history to describe a wide variety of artworks and has been given a range of definitions, the focus here will be on its use to describe works of art consisting of sets of multiple units that are transformed according to predetermined, sequential orders.4

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3. The idea that formed the basis of “Serial Project,” and which LeWitt, in fact, saw as the actual artwork—its content—was, like that of most other early works by the artist, not only manifested as two- and three-dimensional structure, but also in the form of text, diagrams, and photos. Best known, apart from the structures, is the small book that was published as part of *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5-6 (1966). For LeWitt, the various material, visual manifestations of his ideas were derivatives of and clues to the work itself. Each manifestation, however, deepens the understanding of the idea. Norvell 119; Gieskes 151-52.

“narrative” and emphasized the progression of the elements in the series, commenting that the series is “read by the viewer in a linear or narrative manner (1 2 3 4 5; A B B C C C; 1 2 3, 3 1 2, 2 3 1, 1 3 2, 2 1 3, 3 2 1) ...” (“Serial Project”). For the artist, the concepts of serial transformation, linear order, and narrativity are closely intertwined. In fact, for LeWitt, the term “narrative” seems first and foremost to imply linear, directional sequence.5

LeWitt also gave visual shape to the systems governing Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes and Serial Project # 1 (ABCD) in books of drawings and photographs. One might argue that the system is best understood on an analytical level by viewers who get to experience the work in its book-form, which most clearly reflects the progression of the series. In a talk of 1970, LeWitt discussed the book-form as a “perfect vehicle” for his sequential systems, as the reader-viewer can easily flip through the consecutive pages, which “involve some sort of system that has a progression”. The reader-viewer is led successively through the series, following the Western reading convention according to which books are read linearly, starting on the first page and ending on the last page (“Art Now Class” transcript 8-9).6

The significance of the linear order of books to LeWitt’s serial works is underlined by the fact that the artist’s very first obviously sequentially structured work was the result of a commission to make a contribution to a book. In 1968, Seth Siegelaub initiated a book project that was reproduced on a Xerox photocopying machine and is now known as the Xerox Book (1968).7 As seen on the last page of LeWitt’s 25-page contribution to the Xerox Book—the page that served as a schematic summary of the previous 24 pages—the artist drew a number of parallel vertical lines at regular intervals in the upper-left square of a 4-square grid. The upper-right square of this grid features parallel horizontal lines, the lower-left square contains diagonal bottom-left to top-right lines, and the lower-right square holds diagonal bottom-right to top-left lines. The 4-square grid is combined into a larger, 16-square grid with 3 other 4-square grids, each of which would be identical to the previously described grid if not for the different order in which the squares present the four basic line directions. In order to aid comprehension of the system that generates the work, LeWitt assigned a number to each of the four line directions. He submitted the numbers, and concomitantly the 4 line directions, to a series of permutations, based on operations that he has identified as “rotation”, “mirror”, “cross & reverse mirror”, and “cross reverse”, to determine which square would contain a particular line direction. In order to account for all possible combinations of the four basic line directions as presented in 4 separate, grid-forming squares, LeWitt created a total of 24 16-square grids, to each of which a page was dedicated in the Xerox Book.8

The systematic basis of the Xerox Book work is relatively easily decoded because the sequence is

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5. The term “narrative” as employed by cultural and literary theorists is of course much more complex. See Richardson 2002.

6. LeWitt did insist, however, that, despite the progressive nature of the series, the viewer does not have to “read” from beginning to end. Cf. his comment to Lippard: “... the book is ... an easier way of understanding the work. I don’t know if it is necessary or not. Let’s say it is not, but it makes it a lot easier.” Unpublished Lippard interview: 12.


8. For several later works, LeWitt repeated all the original 96 (4 x 24) variations with superimposed lines, which added up to a total of 192 variations.
spelled out for the reader-observer. The book-form, however, is not the only type of presentation capable of facilitating a progressive viewing order, as illustrated by the installation in 1968 in the Los Angeles Ace Gallery of the wall drawing *Drawing Series II (A)* and the installation in 2008-9 of the entire series, *Drawing Series I, II, III, IIII*, at Mass Moca (fig. 3), the concept of which was based on the artist’s contribution to the *Xerox Book*.

![Figure 3](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 3 © Sol LeWitt, Drawing Series I, II, III, IIII, 1968, installation Mass Moca, 2008, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2014**

In Los Angeles and North Adams, *Drawing Series* was rendered on a long wall along which viewers could walk as if following a line. Thanks to this presentation, the units were seen sequentially, in sections, influencing the viewers’ comprehension process in a way similar to the book. On the other hand, in various other installations, including the one currently on view at the Dia Art Foundation, the *Drawing Series* were drawn on a wall not in a linear, extended way, but such that all parts are visible from one point with a view of the whole. Based on the preceding discussion, one might think that with such a presentation, the viewer would be less likely to perceive the sequentiality of the system. Yet, this installation has the merit of offering viewers an overview of all parts of the sequence at once, so viewers need to rely less on their memory, even if studying the details of the system still occurs over time.

Indeed, LeWitt’s serial works tend to be exhibited along with a schema that shows at one glance the full serial concept, allowing viewers to ponder the relationship of the parts to the whole. These schemata serve as clues that can help the viewer to derive the underlying ideas—simple systems—from the perceptually complex works. LeWitt’s use of charts is reminiscent of the contemporary employment of diagrams by structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss to explore the structure of social phenomena like myths. With such a visual chart, a structure that is normally experienced over time—when reading or

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9. LeWitt has compared this viewing process to the reading of detective stories. “I give the viewer all the clues and he arrives at the idea” (Glueck 25). The schema could be seen as a supplemental clue.
listening to a myth—is shown all at once, allowing the reader-listener, for instance, to see simultaneously the relation between the “gross constituent units” of a myth that appear “diachronically at remote intervals” but can be represented in two-dimensional charts (Lévi-Strauss 431-32). Serialist composers also used diagrams, to clarify the serial structures behind their works, structures that determine all parameters of the musical fabric and that are remarkably similar to those of LeWitt, whose early work was inspired by serial music.10 In the case of Pierre Boulez’s “Structure 1a” (1952), the first movement of Trois structures pour deux pianos, the composer assigned the numbers 1 through 12 to a row of twelve notes, twelve durational values (such as a sixteenth note and a quarter note), twelve attack modes (like staccato and tenuto), and the same number of dynamic levels (from pppp to ffff). He then submitted those numbers to various operations in order to determine the musical fabric: processes like mirroring, inversion, and reverse-order, which are reminiscent of those LeWitt used for his Xerox Book piece.11 For many listeners, the structure behind such works is understandable only after studying diagrams such as the “Original” and “Inversion” Matrices of “Structure 1a”, since without them, the brain is not equipped to detect the complex structures that underlie the works as these are performed over a period of time.12

Music scholar Leonard Meyer has argued that people are more likely to perceive unfamiliar patterns when they are able to take in the patterned phenomenon at a glance. The demands placed on listeners of music with an unconventional structure are greater than those placed on viewers of visual art with unknown patterns, as music consists of a series of transient events and an appeal is made to the listeners’ memory (Meyer, Music, the Arts and Ideas 81-82). Though already in the music of Bach, as LeWitt had noted during a talk in 1970, the abstract structures determining the works are only partly discernible for the listener (“Art Now Class” transcript 13), Meyer’s observation is especially applicable to total serialist musical compositions. Compared to LeWitt’s serial works, the systems behind similarly structured pieces of serial music are much less readily understood: it is harder for the listener to analyze and describe the work’s structure than it is for the viewer of an artwork by LeWitt that can be seen at one instant.13

10. In 1964, when he was first developing his serial methods, LeWitt was inspired by an article about the parallels between the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and serial music of the 1950s. See Zeller 1964; Miller-Keller 24; Bernice Rose, “Sol LeWitt and Drawing,” in Legg 34, 41-42. In my 2006 dissertation (available online: www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2006/gieskesm47606/gieskesm47606.pdf), I discussed Zeller’s article at length, elaborating on the parallels between the work of Mallarmé, serial composers, and LeWitt (Gieskes 106-7, 117, 140, 188-89). In 2012, Anna Lovatt focused on other aspects of the connection between Zeller’s article and LeWitt’s work, elaborating on the parallels between LeWitt’s art and the writings of Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet, which I had, likewise, discussed in my dissertation (Gieskes 109-116, 128-32, 140, 142-46, 148, 167-68, 187-89, 192, 200). See Lovatt 374-3. In “Ideas in Transmission: LeWitt’s Wall Drawings and the Question of Medium” (Tate Papers 14 (October 2010)), Lovatt discusses LeWitt’s art in the context of information theory, which I also did in my dissertation, yet again taking a different approach (Gieskes 107-109, 128-30, 148, 152, 159, 169-70).
12. Much has been written about the channeling of stimuli through the senses to the brain. For a brief comparison between the senses of touch, hearing, and vision and their respective roles in the processing of (simultaneous) information, see Grosz 97-99.
13. For an in-depth discussion of this issue, also in relation to the work of Steve Reich and Alain Robbe-Grillet, see Gieskes 147-50. Reich criticized the minimal comprehensibility of the structures of serial music (its “hidden structural devices”), striving in his own works to make all musical processes perceptible, achieved through the gradual introduction of changed variables, a process called “phasing.” See Gieskes 148-50; Lee 2001: 55. Lévi-Strauss also denounced serialist music for the inaudibility of its structures, in The Raw and the Cooked (1964),
Like serialist composers, authors of novels with complex structures, too, have used visual diagrams to organize their writings and to aid readers in detecting these structures. During the prolonged writing process, authors like Georges Perec relied on such models, which provided an overview of the structure that was to organize their books. The structure of Perec’s *La Vie: Mode d’Emploi* (1978), for example, is determined by a 10 x 10 grid, each square of which represents a room in the apartment building where the story takes place. The order of the novel is not linear in the ordinary sense but follows the moves of a knight on a chessboard. Readers of the book will have a hard time detecting this all-determining structure during the reading process. Their understanding of the system will be significantly aided by the images of the chessboard and apartment complex.

In spite of the fact that visual structures may be relatively easily decoded, LeWitt did still supplement visible presentations of his works with diagrams, so that, to use the artist’s own words, “the viewer will know that the changes are not capricious but systematic, becoming a language and a narrative of shapes” (Legg 135). If viewers of *All Combinations of Arcs from corners and sides; straight, not straight, and broken lines* (1973-76) did not have a plan at their disposal, they might have a hard time following the progression of the three types of lines (figs. 4-5).

![Fig. 4 © Sol LeWitt, All Combinations of arcs from corners and sides; straight, not straight, and broken lines, 1973, installation Venice Biennial, 1976, white chalk on black wall, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2014](image-url)

arguing that structures that are not based on the “natural,” “a priori” tonal system cannot be properly communicated and perceived. For a discussion of Lévi-Strauss’s arguments and Eco’s politically-tinted defense of serialists’ use of provisional systems, see Gieskes 136-38.
In all installations of this work, the series starts out with two arcs and finishes with a combination of two broken lines, yet the “reading” direction varies. In the 1975 San Francisco installation, to use the words of the artist, “the movement is read from top to bottom, and in Venice ... the movement is read progressively around the room” (Legg 135). While the overall concept remained the same for all different variations of the series, LeWitt provided slightly different plans that reflected the reading direction, facilitating comprehension. It could be said that with these plans, LeWitt—who wished to make the methods of his works transparent to the viewer—like Lévi-Strauss, Boulez, and Perec, reaped the benefits of the simultaneous presentation made possible by static visual images, while at the same time frustrating the viewer’s desire and expectation to understand the artwork by casting one quick glance.

Although LeWitt’s systems are relatively easily analyzed, viewers who encounter his serial works tend to be struck by their visual intricacy. LeWitt himself has described the final realizations of his concepts as chaotic, suggesting that if people merely look at the work without challenging themselves to find the underlying system, they will only perceive chaos (Wilson 6; Norvell 118; Gieskes 159-65).14 Viewers can be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented to them if they do not immediately observe the sequential order that unifies the data. This seemingly paradoxical situation must be related to the fact that viewers of art tend not to analyze what they see in sequential fashion, even if the art calls for such analysis, a phenomenon that may be considered a form of cultural noise. The term “cultural noise” refers to the confusion that occurs when there is a disparity between the habitual...

14. In 1969, LeWitt compared the chaotic appearance of his systematic works to that of “some kind of music,” which may sound like “just a mess of sound.” The musical score, he noted, can provide much more clarity “than the sound.” Norvell 118.
response to an established style and the very different response required for an understanding of the stimuli presented (Meyer, “Meaning in Music” 420-421; Gieskes 148, 162, 169-70). Most of the static visual artworks that we come across in our lives present a variety of visual stimuli that do not necessarily have to be perceived in a particular order, including representational artworks, which usually portray scenes or events occurring or unfolding in time. Of course there are exceptions, such as Giotto’s Capella Scrovegni frescoes, which narrate the stories of Mary and Christ panel by panel, but generally we do not expect to encounter a painting, drawing, print, or sculpture that asks us to follow a particular progressive course in our observation process. As such, LeWitt’s simultaneously-presented serial works thwart our expectations.

The notion of cultural noise leads us to consider the oft-noted distinction between the static visual arts, characterized by simultaneous presentation, and music and literature, which are of necessity chronologically ordered. It is not a coincidence that LeWitt introduced sequential, or—as he called them—narrative structures in his art precisely at the moment that has been seen as the end of modernism, modernist art being characterized in rough terms by a tendency to explore the intrinsic qualities of its own medium, its own discipline. Modernist painting had self-referentially called attention to its rectangular format and two-dimensionality, but also—if perhaps less explicitly—to its simultaneity, or, to speak with Clement Greenberg, its “at-onceness,” another modernist trope. Broadly speaking, one could describe the artwork that possesses modernist at-onceness as a work that excludes all reference to things external to it and is seen as a whole at one instant. The meaning of this “instantaneous unity,” Greenberg wrote in 1959, is fully present in a single perception of the modernist work. Our experience of a modernist painting is a highly concentrated sense of time, an arrest of our ordinary sense of temporal duration: “You are summoned … into one point in the continuum of duration. … You become all attention, which means that you become, for the moment, selfless and in a sense entirely identified with the object of your attention” (Greenberg 81). A modernist work, to formulate it differently, has absorbed its own past, condensing its history into the present instant.

15. It is impossible here to provide an overview of texts that articulate the difference between visual art and literature and/or music, and on the senses involved in the perception of these art forms. A few examples are mentioned here: Michael Baxandall has written on the simultaneity of sight and the linearity of language (Baxandall 459-60). Elizabeth Grosz, similarly, characterizes sight as “the only nontemporal or synchronous sense,” giving shape “its simultaneity,” while touch and hearing are marked by “the successiveness” of impressions, “their momentary impact” (Grosz 97-98). Early thinkers who have been influential through the distinction they have made between the spatial arts (painting and sculpture) and the temporal arts (literature and music) are Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci (Paragone), and Gotthold Lessing (Laocoon: an essay on the limits of painting and poetry, 1766, which inspired the title of Greenberg’s “Towards a newer Laocoon” (1940)). A list of authors who have countered clear distinctions between sight and language or between the various senses, would be even longer. Here we must mention pioneer Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in The Phenomenology of Perception (1945) argued that the senses can in fact not be seen in isolation from each other as they operate in interaction.

16. In this sense, the concept is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard’s “poetic instant,” which concentrates in one single moment many different, scattered events and disrupts the continuity of ordinary time (Kearney 38), although in modernist artworks with at-onceness, what is concentrated seems much less discordant. It should be noted that Bachelard’s notion of the poetic instant demonstrates that the idea that literature is diachronic rather than synchronic has its limits. Greenberg’s remarks also call to mind Bachelard’s teacher Henri Bergson’s conception of duration, as well as Roland Barthes’ discussion of the centrality of (a series of) representational “perfect instants” or tableaux in the works of Brecht, Eisenstein, and painting as described by Diderot, artificial instants that can be read “at a single glance”—comparable to Lessing’s “pregnant moments”—, which Barthes
extended Greenberg’s argument to famously denounce minimalist, or “literalist,” anti-modernist works as “theatrical” because they confront the beholder as if they were another person and are experienced in time—contended that modernist painting and sculpture’s “presentness” is experienced “as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness” (Fried, section VII.3). As philosopher Stanley Cavell stated in a 1971 description of prominent paintings of the previous two decades, such as those by Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis, the modernist artwork’s “total thereness,” a visual “declaration” of simultaneity, stops the viewer in the “instantaneousness” of its “thereness” (Cavell 111). Consequently, the experience of such a modernist artwork may be said to exist outside of the passage of time.

It must be emphasized that various critics and artists thought that much static art had not taken sufficient advantage of the quality of at-onceness. Donald Judd, incidentally considered anti-modernist by Fried and many others, stated that in artworks that contain too many different elements which are separated from each other, the singularity of form that creates an instant impact is jeopardized, as one has to observe the parts one by one. This would be true for almost all art created before the advent of minimalism. In his own work, Judd aimed for a sense of coherence by arranging identical, rectangular units at regular intervals, emphasizing the indivisible singularity of the work as a whole, which would have a more direct impact on the viewer: “It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting” (Judd 184, 187).

LeWitt also believed that his works can have an immediate impact, although this self-declared conceptualist artist thought that a viewer experiencing solely this momentary impact would miss out on an important dimension of the artwork—its underlying concept: “When one sees a wall, it is the impact of the whole that is understood at once—emotionally more than intellectually. It is only by reading the wall that the viewer understands it fully” (Legg: 164). It is partly due to this property, the deliberate demand it places on the viewer to take the time to figure out the (narrative, i.e. linear) system determining describes as presences of absences. Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory (1912), New York: Cosimo Books 2007; Barthes 1977 (1973) : 70-75.

17. Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” was sparked in part by Greenberg’s “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), which criticizes minimalist objects’ “aesthetically extraneous,” anthropomorphic “presence.” For a thorough discussion of Fried’s canonical polemic against duration in art, interpreted as an expression of anxiety in the face of the incumbent death of high modernism with the weakening position of the “purely present” artwork, see Lee 2004: 37-62. Lee identifies Fried as one of a growing number of “chronophobes,” struggling with modern conceptions and experiences of temporality resulting from the quickly developing information technologies responsible for accelerated communication and instant data processing. Following James Meyer (in “The Writing of Art and Objecthood,” 2000), Lee further discusses Fried’s concept of “presentness as grace” in the light of Jonathan Edward’s linking of instant “momentary renewal” and redemption, arguing that, for Fried, modernist instantaneousity had a redemptive value in ethically challenging times (Lee 2004: 37).

18. W.J.T. Mitchell has pointed out that this emphasis on atemporality is mythical, arguing that abstract art is not purely visual: it has not escaped intrusion of the verbal in that it depends on a kind of “verbal contamination,” i.e. theory. (Mitchell, Picture Theory 220).

19. It must be mentioned that in 1966, LeWitt had stated that whether the viewer understands the underlying series and its transformations is “incidental to the artist . . .,” “who cannot foresee the understanding of all his viewers” (LeWitt, “Serial Project”).

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3. It must be mentioned that in 1966, LeWitt had stated that whether the viewer understands the underlying series and its transformations is “incidental to the artist . . .,” “who cannot foresee the understanding of all his viewers” (LeWitt, “Serial Project”).
the work, that LeWitt’s work can be considered unmodernist. Fried has criticized minimalist works by artists like Robert Morris for inviting viewers to physically relate their own bodies and the environment surrounding the objects to the art. The experience of this relation between minimalist object, architectural environment, and viewer has to take place in time. It is, again, precisely this duration of the experience that is anti-modernist for Fried: the meaning of works that set up a temporal situation, Fried believed, is no longer contained within the works, but resides outside of them (Fried 8-9). According to Fried, therefore, minimalist art’s self-reflectivity is limited, and an intrinsic property of static visual art, total presentness at one instant, is compromised.

It was in the 1960s that an increasing number of artists, including those who had previously created modernist works with “at-oneness,” were starting to make works that broke the rules of presentness. Frank Stella, for instance, in 1966 created a series of paintings entitled Wolfeboro that refer to each other but can also be exhibited separately. Rosalind Krauss has argued that the meaning of the individual paintings that make up the series “depends on comparison with things that exist outside it,” as a result of which “that meaning cannot be seen to be entirely present in the perception of the single work (…) A series simply is diachronic in character—the experience of it is entirely temporal” (Krauss 1972: 49). Krauss is here speaking of a serial work consisting of parts that are separated in space. What is so distinctive for most of LeWitt’s serial works is that, in spite of the fact that the linear structure must be absorbed over time, the meaning is still “entirely present in the perception of the single work”: the majority of LeWitt’s early works is based on a closed, exhaustive system, referring to nothing outside of itself.

As noted earlier, the inspiration for LeWitt’s exploration of the narrative, the serial – which introduced a temporal dimension to the viewer experience—fittingly came not so much from the visual arts as from literature and music, as well as from motion photography. It seems surprising that LeWitt adopted the serial and directional quality of music and literature at a time when many composers, authors, and filmmakers were attempting to create work that defied continuity and progression. Whereas traditional music is generally perceived as having a direction or goal, allowing listeners to make predictions, composers of “nondynamic” or “static” music like Boulez, Stockhausen, and Ernst Krenek were less concerned with the causal succession of notes, which had in the past been maintained by arousal of expectation, through techniques like modulation, deceptive cadences, and the preparation of tonic

20. LeWitt’s conceptual art is obviously, and more famously, unmodernist in that it challenged the notion that art is essentially physical, visual, and formal. This, however, is not the focus of the current article.
21. Fried also included Judd in the group of artists whose works he denounced as theatrical, partly because the sequence of units in Judd’s objects could be “multiplied ad infinitum” and might thus be seen as “a fragment of … something infinitely larger” (Fried 7.3), different from the systems of LeWitt’s art, which tended to be exhaustive, taking heed of the artwork’s boundaries, though in a manner strikingly different from modernist paintings. According to Fried, the experience of such a “presentment of endlessness … persists in time” and has “indefinite duration” (Fried 7.3). Fried does not discuss the fact that Judd wanted to create works that would have an “impact at once” on the viewer due to their singularity (Judd “Interview with Hooton”).
22. An important inspiration for LeWitt’s exploration of the tension between narrativity and simultaneity was Eadweard Muybridge’s layout of motion photographs, which combined sequential arrangement with a presentation that allowed the relation of the individual units to the macrostructure to be visible all at once. (Glueck: 28; Cummings 30-31). It must be mentioned that Mel Bochner characterizes Muybridge’s “serialization of time” as “discontinuous,” “fragmented,” and “directionless,” as such subverting experiential time and subtracting “duration from event.” Bochner 1967: 28.
harmonies by dominant sevenths. A work like Stockhausen’s Klavierstück XI (1956) was marked instead by a variable structure, inspiring Hans Rudolf Zeller to describe it as a “directionless time field,” since the order in which the fragments of the piece are performed is not pre-established and no one trajectory can be relied upon for the prediction of future events (Zeller 17).

Leonard Meyer has argued that directionless music expresses an anti-teleological worldview, held by people who believe that, in a fast-changing and uncertain modern world, absolute and exclusive convictions and perspectives should be cast off and notions of purpose, direction, and predictability rejected. This renewed attention to contingency and distrust of single goals further reflects the emphasis on indeterminate processes central to modern physics, according to Meyer (Meyer, Music, the Arts and Ideas 68-84). This suppression of purposeful direction found its way around the same time in literature and film, those two other art forms that might in their traditional form be associated with continuity when organized according to progressive plots and narratives with beginning and end. Indeed, various works by authors like Samuel Beckett, Borges, and Robbe-Grillet have eliminated causal structures and linear narratives. In Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), for example, the principle character tries to write a novel that features not one storyline at the exclusion of other, alternative narratives, but includes all possible spin-offs.23 Similarly, Jean-Luc Godard’s Masculine, Feminine (1966) is an incoherent, fragmentary patchwork, without fluid narrative or singular plotline. Robbe-Grillet’s and Alain Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad (1961) also does not offer a single narrative, but is based on the protagonist’s reconstruction of events that took place a year earlier in a variety of contradictory versions.24

LeWitt’s work with linear series of course all but reflected an outlook based on teleology. Since in the visual arts, as noted before, sequentiality is unusual and a departure from modernist formalism, the choice of a linear series was not in the least customary, but rather an attempt to renew art aided by the introduction of conventions from other art forms. Photos of LeWitt’s library show that the artist, in fact, had an interest in the non-conventional work of authors like Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, and Beckett,25 all of whom found ways to resist progressive plots and narratives with beginning and end. With the exception of the defiance of linearity, LeWitt’s work has much in common with such radical literature: his own permutational, non-hierarchical work has no climax or point of focus, and the beginning and end of his series tend to be arbitrary. Moreover, similar to much anti-teleological music


24. Robbe-Grillet has argued that traditional narrative order, marked by chronology and causality, reflects the bourgeois social order and, like this ideological order, pretends that it is the only natural order that exists. Robbe-Grillet 1977, 3. For a discussion by Robbe-Grillet of the defiance of chronological time in modern film and literature, see Robbe-Grillet, “Time and Description in Fiction Today” (written 1963), in Robbe-Grillet 1965 (1963): 151-156. In 1961, he asked how, at a time when “thought was abandoning its essentialist bases …, the physical sciences were discovering the realm of the discontinuous …, and the significations of the world around us are no more than partial, provisional, even contradictory, and always contested,” art could “claim to illustrate a signification known in advance, whatever it may be?” Robbe-Grillet, “New Novel, New Man” (1961), in ibid: 140-141.

25. LeWitt even illustrated Beckett’s short play Come and Go, for Harper’s Bazaar (April 1969), creating a visual analogue to the story, which is based on permutational structures.
and literature, which deliberately reflected the purposelessness of life and art, LeWitt’s absurd systems also accentuate purposelessness and the related concept of absurdity: with his absurd systems, LeWitt wanted to create order out of chaos, but he was fully aware that the order he begot was totally absurd, and that the visual effect of that order was chaotic (Glueck 25; Norvell 118). LeWitt’s absurd systems were meant to lead to “something that’s not been done before,” helping him to prevent expression of internalized conventions (LeWitt "Interview with Cummings”), but also reflected the Beckettian insight that orders are normally useless (Wilson 6; Gieskes 169-75, 191-220). In LeWitt’s art, purposelessness can go hand in hand with serial progression.

Can nonlinearity and instantaneous observation still be considered to distinguish the static visual arts from literature and music? It seems true that music listeners, movie-goers, and readers of books cannot possibly take in an entire work at one instant as it is revealed over time, even if we admit, for instance, that a listener of polyphonous music can hear multiple voices at once or that a reader towards the end of a book can simultaneously consider events described on earlier pages of the book. In reading a text, even if that text is limited to one page, people—including those with photographic memory—are forced to ingest information sequentially: our brain is not designed to process many letters at once, and most people process only one word or phrase at a time. It might be said that in the reading process, lots of recognition tasks need to be engaged in sequentially. Still, the notion that music and literature are marked exclusively by duration might be qualified, as well as the idea that static visual artworks like paintings can be perceived all at once: what we may perceive as an instant experience is likely the end result of various separate observational activities that become collated in the brain, entering consciousness as one perception. For these reasons and others, various authors have in recent years denounced the binary thinking of the literature-painting and time-space opposition. W.J.T. Mitchell has, for instance, considered both painting and poetry as spatio-temporal constructions, criticizing the eagerness and artificiality with which people have distinguished between painting and poetry (Mitchell 151-82). Mieke Bal has also objected to such distinctions, pointing out that—as viewing takes place in time and may be seen as a narrative in and of itself, a narrative that is not subordinate to “anterior narratives” such as the iconography of elements of a work or the artist’s biography—an artwork cannot possibly be seen in one “Augenblick” (Bal 109-12, 125).

In spite of such qualifications and critiques, and regardless of whether our visual impression of an artwork that we observe at one glance is the result of an instantaneous perception or of a series of extremely short and indistinguishable imprints, it is roughly speaking possible for a viewer to get an overall apperception of a static, 2-dimensional visual artwork or a 3-dimensional artwork that offers beholders a view of all its parts. Of course we need time to examine all the individual details and nuances of a work, and the experience of the work will be different at different times, in different contexts, and from different viewpoints, but the overall structure can be observed—if not analyzed—fairly quickly.

26. The first art historian to elaborate on the parallels between LeWitt’s art and Beckett’s writings was Rosalind Krauss, who emphasized the central place of purposelessness, irrationality, nonreferentiality, and centerlessness in the work of both (Krauss 1978: 46-60).
28. Robert Morris famously argued that it was especially gestalt objects like his own minimalist works that would
Even when we are in the process of focusing on particular parts of a visual artwork, we tend to relate those fragments to the structure of the whole: when viewing an artwork, we generally first take in the whole image, as art is usually first perceived from a distance, for instance when we are approaching an artwork in a museum. Moreover, peripheral vision keeps the whole in view. Consequently, we rarely look at an element of an artwork without considering its relation to the whole. Although the lack of even implicit sequentiality to most visual artworks lends arbitrariness to the order in which we perceive its parts, we are prone to relate all parts to the whole at each instant, whether or not the arrangement of the elements to the whole is determined by a clear structure.

Modernist visual artists explored the instantaneous impression of static visual art. LeWitt’s serial artworks confirm the notion that simultaneous presentation determines the viewing experience of visual art, yet at the same time the works exploit and acknowledge the temporality of the viewing experience, at once corroborating and challenging conventions and essential features of static visual art. Through the use of a system that unfolds in time, LeWitt introduced duration into an otherwise entirely present, self-referential work of art. As such, LeWitt’s idea-based, serial works emphatically substantiate two of the artist’s Sentences on Conceptual Art: “ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art” and “successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions.” In that sense, LeWitt’s serial work could be cited as demonstrating in part Fried’s comment that art after modernism seems to be based on the illusion that the “barriers between the arts” are “crumbling,” while in reality the individual arts “have never been more explicitly concerned with conventions that constitute their respective essences” (Fried 7.2), though, again, LeWitt also defies the conventions and essences in question. LeWitt’s serial works thematize the simultaneity and duration that are always at play, in varying proportions, in all artworks. In the 1960s, an increasing number of people began to question binary oppositions, exploring the liminal spaces where seeming opposites come together, including 2-dimensionality and 3-dimensionality, the intelligible and the sensible, immediacy and delay, synchrony and diachrony, space and time. Artists increasingly acknowledged the spatio-temporal nature of visual art, producing work made to be experienced in space and time. What makes LeWitt’s artwork so interesting, strange, and timely is precisely the interplay between these forces, in addition to the violation of properties expected of and to some degree even intrinsic to the static visual arts. A viewing of a serial work of LeWitt’s oscillates between perceived chaos (a function of simultaneous viewing) and awareness of systematicity (a function of durational viewing). It is especially the intersection of instantaneity and the directional narrativity borrowed from music and literature that is responsible for the powerful tension in his early work between simple, serial structure and perceptual complexity.

be perceived differently in different places and at different moments (Morris, parts 1 & 2), yet this same statement can be applied to at least some degree to all works of art. Morris’s phenomenological analysis of sculpture was inspired by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Lee has pointed out that all phenomenological experiences of art are of necessity temporal (Lee 2004: 44).


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