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Signature Model
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“He himself, when he speaks, does he not hear himself? Is he not the first one to receive, in the echo of his own voice under his skull, the trace of another voice that dispatched itself from inside his own, from further away, from further ahead?”

»Jean Luc Nancy, *Within My Breast*
Alas, Two Souls

Thinking aloud is a dangerous occupation. This is largely because to think aloud is to construct an argument for the first time, live in the company of others. To argue in this way is perilous, as every decision made has in part been determined by the one that precedes it, and similarly affects those decisions that proceed from it. Any opportunity to reconsider a direction taken is severely limited by a need for continuity that preserves the intelligibility of the argument. Likewise, any point left unqualified, or worse yet subsequently countered, risks the persuasiveness of the message intended. In this situation complexity must ultimately serve the singularity required to communicate effectively.

Thinking aloud is also an accurate analogy to describe the open-ended and meandering statement of intent that an artistic practice entails, because this too is largely constructed work by work, presentation by presentation. Taking this position, as I choose to, that an artwork performs as a physically manifested model of a thought, a relatively simplistic, rhetorical unit; the notion of a practice must then constitute a larger collection of thoughts that go towards the construction of an argument. The manner by which one can proceed going from work to work while continuing to faithfully represent the overarching concerns represented by a practice has to be subject to a constant process of reappraisal. This is because while individual works have a formal or temporal relationship to other individual works, they also refer with increasing complexity to the gathering numbers that have gone before them.

One way to describe the larger, more indistinct image of a practice is by pointing to the conception almost all artistic producers subscribe to being as externally identified as a sum of their products. The idea of an identifiable, signature style is the principle method by which we reconcile ourselves to our products and the fixity of identity

they represent. This is anything but a static, objective relationship, but rather one whose present is constantly updated and whose past is subject to a continuous process of editing. More recently an increased fluency with the documentation of artwork has allowed an even greater control over how we construct this narrative account of artistic practice. Some elements currently deemed significant are stressed, while others seen as being less so are allowed to fade into the background.

Despite this increased control, under the surface of a holistic image of artistic identity, a break is being made every time a work is completed only to be replaced by the next. Simply by relinquishing an object to it’s completion (or at least it’s presentation) it becomes an autonomous entity attached by name yet separate to its producer. This break could further be defined as a traumatic one as it indicates a shift between two forms of identification: firstly with an individual work individually and secondly with it’s role as a component within the larger framework of a practice. Crucially, this takes place on a more fundamental level than any retrospective editing can mediate, as the very functioning of an artistic practice requires a repeated shift back and forth from one form of identification to the other. To balance the seditious potential these past works present to a holistic conception of identity, a certain degree of consistency must be introduced to the creation and presentation of work.

With this in consideration it then becomes necessary to discuss the role seriality plays in relation to a working conception of a practice. Series itself is a vague term that can be interpreted as representing either an open or closed position. It is a commonly used for compartmentalising aspects of artistic production, isolating certain concerns from other threads of production. Works with dramatically different formal characteristics can operate

side by side in this way, managed as discrete and unrelated methods of investigation. Alternatively, series can be perceived to exist at the very core of artistic production if it is regarded in a more open manner as a number of formal or conceptual predicates carried from one work to the next. Whether attributed to a series or not, a work can be said to have serial tendencies if it can be identified as having a strong resemblance to those works that preceded it.¹ The sense that some aspects of a work are inherited from the ones that preceded them is fundamental to a stable conception of artistic identity, and this stability could in turn be said to have a strong relationship to the serial. In negotiating between the dual identification of work and practice, seriality alleviates the trauma felt during this shift.

When seriality was first introduced as a topic of discussion with regards to the dominant tendency of minimalist artworks in the 1960’s, it was presented as a means of downplaying the authority of a single artwork in favour of a more objective treatment of artistic practice.² The taxonomic impulse within this work was in turn replicated by a conception of artistic production in which individual works functioned like mathematical integers in a larger system. Series acted to amplify the singularity of a message by presenting it through a number of formal permutations. In this way seriality was closely related to a contemporaneous notion of the “systemic” whereby an artwork’s “end-state” is “known prior to completion.”³ With subjectivity downplayed and a large number of formal parameters established before a work is made, the problem inevitably arises of how a producer can continue to identify with the product while maintaining this systematic method of enquiry. The stress formed from having to identify with an increasingly pre-determined system of production frequently became too much for these producers as the years went by. Historically in the case of minimalism when these

reductive predicates were broken from, a dramatic reintroduction of subjectivity was usually what rushed in to replace them.⁴

This is not to suggest that this is a problem specific to reductive abstraction. Rather it becomes all the more apparent here at this point where the relationship between a de-subjectivised materiality and a privileged authorial position is at it’s most strained. This is the cusp of what many art historians have defined as the dialectic of artistic degree zero established in the last century, with the vacant gesture on one hand, and the metaphysical void on the other.⁵ It has been further noted elsewhere though, that even the most radically reduced means of artistic production have been unable to embody the de-privileging of authorship that either reading appears to point towards.⁶ To disappear from the work altogether, would require a dramatic (and probably impossible) re-imagining of the means by which we assess and interact with visual art. Artists remain indexed to their artworks and by extension to the formal means that determine their presentation.

It is a healthy distrust of the inevitability of this situation that drives individuals to adopt strategies to downplay or defer authorial control over the work they make. Methods such as appropriation, the employment of pseudonyms and collaborative practices jeopardise the privileged, univocal position of the author by partially concealing it from sight. Ultimately though, no amount of deferral will prevent us from being drawn back to the situation where production is indexed to an authored position. Such strategies cannot be said to break free of this confinement but instead can only progressively essay its inescapability. Additionally, just as artists themselves construct holistic images of their practices, another type of holism is conferred on practices through the channels that work is presented and mediated. In literature, the monographic treatment of an

artist’s work serves to present an author as opposed to a disparate arrangement of objects. The native intelligibility of written language, it’s narrative sense, operates to brand the producer indelibly with the message their products carry, not vice versa.

If we were to return to reductive abstraction to try to argue a case for its sustained renewability, it would have to be on the basis of a reflexive relationship between each work’s inherited predicates and the continuing ability of the artist to challenge and invent within these boundaries. This also returns us to another wider discussion of the dualism represented by a practice- as a manifestation of an identifiable, signature style- and the role the individual work plays in relation to it. In this particular case it is further problematised by the reduced formal means to which this signature style is indexed, a systematisation of production that only accommodates a limited number of progressive movements.

Accounts of the self-reflexive impulse in contemporary painting- the pursuit of a pictorial vocabulary that can adequately critique it’s own codes, it’s limitations and possibilities- are still typically presented as a pre-occupation with materials, the stuff of paint. Should however, a truly reflexive approach to painting not also account for the degree to which a producer perceives the production of a work as one in a long chain of authoritative acts? By recognising that every new work must to some degree conform to or actively break with it’s predecessors we can begin to picture a model of production as one which is under continual re-assembly, whose operation generates completed objects as a waste process as opposed to an end in itself. The serial plays a decisive role in redeeming these discarded objects, and developing an understanding how they are collectively emblematic of the aims of their producer. It is this same heraldic interpretation that once led a critic to re-imagine an

exhibition of abstract paintings as a presentation of row upon row of “battle flags.”⁷

In a series of paintings I have been making since 2006, a relatively uncomplicated model of production: the practice of marketing a customised, shaped guitar by use of a musician’s endorsement, is employed as a means of accounting for this alternative, heraldic interpretation. Images, usually lifted from the internet, are drawn around, emptied out, scaled up and painted on. By doing so Ellsworth Kelly’s optimistic observation of 1969 “everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something which had to be made, and it had to be exactly as it was, with nothing added”⁸, is taken and nihilistically pointed towards another mode of solipsistic, typically male performance. The guitar as signature model occupies an ambivalent role in relation to a musician’s primary output (it’s eccentric shape contributing nothing to the acoustics of the instrument) and functions more as a prop for a staged persona. Music is at best a distorted mirror through which to view artistic production, with the very process its translation into painting working to neuter all subversion the original reference might have held, but this staged identity provides a neat analogy with which to articulate the compromise reached between reductive abstraction and a privileged authorial position. Far from presenting themselves as an escape from the constraints of authorship, these paintings instead tacitly acknowledge the theatrical self-identification that their reduced forms thinly conceal.

1. This inherent seriality is perhaps best framed by this Frank Stella defence of his own, deliberate use of series and repetition: “The change in any given picture isn’t that great. Take a Pollock show. You may have a span of ten years, but you could break it down to three or four things he’s done. In any given period of an artist when he’s working on a particular interest or problem, the paintings tend to be a lot alike. It’s hard to find anyone who isn’t like that.” *Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella. New Nihilism or New Art?* Interview with Bruce Glaser, in Battock, Gregory (ed): *Minimal Art* University of California Press Berkeley 1968.

2. Among the many articles from this time discussing the use of series and in particular it’s relation to more traditional forms of proportional composition, see Bochner, Mel: *Series Art, Systems, Solipsism*, in Battock: *Minimal Art*, Le Witt, Sol: *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)*, in Mayer, James (ed): *Minimal Art, A critical Anthology*, Phaidon Press, London 2000.

3. Alloway, Lawrence: *Systemic Painting* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1966

4. The increasingly maximal work of Frank Stella dating from 1970 onwards is the most obvious example of this abandonment of serial reduction but also one could easily point to numerous other examples of the re-introduction of gesture and representation in the practices of figures associated with 1960’s minimalism, such as Brice Marden, Robert Morris, Peter Alexander, Larry Poons, Walter Darby Bannard, Mel Bochner, Jo Baer etc.

5. The dialectic seen as separating the developments of Malevich from those of Duchamp, were first put forward in Richard Wollheim’s genre defining essay *Minimal Art*, in Battock, Gregory (ed): *Minimal Art*. A further, more exhaustive description of this divide can be found in *The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas*. De Duve, Thierry: *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press London 1996.

6. While I do not by any means subscribe entirely to Anna Chave’s polemic on the relationship between minimalist sculpture and a patriarchal model of capitalism, her observations on the problems of exempting minimalist artists from biographical investigation are certainly worth noting. *Minimalism and Biography*, *Art Bulletin* New York March 2000.

7. Colt, Priscella: *Notes on Ad Reinhardt*, *Art International no. 8*, New York Oct 1964.

8. Rose, Barbara: *Ellsworth Kelly*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1980.