

HOW TO FRAME SERIAL ART¹

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Most artworks—or at least most among those standardly subject to philosophical scrutiny—appear to be singular, stand-alone works. However, some artworks (indeed, perhaps a good many) are by contrast best viewed in terms of some larger grouping or ordering of artworks, specifically as either the parts or the sums thereof. In what follows, I target works of this kind, which I call *serial artworks*. Understood in this broad sense, serial artworks can be found quite commonly throughout the artworld (both high and low) and in a variety of media across not just the Narrative Arts but also the traditionally non-narrative Visual & Plastic Arts as well. To help illustrate this, consider the following examples of ostensibly serial artworks and the varied media in which they appear:

NOVEL: John Updike's *Rabbit* series

POEM: George Oppen's *Discrete Series*

COMIC: Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*

FILM: Universal Pictures' *Flash Gordon*

TELEVISION: Tony Warren's *Coronation Street*

PAINTING: Sean Scully's *Catherine* series

SCULPTURE: Walter de Maria's *Channel Series*

DRAWING: Sol Lewitt's *Drawing Series A+B*

PRINTMAKING: *The Small Landscapes* published by Hieronymous Cock

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Lyon's *The Bikeriders*

PERFORMANCE ART: Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*

CONCEPTUAL ART: George Brecht's *Water Yam*.

Despite the artworld prevalence of serial works, there has been little to no serious philosophical enquiry into the nature of serial art itself. What makes this absence all the more troubling is the fact that artworks being of the serial sort looks to be an art-relevant feature and as such *prima facie* ought to figure (if not crucially so) for the philosophical and critical enquiry into such artworks (i.e., description, classification,

¹ I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Roy. T. Cook, with whom I collaborated on earlier versions of this paper (as well as the symposium project itself) as well as to Henry Pratt for his helpful comments and suggestions. That said, any mistakes herein surely must be mine and mine alone.

ontology, interpretation, appreciation, and evaluation). However, one cannot simply defer to art practice to settle such issues as the standard sense of “series” in use within the artworld looks far too broad and imprecise to be commensurate with the work minimally required of it. At the very least, an account of serial art must provide the means by which to make a principled distinction between *series* as:

- I. An art-historically informative or art critically productive thematically, stylistically, or formally unified ordering or grouping of individual and distinct artworks within an artist’s larger body of work (e.g., Kiki Smith’s *Blue Print* series, Dan Flavin’s *Monuments to V. Tatlin* series, Jeff Koons’ *Made in Heaven* series, Robert Rauschenberg’s *Tribute 21* series)
- II. An individual and distinct artwork that is itself so composed (e.g., Walter de Maria’s *Statement Series*, Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Three Colors*).

To be sure, enquiry into (I) no doubt seems a philosophically substantive enterprise worth undertaking and perhaps may even be crucial to any full understanding of (II). However, for my purposes here, I take the principal (art-theoretic) notion of *series* operative for *serial art* to be that in (II).

Before I proceed any further, note that nothing in what follows requires understanding the terms ‘series’ or ‘sequence’ (along with their relevant cognate forms) in their precise, mathematical senses (i.e., *sequence* as a linearly ordered collection of elements, *series* as the sum of the elements of a sequence). Moreover, I take their being so understood to be wholly inadequate to the task at hand in that not only are the ordering relations on standard examples of so-called serial works of art structurally more varied than this would allow but also in many cases there are multiple distinct ordering relations—not all of which are linear—on the components that are relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the works in question. That said, I think it nonetheless instructive to regard issues surrounding *series* in the art-theoretic sense to roughly mirror those similar surrounding issues for *series* in its more precise mathematical sense, especially with respect to issues of ordering (e.g., trivial vs. non-trivial, partial vs. complete, linear vs. non-linear, intentional vs. non-intentional, incidental vs. constitutive, compositional vs. non-compositional).

Finally, nothing in what follows should be taken to entail, suggest, or invite commitment to anything particularly controversial, whether philosophically, art-historically, or art-critically so. My aim in the brief space that follows is simply to sketch a minimal descriptive and classificatory framework for serial art within which informative distinctions may be made and further philosophical enquiry may productively take place.

SERIAL ARTWORKS

Presumably, what it is for an artwork to be a *serial artwork* is for an artwork to be composed of a sequence of things (objects, events, items, works). There is, of course, a trivial sense in which an artwork might be considered a serial artwork. For example, I suppose one could coherently consider *The Count of Monte Cristo* to be composed of the chronologically ordered sequence of the eighteen parts in which it was originally published (or alternatively the numerically ascending sequence of its later numbered chapters). Of course, doing so fails to add anything of substance to the analysis of *The Count of Monte Cristo* as its being so composed would fail to be constitutive of the work *qua* art (if not also *qua* novel).

Likewise, one can coherently take the film *Fitzcarraldo* and the poem “The Lover’s Complaint” to be composed of the narratively ordered sequence of scenes and stanzas respectively (even taking those to be respectively composed of sequences of photographs and sentences). However, that fact alone licenses nothing of philosophical, aesthetic, or artistic import about either artwork in that from the fact that either can be trivially so composed, it does not thereby follow that either must be so composed, i.e., that their being so composed must be constitutive of the way in which they are artworks (if not also the way in which they are films and poems respectively).

Any minimally adequate notion of serial art must distinguish between the above trivial ways in which artworks might be composed as such and the philosophically substantive sense relevant for artwork analysis. To do this, I define *Serial Art* as follows:

W is a *serial artwork* iff:

- *W* is itself an artwork.
- *W* is wholly (non-trivially) composed of some (non-trivial) sequence $\{w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n\}$.
- Properly attending to (engaging with) *W qua* artwork—i.e., access to any and all of the constitutive art-relevant features for that *W*—requires properly attending to each element in that sequence (in the order/arrangement prescribed by that *W*).²

An immediate advantage of the above account is that it provides us with a principled way to distinguish between those artworks to which some series or sequence is at best only trivially or incidentally related and those artworks with constitutive (non-trivial) serial compositions. Serial artworks prescribe reception of, attention to, or engagement with elements in sequence precisely because their being wholly and non-trivially composed of such sequences is itself constitutive of the way in which they are artworks. As such, even though some artworks may no doubt support or even prescribe some sort of “serialized” reception, attention, or engagement, unless their doing so follows from their non-trivial serial composition, they cannot be serial artworks.

For example, consider Dickens’ *Bleak House* and its initial publication format of twenty monthly “shilling installments.” Determining whether or not *Bleak House* constitutes a serial artwork presumably involves something more than merely pointing to its initial serialized publication format; more precisely, it requires certain further and far more substantive determinations be made such as i) to what extent, if any, serialization figures in the artwork’s production or prescription of its reception conditions, ii) how, if at all, serialization connects to the artwork’s narrative structure or audience appreciation thereof, and iii) whether each element within that series is itself an individual and distinct work (art or otherwise).³ So, although *Bleak House* being initially published in serial form may itself warrant making further determinations of the aforementioned sort, absent such further determinations, its initial serialized publication format should itself no more be counted as constitutive of *Bleak House* either *qua* artwork or

² Note that this is consistent with such prescriptions being made either explicitly so by artist declaration or implicitly/tacitly so by artworld convention.

³ Such issues are explored within the two other symposium contributions in this volume: Roy T. Cook’s “Canonicity & Normativity in Massively Serial Narratives” and Henry Pratt’s “Why Serial Narratives are Killer.” Given that both principally if not exclusively focus on serial *narratives*, I’ve made a point to have the examples of serial artworks employed throughout my work here to be in the main *non-narrative* works in the Visual/Plastic Arts.

qua novel than Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) initially being screened with an intermission should itself be counted as constitutive of *Gandhi* either *qua* artwork or *qua* film. Furthermore, even supposing such further determinations to show *Bleak House* to constitute a (genuine and non-trivial) *serial artwork*, it nevertheless does not follow *merely* from the fact of its initial serialized publication format that *Bleak House* (either *qua* artwork or *qua* novel) must be properly understood, engaged with, or attended to as such—no more than *merely* from fact that its initial screenings featured intermissions does it likewise follow that properly understanding, engaging with, or attending to *Gandhi* (either *qua* artwork or *qua* film) requires even knowing as much (let alone having to pause midway through the screening to use the restroom and purchase concessions).

HOMOGENOUSLY SERIAL ARTWORKS

Another informative distinction to be had I take to concern the relation not so much between serial artworks and those elements in the sequence composing them but rather the sorts of things they are, specifically the forms or media in which they appear. That is, the kind of serial artwork of interest here is a series of works of some such form or works in some such medium that is itself a work of that very form or in that very medium (e.g., a series of comics, novels, poems, films, or sculptures that is itself a comic, novel, poem, film, or sculpture). Call this *Homogenously Serial Art*.

W is a *homogenously serial artwork* iff *W* is a *serial artwork* composed of $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ and there is some artform/medium *F* such that:

- *W* is itself a work of/in that *F*
- For each $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$, p_m is also a work of/in that *F*.⁴

This obviously captures distinctions between serial artworks that are and serial artworks that are not works of the same form or within the same medium as the elements in the sequences composing them. Of course, this by no means exhausts the category of serial art. In fact, those thinking otherwise would quickly find themselves incapable of making crucial art-relevant distinctions between those artworks (non-trivially) composed of some (non-trivial) sequence of things (objects, events, items, etc.) and those (non-trivially) composed of some sequence of *artworks*. I call serial art of this latter sort *Strictly Serial Art*.

STRICTLY SERIAL ARTWORKS

Consider the literary debate as to whether we ought construe T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a collection of five poems or as a single poem in five sections. This is not just a debate about *The Waste Land*'s fundamental (and so non-trivial) composition *qua* poem (and thereby *qua* artwork) but also about the status of its parts also *qua* poem and thereby *qua* artwork. That is, should we determine *The Waste Land* to be a sequential (poem) artwork, we must also determine the nature of the elements in the sequence composing it, both *qua* poem and *qua* artwork, e.g., the dependence relation, if any, to which they might stand to the sequential artwork that is *The Waste Land* and the extent to which, if any, each may constitute an individual and distinct (poem) artwork. To this end, I propose the following:

⁴ This may be more strongly stated as: *W* being a work of that *F* entails that for any $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$, p_m must also be a work of *F*.

W is a *strictly serial artwork* iff *W* is a *serial artwork* composed of non-trivial sequence $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ and:

- For each $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$, p_m is an artwork.
- There is some art-relevant feature Φ (e.g., some intentional relation, aesthetic property, artworld function, semantic content, narrative uptake, etc.) such that *W* has Φ but no $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ has that Φ (e.g., stands in that particular intentional relation, instances that particular aesthetic property, serves that particular artworld function, conveys that particular semantic content, facilitates that particular narrative uptake, ...in that particular way).⁵

Of course, I assume here not just that any member of that series may itself have some other art-relevant feature(s) which may or may not be also had by *W* but also that the art-relevant properties of *W* depend on $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ but not *vice versa* (in the case when individual p_m are artworks).

Consider Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*: a sequence of performances in which over seven consecutive nights, Abramovic recreated performance works of five other artists—Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane's *The Conditioning*, Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Picture to a Dead Hare* (1965)—as well as two of her own works—*Lips of Thomas* (1975), *Entering the Other Side* (2005). Presumably, each of Abramovic's performance re-creations was an individual and distinct artwork. So too presumably for *Seven Easy Pieces* itself. That is, one might plausibly take *Seven Easy Pieces* to name an individual and distinct *serial artwork* wholly composed of the non-trivially ordered sequence of those Abramovic-recreated (R_A) performances: $\{R_A\text{-Body Pressure}, R_A\text{-Seedbed}, R_A\text{-Action Pants}, R_A\text{-The Conditioning}, R_A\text{-How to Explain...}, R_A\text{-Lips of Thomas}, R_A\text{-Entering the Other Side}\}$. From this then it presumably follows that the particular way in which *Seven Easy Pieces* is an artwork is distinct from that which makes any of the elements in its sequence artworks. Moreover, it follows then that at least when construed as a work of performance art, *Seven Easy Pieces* is both *strictly serial* and *homogenously serial*.⁶

LOOSELY SERIAL ARTWORKS

So far I've more or less assumed there to be non-trivial issues of ordering that are aesthetically or artistically relevant for works of serial art broadly construed. However, I think there is an informal and perhaps artworld-entrenched usage of "serial art" that picks out artworks for which there is no non-trivial ordering of elements in the sequence composing them. For example, consider Walter de Maria's *Statement Series* (2011) as a strictly serial artwork composed of three paintings (which are also themselves artworks): *Yes. PEACE. Yes* (2011), *No. WAR. No.* (2011), and *The Color Men Choose When They Attack The Earth* (1968). Presumably, properly attending to De Maria's *Statement Series* requires properly attending to each of the paintings within the series but presumably does not prescribe attending to any particular ordering of the paintings therein. That is, although proper reception of *Statement Series* looks to require

⁵ Or alternatively that no $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ has that Φ in the manner had by that *W*. For more on the role of manner in art, see Mag Uidhir, "Failed-Art & Failed Art-Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88:3 2010 (381-400) and Mag Uidhir, "Why Pornography Can't be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 33:1 2009 (193-203).

⁶ Another example of an artwork both *strictly* and *homogenously* serial would be Krzysztof Kieslowski's film *The Decalogue* (1989), which I take to be a case of a non-trivially ordered sequence of ten one-hour films—that are themselves artworks—composing a strictly serial artwork that is itself also a film.

the constitutive works within the series be displayed in some close lateral proximity to one another, it appears as if the order in which those works are so displayed is not itself constitutive of *Statement Series qua artwork*. As such, *Statement Series* frustratingly seems to be a strictly serial artwork composed of a sequence of individual and distinct paintings that nevertheless fails to identify one particular painting as first, last, or otherwise order-theoretically distinguished. That is, limited to the framework established thus far, *Statement Series* looks to be a strictly serial artwork for which there is no ordering other than the trivial symmetric relation of co-exhibition. To rectify this, I propose the following:

W is a *loosely serial artwork* iff:

- *W* is an artwork
- *W* is composed (in a non-trivial way) of (trivial) sequence or (non-trivial yet non-ordered) set $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$.
- There is some art-relevant feature Φ such that *W* has Φ but no $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ has that Φ .
- Properly attending to (engaging with) *W qua artwork* requires properly attending to each element in that sequence or member of that set (in the *non-ordered* manner prescribed by *W*).

Notice that the above allows for there to be artworks that are both *loosely serial* as well as *homogenously serial*. For instance, one might plausibly construe de Maria's *Channel Series: Circle, Square, Triangle* (1972) as an individual and distinct sculpture composed of a set (or otherwise trivial sequence) of three sculptures—*Channel Series: Square* (1972), *Channel Series: Circle* (1972), *Channel Series: Triangle* (1972)—that are also themselves individual and distinct artworks.

The sculpture [*Channel Series: Circle, Square, Triangle*] is exactly what it says it is: a series of three brushed stainless steel geometric shapes, each with a channel in which a silver ball sits...⁷

So construed, *Channel Series* would thereby constitute an artwork not just *loosely serial* but *homogenously so*.

CONCLUSION

There are no doubt several pressing issues that not only haven't I the space to address but are ultimately well beyond the purview of my project, the aim of which has been to provide the minimal framework for further philosophical enquiry into the nature of serial art. That said, I'll conclude by employing this framework to ask a few of the questions further enquiry into serial art should strive to answer.

- Assuming there is such a thing as a *strictly serial* artwork over and above the individual and distinct artworks comprising it, what (ontic) kind of thing must it be? A standard set-theoretic object? A non-standard sort of (impure) abstracta? A spatially dislocated concretum composed of all and only those individual and distinct artworks that stand in certain relevant intentional, behavioral, epistemic, attitudinal, conventional, relations to that artwork, its artist, or the

⁷ Joseph Campana, "Perfect Decay" *Culture Map*, <http://houston.culturemap.com/newsdetail/10-09-11-15-22-walter-de-maria/>

surrounding artworld institutions, conventions, and practices? Perhaps the mereological sum thereof?

- Which, if any, of the art forms or art media might be more conducive to admitting *homogenously serial* artworks? Which, if any, might frustrate or altogether preclude such admissions? How might homogenously serial art fare within the Literary/Narrative Arts as compared to the Visual/Plastic Arts? Could a *strictly serial* artwork—*homogenously* so or otherwise—be such that *being in that series* entails being an artwork of a certain form or medium—i.e., being an element in the sequence composing that strictly serial artwork is *ipso facto* to satisfy the conditions for being an artwork of that form?
- Can there in fact be an artwork that is both *strictly* and *homogenously* serial? Note that this question isn't trivial. If W and any $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ are works of the same artform, then to what extent, if any, might this suggest that any art-relevant feature of W must also be an art-relevant feature of some particular $p_m \in \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$?