

Rethinking Seriality in Minimalist Art Practices

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Abstract

Seriality is one of the characteristics of Minimalist works. It shows a visual order of “one thing after another”. However, we never think about issues related to Minimalist seriality, such as the difference between modernism and Minimalism when thinking in series, the theoretical logic behind it, whether seriality is equal to repetition, and its aesthetic and social meanings. This essay rethinks the meaning of seriality in Minimalist art practices. It aims to reexamine the term “seriality” in both modernist and Minimalist practices, distinguish it from repetition and sameness and explore the reason for Minimalist artists thinking in series from both socio-political and aesthetic epistemological perspectives.

Key words: Seriality; Minimalism; Objecthood; Repetition

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INTRODUCTION

Seriality as an artistic strategy is frequently used in Western art works. As Michael Fried explains, the concept of seriality came into prominence in the Impressionist school with the exploration of a single motif through out a number of pictures, but which has come increasingly to have the function of providing a context of mutual elucidation for the individual paintings comprising a given series (Colpitt, 1993). For example, Monet's Haystacks

and Rouen Cathedral paintings, which are often cited as modernist prototypes, are painted in series. In fact, artists paint in series, because this approach serves to clarify the individual works of art. In modernist paintings, seriality is also an artistic strategy and is popular among a great number of abstract painters, such as Mark Rothko, Kenneth Noland and Barnett Newman. They paint in hierarchic series in order to clarify the meanings of these paintings and encourage the viewers to contemplate their meanings. Working in a hierarchic and compositional serial mode was not reversed until the mid-1960s, when Minimalist artists produced works in non-hierarchic and non-compositional series. Minimalist artists emphasize working in a non-hierarchic mode to dismantle the individuality of each element in a series and structure various repetitive forms. These non-hierarchic serial modes can be easily seen in Minimalist works, such as the stripe paintings by Frank Stella, the repetitive boxes by Donald Judd, the wooden blocks by Carl Andre, the fluorescent lights by Dan Flavin, and the cubes by Sol LeWitt.

A number of terms can be used to describe the characteristics of the seriality in Minimalist practices, including literal, non-hierarchic, formal reductive, “objecthood”¹ and repetitive. It is evident that Minimalist artists adopt the same strategy as modernist painters when thinking in series. But, what is the difference between modernism and Minimalism when thinking in series? What is the theoretical logic behind it? Is seriality equal to repetition? How did this difference relate to the American social context in the postwar period including

¹ Objecthood is defined by American art critic, Michael Fried in his essay “Art and Objecthood” published in 1967. Fried argues that Minimalism's focus on the viewer's experience, rather than the relational properties of the work of art exemplified by modernism, made the work of art indistinguishable from one's general experience of the world. See Fried, M. (1998). *Art and objecthood: Essays and reviews*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

economic recovery, urbanization, industrial production and the development of the mass media? Can this social context completely explain the serial modes in Minimalist practices in the 1960s?

The purpose of this essay is to reexamine the term “seriality” in both modernist and Minimalist practices, distinguish it from repetition and sameness and explore the reason for Minimalist artists thinking in series from both socio-political and aesthetic epistemological perspectives. In order to address these issues, the essay is divided into four sections. In the first section, I will discuss how modernist paintings are created by their arrangement in series. I will define the characteristics of modernist seriality by focusing on Barnett Newman and his painting the *Station of the Cross*. In the second section, I will discuss how Minimalist artists deal with seriality in their art creations. I will compare and contrast the works of Newman with Minimalist artists, such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, to point out the differences by analyzing how Minimalist artists explore the significance of seriality in their works. In the third section, I will rethink the issue of whether seriality is equal to repetition or sameness through analyzing several works of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. In the last section, from both sociopolitical and aesthetic epistemological perspectives, I will discuss why Minimalist artists pursued seriality in the 1960s.

1. BARNETT NEWMAN: COMPOSITIONAL AND HIERARCHIC SERIALITY

In 1966 Barnett Newman displayed his first American Museum show *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* in the Guggenheim Museum. In this exhibition, Newman showed his series of fourteen paintings titled *the Stations of the Cross*, which were painted with vertical stripes from the top edge to the bottom edge in different places on each canvas. These paintings were individually titled “First Station”, “Second Station” and “Third Station” until the fourteenth to suggest a serial mode which could structure viewers’ understanding of Jesus and the end of his life on the Cross. Newman invited viewers to view these works along the continually spiraling walls of the Guggenheim, because it architecturally structured a sense of hierarchy which could lead the viewers to view works step by step and contemplate the subject in order to experience the last hours of Jesus on the Cross (Figure 1).

This empathic iconography of the *Station of the Cross* is not only for the viewers but also for the artist’s experience when painting this series. Newman explained in his interview in “Newsweek” after the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum:

I tried to make the title a metaphor that describes my feeling when I did the paintings. It’s not literal, but a cue. In my work,

each station was a meaningful stage in my own – the artist’s – life. It is an experience of how I worked. I was a pilgrim. (O’Neill, 1990) In other words, as a “pilgrim”, Newman composes signs with the stripes on canvases and invites the viewers to decode these signs in order to derive spiritual experiences. As Harold Rosenberg suggests, Newman’s painting is a way of practicing the sublime (Rosenberg, 1978, p.83). In this sense, like all modernist painters, Newman’s works emphasize the aesthetic composition rather than literal objecthood. Besides, each painting in this series is shown individually as well as hierarchically, because none of the paintings in the series can explain the whole story of Jesus. That means if we miss one in this series, the story will be out of order. Therefore, the significance of a series derives from a hierarchic system (Alloway, 1995). In this sense, Newman composes each element on his canvases in series in order to create a sense of hierarchy, and this hierarchy encourages viewers to contemplate the meanings behind the forms.



Figure 1
Barnett Newmann, *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, Guggenheim Museum, 1966

2. MINIMALIST ANTI-COMPOSITIONAL AND NON-HIERARCHIC SERIALITY

However, this hierarchic mode is reversed by Minimalist artists, such as Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. In 1959, Stella showed his *Black Paintings* in the exhibition “16 Americans” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. James Meyer characterizes this exhibition as “the beginning of Minimalism” (James, 2000) He claims that Stella’s works announce a turning away from the painting of the previous generation (Ibid.). Following the legacy of Newman’s work, Stella produced black stripes in the series which were regularly separated by very thin pinstripes of unpainted canvas. According to Meyer, the *Black Paintings* showed the symmetrical format of Newman’s works (Ibid., p.21). But these stripes were different from Newman’s because he rejected Newman’s “grand allusion” (Ibid.). Thus, Meyer points out that the Newman seeks to produce an art that transcends its objecthood and points to religious and mythical themes. Instead, Stella makes the experience of materiality – “the paint as paint, the canvas as canvas” (Ibid.). In fact, Stella’s artistic view is embodied

in the phrase he coined, “what you see is what you see”.²

In 1964, the Minimalist credo, “What you see is what you see”, praised the artist’s reduction of painting to its essential formal components. Indeed, as a minimalist, Stella emphasizes the literal rather than the representative meanings of painting. He treats paintings as objects and explores how to use a literalist view to minimize the significance of painting as well as the artist’s subjectivity. Therefore, repetitive stripes in Stella’s painting do not signify any meanings, but are merely literal stripes. In contrast to the hierarchic serial mode of Newman’s paintings, Stella’s stripes structure a non-hierarchic serial mode. In other words, Newman sought to create empathy between the viewers and paintings to represent the spiritual meanings of paintings through emphasizing hierarchic and aesthetic composition in his work. By contrast, Stella focuses on the non-hierarchic serial mode and unifies each element in this serial in order to make viewers to pay attention to the objecthood of his paintings (Figure 2).

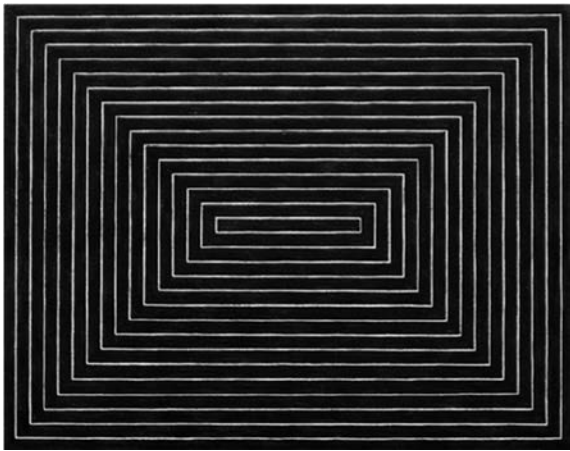


Figure 2
Frank Stella, a Sample of Stella’s Stripe Paintings, 1950s-1960s

Stella’s stripe painting influenced a group of Minimalist artists in the 1960s. One of them was Donald Judd. In 1965, Judd published his influential essay “Specific Object”. In this essay, Judd points out several important three dimensional characteristics of Stella’s painting (Judd, 2002). He writes, “In Stella’s shaped paintings, the periphery and lines are correspond with each other; the stripes are nowhere near being discrete parts; and the surface is father from the wall than usual.” Thus, he indicates: “Since the surface is exceptionally unified and involves little or no space, the parallel plane is unusually distinct. The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.” (Ibid.). Judd’s observation suggests

² In 1964 Frank Stella said of his paintings, “What you see is what you see,” coining a phrase that exemplified the minimalist movement. See Doss, E. (2002). *Twenty-century American art* (p.164). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

that Stella’s painting establishes a literalist point of view because he provides a simple and non-hierarchic order of different stripes on canvas without any composition. These stripes successfully represent modernist “form reduction” which is proposed by Clement Greenberg; meanwhile, they effectively deal with a contradiction of Greenbergian form reduction. The contradiction lies in the fact that, on the one hand, Greenberg believes that in modernist painting artists should pursue the flatness and purity of medium though “form reduction”.³ On the other hand, when a painting is in the logic of form reduction, it will eventually become the medium itself. That means this painting becomes an object. But Greenberg criticizes this. In his opinion, the objecthood in paintings is a kind of kitsch art as opposed to modernist high art (Greenberg, 1965). Therefore, a contradiction lies between the purity of medium and the objecthood of medium. However, Stella’s painting bridges a gap between art and object and establishes a new format of art by using the logic of modernist form reduction.⁴ For Judd, Stella’s paintings are no longer two-dimensional works of art. Instead they establish a literalist view for the viewers to see paintings as objects in three-dimensional spaces. To this extent, are Stella’s paintings still paintings or sculptures? Thus, Judd begins his essay with the sentences: “Half or more of the best new work in the last few years had been neither painting nor sculpture. Usually it has been related, closely or distantly, to one or the other.” (Judd, 2002) In fact, the essay “Specific Object” legitimizes blurring the boundaries between painting and sculptures in the mid-1960s. As James Meyer suggests, this essay marks the term “Minimalism” away from painting in favor of the three-dimensional object (James, 2000, p.28) According to Meyer, this is because Judd aspired to produce a high formalist art though extending the large-scale and simple shapes of abstract expressionism into three dimensions (James, c2000, p.4). Thus, in the mid-1960s, Judd abandoned easel paintings, which he regarded as structured on a relational balancing of parts or a compositional hierarchy. Instead, he started to produce a series of reliefs to explore the objecthood in a three-dimensional space (Ibid., p.29).

Judd made his first “new three-dimensional work” in 1962, two years before his first solo exhibition held at the Green Gallery in New York. He built *Untitled* (DSS 29) from a red and black wooden rectangular frame that surrounds a four-foot-long black asphalt pipe, which

³ Form reduction is proposed by American critic, Clement Greenberg in his essay “Modernist Painting”. It is one of the major features in Greenbergian modernist painting. See Clement Greenberg, C. (1965). *Modernist Painting*. In his book *Art and culture: critical essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁴ This opinion can be seen in Michael Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood”, published in 1967. See Fried, M. (1998). Michael Fried, *Art and objecthood : Essays and reviews*. Chicago ; London : University of Chicago Press.

vertically bisects a canvas in light cadmium red paint, wax, and sand (Figure 3) (Raskin, c2010, p.9). This work seems to three-dimensionalize what Newman paints in the *Station of the Cross*, because both works have the same square frames and the same lines vertically connecting the top and bottom of their square canvas. Compared to Newman's painting, Judd's work not only three-dimensionalizes Newman's gesture but also pursues a symmetrical, non-hierarchic and non-compositional literal formation as what Stella did in his stripe paintings.



Figure 3
Donald Judd, *Untitled* (DSS 29), Green Gallery, New York, 1962

In 1966, Judd showed a pair of works, *Untitled* (DSS 85) and (DSS 86) in the "Primary Structure" exhibition at Jewish Museum (Figure 4). The pair of works represented his literalist view of "one thing after another". Each work has four 40X40X40 – inch galvanized iron cubes and an L-shaped cut to join the top and front surfaces. In this cut, Judd mounted a 190-inch long aluminum rectangular prism that joins the four units and the three 10-inch intervals dividing them (Ibid., p.33). Apparently, Judd tended to arrange these boxes in a serial mode by emphasizing repetitive and symmetric syntax of "one thing after another" (Figure 4).



Figure 4
Donald Judd, *Untitled* (DSS 85) and (DSS 86), "Primary Structure" Exhibition, Jewish Museum, New York, 1966

3. SERIALITY IS NOT EQUAL TO REPETITION

This repetitive syntax does not merely exist in the works of Judd. In the 1960s, artists such as Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre and Dan Flavin, produced works in three-dimensional spaces, repeating each element in their series in order to resist composition. In this situation, we may wrongly assume that seriality is equal to repetition, because each element in a series has the same appearance and aesthetic function. This opinion can easily be challenged by carefully examining Judd's horizontal progressions work for the wall, *Untitled* DSS 45 (1964) (Figure 5).

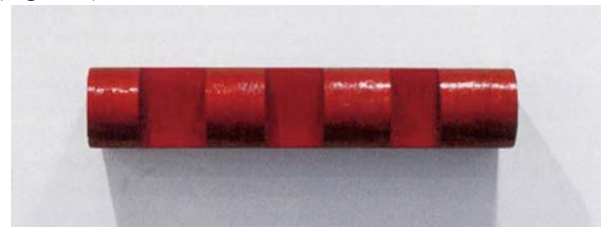


Figure 5
Donald Judd, *Untitled* DSS 45, 1964

This work has four semi-cylinders that jut forward from a wide rectangular prism. At first glance, this work is in a symmetric form and each of the semi-cylinders has similar size to its neighbors. But Judd ran the piles from end to end, letting the additive arrangement narrow the gaps, which partnered the intensified symmetry of a given form with an internal planar asymmetry (Ibid., p.20). This work suggests that the seriality in Judd's works is not merely a repetitive format. In fact, his practices from the 1970s apparently displayed asymmetric formats, and three of Judd's works, *Untitled* DSS 233 (1970), *Untitled* Bernstein 89-13 (1989) and *Untitled* DSS 224(1970), extended his artistic gesture in pursuing asymmetric and progression formats. All of them were characterized by several boxes sticking to a prism which attached to the wall. Even though they have the equal thickness, these boxes have different lengths. Additionally, the gaps between each box are also different in length.

Evidently, conceptualizing these works as series, we need to be quite sure that seriality is not equal to repetition. But what does seriality mean if it is not equal to repetition? In order to understand Judd's progression sequence, we should understand seriality as a mathematic pattern. Judd's horizontal progressions display three different metrics of shape and gap (Ibid.). One of Judd's patterns uses the Fibonacci series and has the following logic sequence: 1.2.3.4.8.13.21(*Untitled* DSS 233) (Ibid.). A second has a reversal pattern in which the shapes double in length in one direction while the gaps in between double in the opposite(*Untitled* Bernstein 89-13) (Ibid.). In the third type, the shapes and gaps work in opposite directions by using inverse natural numbers in a succession of subtractions and additions,

$1-1/2+1/3-1/4+1/5-1/6+1/7-1/8+1/9-1/10$ (*Untitled* DSS 224) (Ibid.). For Judd, mathematical progressions provided asymmetrical order without composition in the traditional and relational manner of modernist paintings. In this sense, seriality is not equal to repetition but is profoundly associated with the logic of mathematic progression.

In addition to Judd, Sol LeWitt is another typical practitioner using mathematic pattern. In 1973, he started literally to take the cubes apart by asking how many variations would be shown by systematically subtracting parts from a skeletal cube. Therefore, he worked through the artistic process and idea for months, and concluded with 122 variations of incomplete skeletal cubes. This concept was shown in his *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* in 1974 (Figure 6). It is a modular structure composed of 122 skeletal structural units, and each unit is ordered in terms of a numerical progression of the missing edges from eleven edges to three edges (Kruass, c1985 p.246). In this work, LeWitt uses a mathematic schema to calculate the possibilities of the missing edges in a skeletal cube and invited the viewers to supply the missing edges mentally and experience the tension between the literally unfinished but mentally finished cubes (Ibid.). In this sense, LeWitt pursued seriality in this works though creating a geometric emblem with cubes.

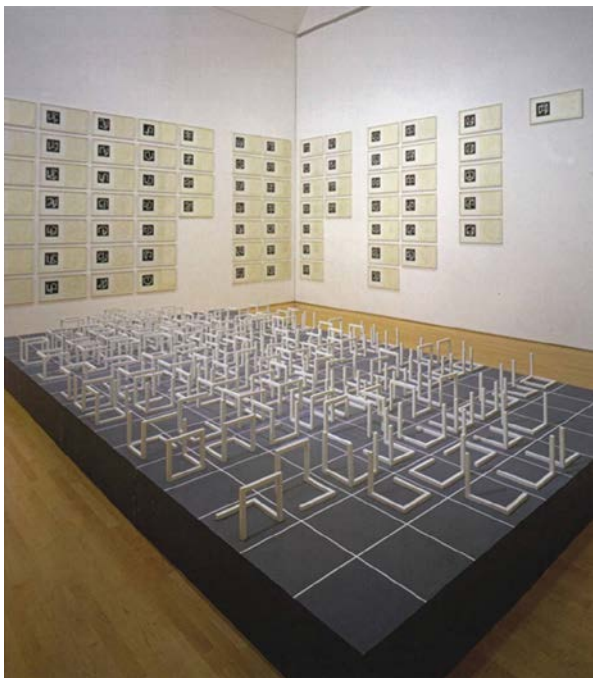


Figure 6
Sol LeWitt, *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*, 1974

4. RETHINKING SERIALITY IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

Both Judd and LeWitt designed their works in series, not in a repetitive format of “one thing after another”,

but with a pattern of mathematic progression. In fact, in the 1960s most of Minimal artists were involved with seriality and produced numerous examples, including Morris’s gray polyhedrons, Flavin’s lights, Bell’s glass boxes, McCracken’s planks and Andre’s plates. But why did most of Minimalist artists pursue seriality in the 1960s as an artistic trend and why were they so obsessive in mathematical progression patterns?

From the socio-political perspective, Minimalism is a response to the development of economy, industrial production, urbanization and mass media in the postwar period. In his essay “The Crux of Minimalism”, Hal Foster explores the relationship between seriality and industrial production in depth. Based on Peter Bugar’s theory of avant-garde, Foster considers Minimalism as a neo-avant-gardist gesture to resist both the high art of late modernism and the mass culture of advanced capitalism in the postwar period (Foster, 1996, p.30). Indeed, Minimalist industrial objects produced in serial modes profoundly relates to the industrial mass production since the 1960s. As Foster claims, minimalism pointed to an order—“to work in a series, to serial production and consumption, to the socio-economic order of one-thing-after-another.” (Ibid., p.62) Foster’s essay takes a socio-political perspective to examine the reason why Minimalist artists think in series when producing works of art.

However, there is a weakness in Foster’s argument. In my opinion, Foster oversimplifies and generalizes the reason for the Minimalist pursuit of seriality. At the end of his essay, “The Crux of Minimalism”, he indicates, “Somehow the new immanence of art with minimalism and pop is connected not only with the new immanence of critical theory (the poststructuralist shift from transcendental causes to immanent effects), but also with the new immanence of North American capital in the 1960s.” (Ibid., p.68). Here, Foster tries to avoid discussing Minimalism from a philosophical perspective. Instead, he demonstrates the main interests of his essay are how to approach Minimalism from a socio-political perspective and how to concern Minimalism with the industrial reproduction in advanced capitalist society. Therefore, he does not examine the difference between Minimalist artists working in series and simply considers that seriality is equal to repetition by emphasizing Minimalist as a pursuit of socio-economic order of one thing after another. However, since 1970, Judd had been constantly reversing this phase by his practices in series and doing a number of works focusing on its mathematic progression, as we have discussed above, instead of reproducing each unit in a series one after another. In this sense, the seriality in Judd’s serial mode does not simply represent such social spectacle in the 1960s as industrial production and mass consumption. Therefore, it is not objective to explore the Minimalist pursuit of seriality from only one socio-political perspective.

To this extent, I would suggest another reason for Minimalists using serial mode in their practices. It may relate to the transformation of aesthetic epistemology in the 1970s. At that time, a group of artists started to explore the issue of how art could be discussed in a system rather than what art could be. In this sense, neither the steel boxes by Donald Judd nor the progressive cubes by Sol LeWitt could be interpreted literally as objects, though all Minimalist artists claimed the absence of artists' subjectivity by emphasizing their literalist view. By contrast, how to organize these objects and make them negotiate with the system should be the key point under discussion. Based on the literatures of structuralism and poststructuralism, from Ferdinand Saussure to Claude Lévi-Strauss and from Roland Barthes to Jacques Derrida, Minimalist practices signaled a scientific aesthetics from linguistic data and structural system.⁵ The scientific aesthetics is the "system viewpoint", proposed by Jack Burnham, in his essay "Systemic esthetic" (Burnham, 1974). Focusing on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems, it became the theoretical prototype of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt's mathematic progression formats (Ibid.). Indeed, Burnham argues, "All living situations must be treated in the context of a system hierarchy of value in the 1970s." (Ibid.). Therefore, we need to rethink the pursuit of seriality in Minimalist practices.

Consequently, on the one hand seriality should be profoundly associated with the social reality of post-industrial society. On the other hand, we should pay attention to the transformation of aesthetic epistemology in the 1970s. After all, thinking in series cannot have always been artists' responses to endless industrial production, serial consumption and urban constructions in the postwar period, or a neo-avant-gardist gesture to resist both modernist high art and capitalist mass culture. In fact, in the 1970s, artists had to restructure both the language and epistemology of art in order to satisfy new social needs including maintaining the biological livability of the Earth, producing more accurate models of social interaction, understanding the growing symbiosis in man-machine relationship, establishing properties for the usage and conservation of natural resource, which are observed by Burnham (Ibid.). Therefore, thinking in series not only reflects social realities in postwar period from a socio-political perspective, but also responds to the issue of how to rethink about art from an aesthetic epistemological perspective. In fact, producing art in mathematic patterns and thinking in series provide artists with a

linguistic approach and establish a new way of artistic creation.

This essay has reexamined the meaning of seriality in Minimalist art practices. Though comparing and contrasting the modernist and Minimalist ways of producing artworks in series, I argued that their difference lies in the different views of treating hierarchy and composition in their works of art. For modernist painting, artists pursue seriality in a hierarchic and compositional mode. By contrast, Minimalist artists pursue seriality in a non-hierarchic and non-compositional mode. However, this serial mode caused people to wrongly equate seriality with repetition and sameness. In this situation, I analyzed Judd's works which were produced during the 1970s and argued that Judd's seriality is based on mathematic progressions rather than simply repeating objects in a series. This observation can be used to explain Sol LeWitt's practices as well. Therefore, for Minimalist artists, their pursuit of seriality is not equal to the pursuit of a repetitive objects or working manners. In this sense, seriality is not equal to repetition and sameness. In the final section of this essay, I argue that the reason for Minimalist artists' thinking in seriality lies in two perspectives. One is the socio-political perspective. As Hal Foster argues in his essay, "The Crux of Minimalism", thinking in series in the 1960s was a response to such social development as social economic, industrial production, urbanization and mass media in the postwar period. The other is the aesthetic epistemological perspective based on the development of postwar philosophy, such as structuralism, post-structuralism and system esthetics. In this sense, thinking in series in Minimalist art practices not only responses to the capitalist social order, but also provides a new linguistic mode to rethink about art, and this linguistic mode helps to establish a new aesthetic epistemology.

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⁵ Structuralism is widely used in Minimalist practices. For example, LeWitt's cubes are defined by Rosalind Krauss as following the linguistic regular. In addition to LeWitt, Krauss was profoundly influenced by structuralism and used structuralist method – the Klein Group – to analyze Minimalist works. Her structuralist research method can be seen in her essay "Sculpture in the expanded field".

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