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From Classical Compositions to Contemporary Seriality

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Classical compositions, such as those of Claude Lorrain (1600–1680), show balanced situations where the depicted objects seem to represent beauty – they appear to exist in an ideal order; they seem right, once and for all. They allow their viewers, who live in a contingent world, believe that unity and beauty are attainable. English landscape gardens in the eighteenth century offered viewers the experience of moving in real settings that seem to reproduce the canvasses of classical landscape painting. Contemporary visitors know this is an imitation; they appreciate that this is not everyday reality but a kind of realized utopia. Artworks such as the early ones by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669) and those from the nineteenth century onwards (Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet), make us understand that a final rightness is not possible; that it is only possible to try again and again to attain the real – without ever arriving at the one right solution. In their endeavour to depict reality, these artists engage in a serial elaboration of the same subjects and objects of their art. These series of nearly the same subjects invoke the impossibility of getting it right once and for all. Piet Mondrian illustrates the development from seriality, as repeated attempts to depict the same with a difference, to the practice of seriality as an experiment in symmetry and balance that both goes back to Claude Lorrain and modernizes the concept of the ideal for application to abstract art. In contemporary art after the Second World War serial structures in single artworks were common, thus superseding compositions with their discredited promise of ideality. Series occurred not only in the contemporary visual arts, but also in literature, music and in the theatre. The repetitive structures of Minimal Art offer to the beholder the possibility of experiencing 'reality' in an age of media and fakes. My example will be the repetitive structures of Christian Boltanski's oeuvre which provides an opportunity to reflect on the similarity and difference of people in contemporary democracies. My main argument is therefore that the change from composition to seriality corresponds to historical change.

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1. Compositions in Single Art Works

Today, composition appears standard and even natural, but in fact there was a clearly distinct historical period in which painting could be equated with composition. Medieval painting was not composed, it might have been formed, organized, designed, it might be beautiful, but it was not 'composed'. The convention of composition was employed only between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. As I want to illustrate, today art is no longer composed but follows other criteria.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century Leon Battista Alberti wrote on 'compositione' and 'concinnitas' (Alberti 1996, 2002, 2011; Fehrenbach 2011; on the concept of beauty and its changing meaning see Kambartel 1998). He set the standards for balanced creations, where no part can be added or removed, where the whole and its parts are bound together in a single manifestation of beauty. Such beauty appears only in art, for in nature there is always something imperfect according to these criteria. In his treatises on buildings, statues and paintings, Alberti demanded conscious compositions. They show how reality *would be* if everything were right. Leon Battista Alberti wrote on these new paintings and how they could look like corrected nature: artists were now to study nature, and to learn the skill of perspective, to show what could be seen, with the same impression on the retina that nature would make if everything were as it should be.

According to Alberti, pictures are like openings in a wall, like windows – windows onto imagined worlds. It is not possible for viewers to enter these worlds, but they have the illusion of being near these worlds – and feel as though they are near the landscapes seen through a window (Vaihinger 1935). Real windows normally show chaotic and changing pictures – the weather changes, a tree is ugly, and our contemporary windows often show what we do not want to see. In Altberti's eyes, composed paintings are more ordered than any normal view. Normally it would be impossible to see such beautiful combinations of trees, etc., and there are no Golden Sections, thirds, halves, etc., in the view. Parts do not all fit with one another or fall into place. Normally views change. (See Hubert on symmetry in this issue of *European Review*.)

Leon Battista Alberti maintained that planes should be composed, that bodies should be composed and also that figures should be composed. Whenever there is an object, others should align with it. Painters should avoid disparities (Alberti 2002, 123). Variety is appreciated, however, when it can be seen to stand in correlation to a composed whole. It was important for Alberti and his followers that *different* elements harmonize with one another.

Alberti's influence was considerable: *compositione* was taught in academies, and many treatises reflecting on different ways of composing followed.[1] While Alberti spoke about the things shown in the imagined space, later the interest of artists shifted to the composition of the picture plane. Classical landscape painting is particularly open for composition, for it invents landscapes. Other paintings – such as history paintings, portraits, genre paintings and still lives – invent their subjects,

1. Later on, Rudolf Kuhn analysed different types of compositions (Kuhn 1980, 2000; Puttfarken 2000).

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Figure 1. Claude Lorrain: Landscape with dancing figure (The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca), 1648, Palazzo Doria Pamphili, Rome. Oil on canvas, 150.5 × 198 cm.
Source: Christopher Wright (1985, 162, fig. 20).

too, but landscape painting is the least constrained type and therefore predisposed for composition.

1.1. Claude Lorrain

Good landscapes – those of Claude Lorrain are the best examples – have always been appreciated because of their seemingly casual order. It is difficult to describe and justify the sense of rightness that they evoke (Figure 1). Max Imdahl explained the composition of Claude Lorrain's 'Landscape with marriage of Isaac and Rebecca' (Rome, Palazzo Doria):

> The upper contour of the tree on the right touches on the upper edge of the painting. In the silhouette of the tree there are three leafy branches, the most extensive of which marks the Golden Section across the breadth of the picture. This is repeated through the leftmost boat on the lake. An imaginary straight line touching the upper and lower branches of the tree on the right meets the vertical halving line at the top edge of the picture; at the same time it is touched by the crown of the tree on the left, which leans towards the centre of the picture. Altogether the crown of this tree on the left shows similarities in form to the upper branch of the tree on the right, and seems to be swaying towards it. The highest point of the tree marks the three-quarters section of the picture. The almost horizontal line of the top of the tree to the left anticipates the upper edge of the picture. Finally the middle branch of the tree on the right indicates the intersection of the tower with the horizon. This tower marks out a third of the breadth of the picture and is seen together with the horizontal shore of the lake which

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> calls up the Golden Section in the height of the picture. The lower lake shore to the right of the dancer reaches up to a quarter of the height of the picture. (Imdahl 1996, 280–326, here 289; translation by Teresa Woods)[2]

This description explains and confirms the diffuse feeling of rightness the viewer of the painting experiences.

In an ideal landscape the unity of the painting binds together the single elements. Every tree is positioned in a way that makes the picture plane seem logical: the continuity of the landscape is fixed in this cut-out of the frame, which does not seem to be a cut-out because the things are mutually bound together within the frame and in relation to it in such a manner that here, on the picture plane, the unity emerges. Composed paintings like these cannot be altered. It would be impossible to cut the picture slightly. And every dislocation of an element in the imagined space would have consequences for its appearance on the plane of the picture: thirds would not work anymore, Golden Sections would be destroyed and so on. The paintings are not mirror-imaged, they do not have two matching halves, but there is a balance between left and right, which is more precious because it binds together *different* elements.

Classical landscape paintings give their viewers an ordered, 'ideal' sight. Claude Lorrain, for example, presents landscapes in which not a twig is random. Not a single element in the painting could be moved or removed without destroying the whole. When things are bound together and linked like this, contingencies seem to be overcome. For someone who normally moves in unordered, chaotic circumstances – and that is everyone – it may appear as pure beauty, it may be experienced as release.

The ideal seen is not real, but it appears possible in painting. There is the hope that utopia, that equilibrium, unity and beauty are possible. In a real landscape there would be no thirds, halves and Golden Sections. Viewers would move, every single step would change their perspective and thus the picture they see. And living objects themselves move, things get older, light dims, time changes everything. Only landscape paintings function as a possibility to see ideal standards which never occur in reality. In the paintings, utopian states seem (seem!) to be true. In the paintings everything *seems* alive, but *is* stable, static, right. Things are right once and for ever only in this state of irreality, in the mode of 'as if'. Under normal circumstances it would be impossible for all parts to fit, for everything to be in the right place.

2. English Landscape Gardens

English travellers of the seventeenth century returned home from Italy or France with classical landscape paintings, for example those of Claude Lorrain. It is noteworthy and curious that in England they then laid out landscape gardens that recalled the landscapes first seen in the paintings. Whoever was rich enough built at home a kind

2. Imdahl's descriptions of other compositions make it clear that in every single painting the compositorial order was new and invented just for this topic. For example (Imdahl 1996, 345–384): Jacob van Ruisdael's 'Mühle von Wyck' (1968). There are only a few examples of such descriptions. Gerstenberger (1923, 284) described Claude Lorrain's 'Heiligtum des Apollo' (1648).

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of 3D-park (amusement park) where the utopian landscapes they knew from paintings now seemed to be realized (Von Buttlar 1989).[3] Anyone who went for a walk in such a garden (one could never walk in front of or inside a picture) saw different 'pictorial' sights with every step. The pleasure lay in the variety of perspectives, which looked like paintings. One tree can have different functions in different imagined compositions, which appear to someone walking through the park and disappear when he or she changes their viewpoint. Ideally in such a garden there should be no viewing point without 'pictorial' composition; that is, composition evoking paintings. But the viewer who leaves the garden then notices or feels the arbitrariness and ugliness of normal non-composed landscapes more acutely than ever. The standard established in the sheltered environment of the garden cannot be upheld in reality – just as the standards of pictorial landscapes could not be realized in real life. The desire to see something perfect provokes the necessity of creating fakes. Maybe the realms of the fake have been widened since the eighteenth century, but even today there is a distinction between perceived perfection and its experienced limits.

3. Unity

Compositions correspond to the need for unity, for something that is right once and forever. Do they correspond to ideas like, for example, the existence of one god, one rightness, one solution, or a guarantee of paradise? In any case, compositions establish a certain unity, which often was assumed to exist in nature, and which was sought in the laws of proportions and the laws of nature. But this unity was never actually observed in nature, and instead was created in artefacts. Hans Körner (1988, 17) points out that in the early Renaissance Alberti recognized unity ('concinnitas') as existing for buildings and for what was evidenced in paintings.[4] It was only in such buildings and paintings (and then in England's constructed gardens) that human beings found what was lacking in nature. Since Antiquity there have been many attempts to find laws and proportions in nature – Golden Sections, geometrical divisions, numbers. Architecture constructs a dimension which goes beyond nature; landscape gardens and landscape paintings correct contingent reality. Above all, in paintings, unity seems to be possible; here it is relatively easy to show what would never occur in normal life. While a garden displays a multitude of compositions with transitions and gaps, a painting depicts a unity in which everything works to create a sense of beauty and rightness, set down and manifest once and for all. In art – that is, in man-made works – what are supposedly the laws of nature are applied or implemented in such a way that the artefacts seem to have a rightness that surpasses nature.

3. Von Buttlar wrote in particular on the gardens in Stowe and Stourhead where Claude Lorrain's paintings are the model.
4. The quest for unity became even more important when Aristotle's poetics, with its three unities, became known in 1554 (Fehrenbach 2011, 228).

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4. Seriality in the Oeuvre of Individual Painters

Every single painting establishes its own claim to unity. But painters have always repeated or completed or commented on their paintings. Claude Lorrain himself, for example, often showed two paintings as pendants that constituted more complicated unities. Other painters, both in the Renaissance and later, have shown groups, cycles, series, enhancements, and of course there are various motives for an artist to present more than one painting. Often, several paintings are presented as belonging together, thus evidencing the painter's acceptance of the impossibility of an ultimate unity and rightness (Thürlemann 2013).

4.1. Rembrandt

Rembrandt (1606–1669) is an early example of an endlessly questioning artist. He seemed driven to record change in his various self-portraits, of which he painted over 60. During his lifetime, he tried again and again to capture his appearance, trying out poses, and different aspects and various relations between the seen figure and the viewer. He was his own first viewer; he showed himself to himself, accepting the changes brought by age and reflecting on the ever-changing subject with all its subtle differences. His self-portraits capture aspects of fleetingness (Pinder 1943; Erpel 1967; White and Buvelot 2000). Following his tradition, other painters recognized that change was ongoing and inevitable.

4.2. Paul Cézanne

Paul Cézanne painted the mountain, 'Montagne Sainte-Victoire', near where he lived between 1885 und 1905. He painted it more than 80 times, and there are yet more sketches. He seemed to be trying out various perspectives, distances, views, and changes of light. But above all he was aware of his own ever-changing opportunities to see, to capture, to 'realize' his subject. Again and again he attempted to grasp the mountain, to do it justice, to be in accordance with its essence. His series was not planned as a series, as Rembrandt's probably was. Cézanne wrote that he felt the inadequacy of his efforts in relation to the mountain. Further, he had a sense of things disappearing, of reality itself disappearing (Doran 2001). He was modest. Of course, he *could* have travelled and depicted other scenes. But his interest was not to make beautiful, well-composed paintings but to show his impressive mountain *as it was*.

4.3. Edouard Monet

Edouard Monet is famous for his series. He deliberately exhibited them as a series, and he was successful with this strange new presentation of 15 or more similar paintings. His exhibition at the gallery of Durand-Ruel in 1891 presented no cycle, no systemic experiment, just variations of a solid body – a single haystack, shown with

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changes of light and perspective. There were at least 11 paintings of a single haystack, and at least 14 times Monet painted two or more haystacks in one painting, standing together on the meadow. He set them down on the surface of the paintings with obvious joy in the variations. In 1891, there were 23 paintings of poplars. Monet had begun to make series of series. In 1893–1894 he painted the Cathedral of Rouen. These paintings appear to be a cycle based on variation through different times of the day, but this is not a systematic experiment with, for example, one painting at 10 o'clock, the next at 12, and so on.

In his last works Monet painted waterlilies. Here the subject is always changing, every change of light changes the aspect of the shimmering, reflecting water. When looking at these paintings, the viewer becomes aware that they are seeing changing objects, a changing surrounding, an entirely changing subject. There is no solid component in these paintings of waterlilies – only the paintings themselves, which, like instant photographs, freeze one aspect of an ever-changing reality. Monet presented symmetrical and non-symmetrical paintings, he was not interested in classical compositions on the surface of the painting. He recorded things as they are in reality, in their arbitrary setting. Monet decided the segment and the perspective and the time, but he did not compose in the classical manner, constructing Golden Sections and so on. He pretended not to decide, not to take charge, not to regulate and employ artificial means. He pretended merely to see. Cézanne said that Monet was only an eye, but what an eye. Kandinsky said that with the haystacks the 'sujet' was not necessary anymore (Imdahl 1987, 19, 119). And Monet presented series, a multitude of paintings, because seeing itself changes and because he did not believe in a unique right and final answer.

4.4. Piet Mondrian

Mondrian showed abstract compositions in the tradition of Claude Lorrain. He always used the same techniques: on a more or less white ground, there are more or less black horizontal and perpendicular lines. Between these lines, there are the white surfaces (or blue, yellow and red ones). There can be smaller and larger areas, there can be one or three colours or even slightly changed colours, the white areas can be slightly grey – but there are never other colours, only blue, yellow and red, and never other directions, only horizontals and verticals. Theo van Doesburg who made, superficially judged, similar paintings but just tilting all the lines to 45° angles, lost the friendship of Mondrian, because the latter's compositions were meant to correspond to reality on earth, that is gravity and horizons – and he did not appreciate jokes such as van Doesburg's about this. Mondrian's paintings, even more than those of Claude Lorrain, are to be understood as balances, as scales with weight and a clear distinction between up and down, between light and heavy.[5]

Mondrian's paintings strive for balance, for the one fragile right solution. Every painting is like a balancing act: removing or altering any one element would change

5. They are 'abstrakt' and not 'konkret' according to Theo van Doesburg (2001, 113).

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the entire painting. It is 'so and not otherwise' (Imdahl). But Mondrian felt the pull of so many possible right solutions that he tried to develop all of them. He recognized that there was not only one balance – just as Lorrain knew there was not only one ideal landscape. It is always possible to recognize Mondrian in his over 20-year oeuvre of similar paintings but it is possible, too, to see him getting older. Mondrian's paintings could provide material for a flip-book, they show a development that is not an evolution of an object, but of his feeling for balance. The elder Mondrian tried simpler and less centred compositions, he risked more, he appeared to be trying out the extremes of possible good compositions.

Other artists could be named: there are all the dancers and all the horses of Edgar Degas, and it would be necessary to look at Alexej von Jawlenski, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt or Andy Warhol. In photography, series seem to be even more natural. There are great series by August Sander, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha and others. The more recent artists who reflected on time often presented series: On Kawara made nearly 3000 'date paintings', Roman Opalka just counted, Hanne Darboven invented systems, Peter Dreher has painted one glass more than 5200 times. None of these photographs and paintings are Albertian paintings. Albertini's concept has been superseded. Its time is over. There are no compositions, but repetitions, series, variations, sequences. In the pictures there are grids (Krauss 1985; Groos and Schimpf 2012), rows, successions, queues, files, progressions, additions, lists. It is not easy to identify the problems attached to the production of series in art, since each type of series has its own questions – though these questions are related and there are no final answers. One thing is certain: the single compositions of the nineteenth century are no longer the norm.

5. Serial Structures in Single Art Works

In Europe, the idea or ideal of a single well-composed artwork, a masterpiece, the one and only answer, has persisted until today. However, there have always been repetitive structures in cultural works (Eco 2009; Eco began with sacral litanies etc.; Usher 2015 showed everyday examples). In traditional music, for example, there are themes with variations, which do not repeat the same notes but comment on repetition.

To give a brief overview of artworks in the modern era: in literature, it was Walt Whitman who wrote texts that were extremely sophisticated but repetitive in structure. In the twentieth century, George Perec, Inger Christensen, Peter Handke and many others followed this trend. In music, Eric Satie produced repetitive variations without a climax and traditional order. Later John Cage, La Monte Young, Morton Feldman, Steve Reich, Philipp Glass followed. In film, contemporary authors and film makers such as James Benning, Jim Jarmush, Robert Altman do not tell traditional stories but string along series of episodes, adding one episode to another. In theatre, many plays dispense with the traditional three-act (or five-act) structure,

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avoiding narrative dynamics, constructing plays without a beginning and an end, simply linking scenes in the form of a concatenation of scenes. One can here mention the work of Pina Bausch, Peter Handke or Rimini Protokoll.

Single works of art often became characterized by non-hierarchical, additive structures. Most of these structures are evident in the visual arts. Compositions of course still appear, and artists such as Andy Warhol or Gerhard Richter comment on compositions with paintings that look like compositions, but were the result of other decisions. In Minimal Art, in particular, compositions are consciously avoided and there are many works characterized by additions and repetitions (Hilmes and Mathy 1998; Pütz 2004; Buchmann *et al*. 2005; Kalu 2013; Daur 2013). In contrast to traditional compositions they seem offensively boring, simple, monotonous. They have serial structures (Bochner 1967; Coplans 1968; Kambartel 1977, 16–28; Boehm 1988; Bippus 1998, 2003; Schneede and Heinrich 2001; Penzel 2003; Scholtz 2017). In what follows I want to discuss serial structures in two artists, Donald Judd and Christian Boltanski.

5.1. Donald Judd

Donald Judd shows multi-part sculptures that he calls *stacks*, which in fact are fixed to the wall. In his work 'Ohne Titel' (1978) there are ten elements between the floor and the ceiling, and the 11 spaces around them have the same dimensions (Figure 2). They are repeated. The work is as simple as it is effective. Even the number of the elements has no meaning, ten elements just fit between floor and ceiling. The solid bodies seem different than the airy interstices, but it is possible to guess that they have the same measurements. The perspective is different for someone who is tall than for someone who is small and, what is more, the perspective alters with every step in front of or beside the work. The photographer here decides to stand slightly left, he is as tall as the upper edge of the fifth unit and it would be possible to measure his distance. Even without measuring, it is easy to grasp the situation, because viewing the sculpture itself (and not a photograph of it) one looks for one's own relation to the work. The line-up of elements is not important, not meaningful, not beautiful, it is just not interesting. The elements are made according to industrial standards. Judd has not made a masterpiece, has not shown gestures, has not accomplished a masterstroke. There is no message to be understood. Like other Minimal Sculptures this is a tool for experience. It sharpens the sensibility of the viewers, who are freed by the extremely simple serial structures to experience their own experience. Robert Morris describes how Minimal Sculptures are perceived (Morris 1966a, 1966b, 1967; Primary Structures 2017). Viewers notice all the simple things they otherwise would overlook: distance, position, perspective, light, material.

A work by Donald Judd is so simple that no effort is necessary to understand its construction. Anyone could rebuild it, everyone can remember it, and it is so simple that no one thinks they need to 'understand' it. Instead they are free to experience it. Donald Judd said that it is possible to see an object not as a sign of something or someone, not as a means for something, not with all these interests we normally

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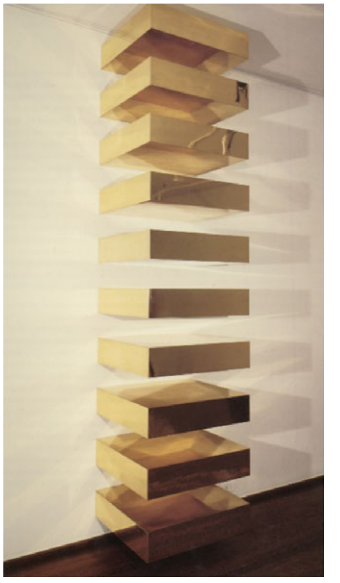


Figure 2. Donald Judd: Ohne Titel, 1978 brass, 15.2 × 686 × 62 cm (15.2 cm distance between he units).
Source: exh. cat. Donald Judd. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1988, p. 75.

follow – it is possible to see *a thing in itself* (Judd 1975; Haskell 1988; Janhsen 1990, 1991, 2000). Someone who is able to see something else as itself, according to Judd, should be able to see other things in like manner and to draw their own conclusions. Donald Judd aimed at this kind of real experience. Such experience seems very basic and simple, but today has become rare. The realm of fake described above in the example of English landscape gardens has widened dramatically (Anders 1956; Baudrillard 1981; Handke 1991). And objects are almost always signs for something else; they are useful, they are there because of something else, but they are not merely themselves. Normally order is a sign of meaning. A line-up of just one thing after the other – as in the Judd example – hardly ever occurs, and seems either childish or very sophisticated (or possibly both at the same time?). In any case, the serial order of the work destroys every understanding of meaning. For this very reason it has meaning in a contemporary situation where reality has been lost.

The inner structure of Minimal Art objects is obviously serial. There are additions, rows, repetitions, symmetries in the works. The stacks and cubes of Donald Judd, the grids of Sol LeWitt, the plates of Carl Andre, or the multiple presentations of Robert Morris' works are all well known among artist and people interested in contemporary art. Not only do the works of the main Minimal Art artists illustrate seriality but there are series in Postminimal Art as well. The majority of new art work is not composed. These serial works compare negatively with traditional compositions, because they have no such beauty, nor do they provide a single answer. But they have a positive effect because they induce the viewer to be really present

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Figure 3. Christian Boltanski: Réserve: Les Suisses morts, 1990. Installation at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris. 2580 tin boxes, 2580 black and white photographs.
Source: Didier Semin et al. (2004, 89).

at every single moment. Often easily recognizable, many contemporary artists produce works that present variations on a main idea: Bruce Nauman shows similar corridors, Richard Serra presents sculptures with similar elements. For Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, George Brecht, Jenny Holzer, and many others, the inner structure of new works is often not composition but repetition. These works are tools for experience.

5.2. Christian Boltanski, 'Les suisses morts'

Each installation of this workgroup (Figure 3) differs in its dimensions, according to the space in which it is installed. There are corridors, larger walls, smaller walls. In every work Boltanski shows cookie boxes with a photograph attached to the front of each one. These boxes are placed on top of and alongside of one another and form walls in merely additive order (this and this and this . . .). There is no composition, no hierarchy, no alphabetical or numerical order. This is a heritage of Minimal Art. For viewers, all these boxes with all these photographs suggest that all these men and women are equal, and that they are part of an archive. At the same time the walls remind viewers uncomfortably of the walls of cemeteries in southern Europe, where

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photographs of the dead are attached to their grave sites or on a wall holding their ashes. Boltanski took all his photographs from Swiss newspapers in which the death notices are accompanied by photographs. These photographs were not produced for this specific purpose: relatives needed a photo quickly, they may have had little choice and taken what seemed fitting, whether it was an official photograph or one that seemed appropriate to highlight the character of the deceased. These photographs tell us that the men and women who are photographed are dead. When there is a large number of deaths, it is a sign of a major accident or calamity or war in which a group of people died at the same time. The Jews in the Holocaust are the largest number of murdered people. Boltanski calls his installations 'The dead Swiss' – and in fact the photographs are of people who are nearly contemporary Swiss. But they make viewers think of the Jews. Here only some hundred photographs are shown, but they catch more attention than the statistics one is familiar with. Here there are single people like you and me, this one and this one and this one and... There is a women who reminds me of my neighbour, there is a man who reminds me of my uncle, there may be someone who looks like me. They remind us of the individual men and women who did not want to die but were murdered in the Holocaust. Viewers are confronted with numbers of people, not with a mass. It is this and this and this and this... person who died. This counts and this and this... The additive structure is open-ended. One could argue that there is a Jewish and Christian theme hidden in this arrangement: everyone counts as equal before God, who cares equally for everyone. European Democracy was established in this tradition in which everyone was to have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. Precisely because of the simple additional structure, because of the series, it is possible to reflect on challenging questions on life and death, on ethics, on one's relationship to others. The work looks simple but opens up complex experiences for the viewers.

Following Boltanski there were serial structures in other artworks: Peter Eisenman's 'Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas' (2005) in Berlin, Gunter Demnig's 'Stolpersteine' (from 1996 to today), all the repetitions, all the additions, all the series, all the variations, all the...

6. Conclusion: No Final Unity Anymore

Compositions in the manner of Leon Battista Alberti indicate that there could be one single solution, a unity, right and set for now and ever. They assume that things could be in perfect accord with presupposed laws of nature. Compositions answer the human need for order, for a sense of rightness. Compositions stimulate thinking in terms of more or less important elements, of better and worse solutions, of more or less convincing structures. This corresponds to thinking in hierarchies. Rightness is radiant, different kinds of rightness seem possible. Classical landscape paintings show right things as if they were really present. But what is shown is only shown,

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and is not real. There is no wind, no motion, no growth, no movement, no changing time. The illusion is fixed, dead, it is not living.

In the nineteenth century, the classical concept of composition was no longer in force, or at least there were serious doubts that there could be the one answer, that human beings could be in accord with laws of nature or god, laws that were also coming under question. Series of compositions such as those in the twentieth century and then the serial structures in non-composed art works of Minimal Art became important for those who, since the mid-twentieth century, no longer believe in these laws. At the same time, a sense of reality has been lost, and replaced by the great uncertainty, which Jean Baudrillard and others describe.

For someone who has lost faith, series as a form may be significant. When unity is doubted, repetition is meaningful and confirms doubts (Kierkegaard 2000; Deleuze 1968; Waldenfels 2001). Series mean that there is this and this and this . . . without a common framework. There are only additions, one after the other, without beauty, offering no ultimate answer but only so many (infinite?) possibilities. Series provoke a sense of one's own inadequacy.

At the same time, series correspond to the idea of democracy, in which all members are equal, without hierarchies. And the experience of a series – in which minor differences are noted immediately – stimulates attention and sensibility and a sense of presence. Since a series means that there is not the single right solution, that things are open, that all elements are equally important, tolerance is fostered. Things (like people) may not be bound to each other, may stand alone, but they are parallels, analogies. That recalls and affirms democracy, where there is no hierarchy between the members, all of whose votes count equally. Series may encourage a certain humility.

One way or another, the concept of composition has become obsolete. Today anyone who regularly experiences arbitrariness, contingence, randomness and who has doubts about God does not believe in a final unity and rightness. A comparison of contemporary serial structures in art works with traditional compositions shows the former as negative in its lack of beauty and of a single solution, but the positive effect on the viewer is the direct experience of being in the present. And after Minimal Art, which provoked such basic experiences, it is once again possible to deal with major questions, such as those of Boltanski.

Composition in art belongs to the early modern period, seriality is contemporary. There is composed non-symmetrical art first, then non-composed serial art. Things seem natural but they are historical. Composition meant the one right solution, God, thinking in terms of a single whole. Seriality means uniformity and equal rights. With regard to experience, composition meant tranquillity and bondage. Seriality means freedom, a lack of completion; it is secular, additive, haphazard, expandable, indifferent.

This claim to a historical development is confirmed by the growing number of studies in the history of ideas and cultural history. These studies are successful because they show the tradition of contemporary positions. History in the tradition of Aby Warburg deals with Iconology or 'Kulturgeschichte', that is, cultural history.

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Art history, especially in the tradition of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), attempts to trace and to understand cultural changes. Erwin Panofsky has shown in various studies that it is possible to grasp changes in ways of thinking through changes in art (Panofsky 1924a, 1983, 1998; Ritter 1971–2007), whether a term such as 'idea', or techniques of proportion or of perspective. In particular his notion of the development from 'Massenstil' to 'Körperstil' is useful here to understand the change from composed unity to seriality (Panofsky 1924b, 11–13). Panofsky showed that medieval sculptors first thought of the whole and then differentiated in a further step. Roman sculptures consisted of bodies that appeared to be from similar material. Starting from the whole, sculptors then differentiated out the body parts. Later sculptors added independent single elements to construct a body. Gothic sculptures formed bodies where individuals were defined first and then, in a second step, bound into a unity. According to Panofsky, there are parallel evolutions in architecture and he regards it as possible to compare the artistic procedures with mathematical ones, such as division or addition. Erwin Panofsky's work revolves around these problems, evidently the main questions of his life as scholar. He is one of the great art historians because he had the courage to ask great questions – and he had the means to answer aspects of them.

Today, it is important to uphold this tradition of thinking. Questions that touch on various disciplines are being posed in various contexts such as this interdisciplinary venture in the current special issue. The historical development from composition to seriality in art may have parallels that become evident through other historical studies. I propose looking at a major historical perspective spanning from the Renaissance to contemporary democratic societies. I do not claim to understand the path of history nor our current condition completely. However, I think it is important to contrast the present with earlier periods in which standards, here 'compositione', seemed to be valid in eternity. It is important to conceptualize fundamental differences. Then it becomes possible to understand the decisions taken by artists, the richness and the poverty of various styles, the strengths and the shortcomings of traditions and of what seems natural to us today.

Moreover, this development which we have observed in art history can be recognized also in scientific publications. Nowadays, we no longer write the one masterpiece, the one standard work of criticism, but we try to collect various aspects of a topic in collections such as this one.

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