

## HOW'RE THINGS? SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THINGS, NON – THINGS AND SERIAL THINGS

Michael D Cooke

### SITTING MATTERS

I've got ten minutes before work. There's a wooden bench there, outside the corner dairy. I sit on it. There's a bin there, stuffed full, beyond brimming, an empty beer bottle sits upright on the bin lid. On top of the hill across the way is a row of houses, the sun is merely a flint of light, shimmering over one of the rooftops. In two or three minutes it will shine in my face. I look at my phone, I've got eight minutes. The sun slowly swells. "Sunny-sun-sun, do you have a name?" I mumble. I sit, I look at my phone, I've got five minutes. I better go. I sit, and the sun finds my face. I wish this was my job, sitting on a bench, in the sun. I want to stay here, staring at the sun until I'm blind. I better go. I stay, but I close my eyes. I need my eyes. Sunlight flares through my eyelids. Dark black morphs into the brightest red.

### SLICE AFTER SLICE

Recently, I ran into a friend of mine on a street in New Plymouth. We hadn't seen each other for a few years, so we walked to the park and found a tree to sit under for a catch-up. He used to paint these amazing amorphous abstractions, so I asked him about those paintings and what he was painting these days. He told me he doesn't paint pictures any more, at least not in the material realm. "All the art I make these days remains in my mind," he said. "But it's beautiful, it's the most perfect art I've ever seen." It was the kind of thing people say to each other when they're sitting under trees in parks, and I probably should have just said something like, "Yeah, man," but I could tell he believed it, fervently. As far as he was concerned, he told me, the best art that he had ever accomplished was being created and exhibited purely in his own mind. So I attempted a response. I said that perhaps what he is achieving through this artistic exploit is like some sort of unadulterated abstraction, an abstraction that permanently resides in the place it is generated, within an abstract realm. I suggested to him that perhaps he is reluctant to desecrate his art, which could happen if he were to translate it into something of substance, something our limited senses could decipher. There, in his mind's eye, it is perfect, it is uncorrupted and unfettered, and perhaps that's the reason he keeps it up there, so it can remain uber-abstract, free in its transcendental realm. "At the risk of trivialising something sacred," I concluded, "perhaps you are an Abstract Ineffabilist?" There was a long silence, then he plucked a daisy and handed it to me. "No," he said, "I just ate one too many magic-mushroom pizzas back in 2012." I twirled the tiny flower between my fingers, thought about mushrooms growing in dark places, thought about trees falling unwitnessed in forests. "Yeah, man," I said.

## LOOK, THERE IT IS

Every now and then I replay that conversation with my old friend, beneath that old tree, and it always leads me to imagine exactly how the art that flourishes in his brilliant mind would manifest, were it to be transferred to material form. I want to see it! But I can only imagine it and, I guess, that is essentially what he is doing too, only imagining it. In theory he is making art, but only in theory. Is art redundant if it is exclusively theoretical? Because, for art to really exist, surely it must be communicated in some way, reduced to a defined time and space, somehow transformed into a material or an action?

The Ancient Greek tradition of *Theoria*, *Poiesis* and *Praxis* could offer a path through this rumination. From what I understand, deploying this concise triple-part concept initiates a vital inter-realm transferal process. It goes something like this: *Theoria* involves contemplating the nature of such perfect abstract Forms and Ideas that exist in a divine superlunary sphere; subsequently, *Poiesis* and *Praxis* employ material means and intentional, reflective action in response to this contemplation; what results is the formation of a new thing. A thing that simply wasn't here before, this new thing that originated from the contemplation of an expansive transcendent realm is now relegated to our limited temporal, spatial reality.

## LOOK, IT'S STILL THERE

Ancient woo-woo perhaps, although it is true, isn't it, that to reduce anything-and-everything into some *thing*, is always to acknowledge at least one thing; it is no longer anything-and-everything, as in it is no longer pure, unlimited potential, but something does now exist. For example, if an artist makes a bottle, wherever that bottle may be presented it takes up that space, it defines a gathering point, a space to galvanise discussion, interpretation and reflection, contemplation or critique. If the bottle exists, here and now, its existence has something in common with ours.

## LOOK, THERE'S ANOTHER ONE

I keep coming back to this idea: Art could be anything, as long as it is a thing, a here-and-now thing. I'll stop saying *thing* soon, I'll inevitably move on, but on to what? On to a different thing, or on to the same thing?

## THE THING IS, THING IS, THING IS ...

There's something about intentionally repeating a certain thing through the mechanisms of a series that really drills down into that thing's particular essence – its distinctive *thingness* is amplified. Elizabeth Helmuth Margulis's book, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, closely examines the prevalence of repetition within music. Margulis coins the term "thingification" when describing how we can identify repeating elements; as she explains, this *thingification* is in fact the primary function for detecting repetition: "To hear something as repetition, a listener must first hear it as a something. In this way, repetition detection can be a useful methodology to investigate perceptual units: the segments of music that listeners treat as individual entities ... An individual note does not ordinarily rise to the level of 'thingification;' only special treatment can promote it to this status."<sup>1</sup>

*Thingification* is the process of extracting *something* discrete from a wider spectrum: "a particular frequency, for example, is heard as a better- or worse-tuned A, or a particular wavelength is viewed as a more- or less-representative shade of blue."<sup>2</sup> *Thingification* tends to highlight the hidden mechanism of repetition. The process emphasises the inherent arbitrary nature of any single thing which could be repeated; the substance of the thing doesn't matter, initially – what matters is that separate basic modules are predetermined by a unifying category. Only once a thing is categorised can it subsequently be recognised as repeating; and, as Margulis claims, to repeat the something is also to promote it: "Repetition tends to reify a passage – to set it apart from the surrounding context as a 'thing' to be mused on, abstractly considered, and conceptualized as a unit."<sup>3</sup>

## HERE WE GO AGAIN

Repeating units. Space repeating in time, time repeating in space, will it ever end? Time and space might be infinite, we don't know yet. The *Infinite* is another transcendental non-thing, merely immaterial potential going on and on (yawn) and, not unlike my friend's psychedelic-fungus visions, infinity refuses to be objectified. In reality, infinity can only be partially alluded to or imagined. This is to follow Briony Fer's statement regarding Agnes Martin's gridded drawings and paintings, works which are laboriously constructed with subtly imperfect, yet precise lines:<sup>4</sup>

The thing about infinity is that it is not a thing: It exists only in the imagination. The point is less what infinity is than the operation that it names, an operation that is always uncertain about its object, that calls infinite what exceeds representation and so has to be abandoned. Infinity, after all, is not an object, but something that exists in the mind as that which is beyond representation.<sup>5</sup>

It is from this stance that Fer imagines infinity in an Agnes Martin grid: "What Martin does is to isolate something precarious – like the infinite differences of her grids – and make of them something temporarily cohesive in a way that enables the loss of oneself in the infinite fabric of surface."<sup>6</sup>

In the same way, the concept of infinity – limitless potential – can be triggered in our minds when we consider any endlessly repeatable, endlessly differentiated format behind a series of paintings. Immaterial potential becomes material example in a repeatable format. Gretchen Albrecht's *Hemisphere* series works as an example:<sup>7</sup> generally, two territories of colour; sweeping up from opposite sides of an arch, through Albrecht's wingspan, to clash and merge in the centre. The multiple manifestations of the *Hemisphere* series format can set in train a consideration of infinity; we can start to imagine endlessly nuanced versions and variations of this irresistibly repeatable format.

Again, to refer to Elizabeth Helmuth Margulis, this relates to a certain occurrence evident in our experience of repetition in music, which Margulis describes essentially as a knowability: "Knowability creates a link between the sounds as they are occurring in the world and as they can be imagined internally in the mental soundscape."<sup>8</sup> Once the listener becomes familiar with a repeated passage in a piece of music, their participation moves from perception to something that seems more like production:

When a passage is repeated several times across the course of the piece, the listener gains an enhanced ability to think through that passage, to match an internal auditory image with the external sound increasingly well and with an intensified orientation toward the future across the course of each iteration. This process weaves the listener more and more into a sense of virtual participation across the piece.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of a *virtual participation* can perhaps be transferred to a similar approach to the painted series; as repetition makes a *knowability* possible, this creates a link between paintings in a series as they occur in the world and as they can be imagined in the mind's eye. Keeping with the example of Albrecht's *Hemispheres*, as the viewer begins to comprehend the repeatable template which is conceiving the *Hemispheres*, they may begin to participate on a different level from that of simply receiving the presentation of the imagery; they may begin to imagine for themselves unrealised iterations of the repeated formula relating each painting of the series. Endless colour combinations, for instance, shimmering, clashing, transforming and morphing where they meet.

Albrecht's *Hemispheres* appear to be an inevitable series of multiple variants; it is easier to imagine infinite versions than it is to imagine there only ever being one. But why is this? What if there were only ever one single *Hemisphere*? To end a recorded interview conducted by Kim Hill on the occasion of the release of Luke Smythe's 2019 book *Gretchen Albrecht: Between Gesture and Geometry*, Hill asks Albrecht a somewhat throwaway question and receives a somewhat throwaway answer:

**Hill:** Alright here's the question [...] It's a crass question, but I want to ask it ... You have [your] entire collection of works in a warehouse and a fire breaks out, you have the opportunity to rescue one, what is it?

**Albrecht:** It would have to be an *Annunciation*, I'm afraid.

**Hill:** Which one?

**Albrecht:** Oh g-, um, well, I guess ... I guess *Pacific Annunciation*<sup>10</sup> is as good a one as any.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this crass exchange shouldn't be read into with too much earnestness; however, it is an interesting point from which to proceed. If one *Hemisphere* is as good as any other, why are there so many? Needless to say, Albrecht is no one-trick pony, but why has this artist returned to the format so often during her impressive 56-year (and counting) career? Does dedicating so much effort to such a restricted range come at the expense of versatility?

Larry Rivers and David Hockney take up a similar line of inquiry during a conversation published in the journal *Art and Literature* (1964),<sup>12</sup> where Rivers identifies an attitude that some of their contemporaries (Kenneth Noland, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman) seem to maintain, one of dedication and concentration. As Rivers describes them: "Those dedicated types who spend years of their life refining one image until it becomes more and more beautiful like a polished jewel."<sup>13</sup> This dedication is held up as a credential that is perhaps the obverse of the qualities making for versatility within the studio; and the consequences of precluding versatility in exchange for dedication can perhaps have an unintended effect on the way an artist's oeuvre is received. Rivers uses Mark Rothko as an example of an artist whose unchangeable output seems to refuse any attempt to exceed expectations, the resulting artwork becoming perceived as a recognisable product, "a product we call a Mark Rothko."<sup>14</sup> Rivers then asks Hockney if he would feel self-conscious repeating the same ideas, leading to these implications of product branding his own practice:

**Hockney:** "Rothko's a painter whose subject matter is very small – tiny – and he obviously thinks he can do everything he wants within his range and I suppose it's O.K. But I, for one, couldn't work in a range that tiny..."<sup>15</sup>

Far from merely establishing a repeatable product, Briony Fer describes an alternative approach to Rothko's signature series in her book *The Infinite Line*: "Repetition is almost too capacious a term for thinking about Rothko's work, which, after all, would seem at all cost to resist repetition and subtly seeks out difference."<sup>16</sup>

Any demonstration of versatility in subject matter or style may indeed be lost when an artist works within such a tiny range; however, it is not at the cost of a certain versatility that can be demonstrated by the template itself. An example of this can be seen in Rothko's work; as Fer describes: "Rothko's template of an upright rectangular canvas, with a stack of rectangular forms, endlessly differentiated, endlessly nuanced, is both stringent and flexible. It invites a subtle discernment of the differences that occur, even as it repeats."<sup>17</sup> Fer also sees this effect highlighted in Agnes Martin's studio work: "Imposing strict limits on her format enabled her to increase the play of difference within it. Rather than constraining difference, repetition allows for maximum difference, exacerbating, even, the multiplication of variables."<sup>18</sup>

Fer's succinct insights suggest that versatility in the form of endless differentiation is not lost within a repetitive format or restricted range. In fact, what it seems to suggest is that our experience of any form of repetition of *exactly* the same – that is, repetition *without* difference – is a highly subjective experience at base level.

It is possible to imagine a format such as Albrecht's *Hemispheres* being repeated in endless variations, but obviously not probable. There's the entropy factor for a start – an artist's fatigue or simply a loss of interest could come into play and, in reality, there is an impending finality to every series. For example, it is with knowledge of its ultimate terminus that we approach Rothenberg's *Horse* series.<sup>19</sup> We know how it began, in an intuitive exploration, how it was sustained by a continuing fascination, and that it *does* end; the series ended when that fascination, along with the horse, just "ran out."<sup>20</sup> It is not necessary to work towards a conclusion in any given series, but it is somewhat of a relief to view a series with an ending. For better or worse, there is a resolution and the indeterminable becomes determined.

On Kawara's *Today* series<sup>21</sup> is another example, although the series relied on each component part being fully concluded each time; a final conclusion was strangely absent until its totality was resolved when Kawara died in June 2014. Until then, the *Today* series largely remained merely imminent.<sup>22</sup> Since Kawara's death there are obviously no more "Date" paintings which can be added to the *Today* series; and now that the artist who painted them is lost, along with the days the paintings refer to, the *Today* series can finally distinguish an era.

Stanley Cavell seems to value this type of certain resolution within a series of paintings when he declares in his book *The World Viewed* (1971): "Nothing but our acceptance of an instance determines whether its series is worth realizing, or how far it is worth going on generating its instances; when we find that a series is exhausted, it is absolutely past, over."<sup>23</sup> For Cavell, the task for the modernist painter was not merely to deploy the self-producing automatisms of an established tradition, but instead to create new branches of their art: "I characterized the task of the modern artist as one of creating not a new instance of his art but a new medium in it. One might think of this as the task of establishing a new automatism."<sup>24</sup>

It follows that for the modernist painter (Cavell mentions Pollock, Noland, Louis and Stella as examples), the series was a means to establish these new mediums, these newly discovered 'modes of achievement within the arts' through automatic instances:

My impulse to speak of an artistic medium as an "automatism" is, I judge, due first to the sense that when such a medium is discovered, it generates new instances: not merely makes them possible, but calls for them, as if to attest that what has been discovered is indeed something more than a single work could convey. Second, the notion of automatism codes the experience of the work of art as "happening of itself."<sup>25</sup>

This statement of Cavell's resonates with Albrecht's description of the initial discovery of the *Hemisphere* format in her studio in 1981, and may go some way to explain why there was never going to be only one:

"The first Hemisphere that I painted, of three, I called *Cardinal* [...] The other two paintings rushed out after that. One of them was called *Rapture* and one was called *Possess*. And those titles seemed to be also speaking for me about what I'd found. This was a revelation for me personally in my studio, this little mini-revelation of discovering the Hemisphere and the content rushing into it; so, everything that was important to me in the making and painting, that gave it meaning, had arrived, and I was on my way."<sup>26</sup>

However, far from being flawed by apparently happening of themselves, for Cavell, the fact that these instances rush out in automatic self-generation is a necessary and significant virtue within modernist painting. "It is true that their existence as instances is carried on their face; labor is not in them; they look as if they might as well have been made instantaneously, and that their use should take no longer."<sup>27</sup> What Cavell points out here though, is that, despite the fact that an instance projects such an inherent insignificance ("they declare the evanescence of existence in space and time"<sup>28</sup>), they can nevertheless pose a "permanent beauty."<sup>29</sup>

For Cavell, this is analogous to our experience of beauty in general. He makes a distinction between the momentary and the momentous, comparing the evanescence of these instances with more traditional art forms which display their labour; are therefore assured of their permanence, and can bear the "major importance we have attached to works of art."<sup>30</sup> However, the evident beauty found within any instance of a self-generating automatism shows Cavell that the presence of beauty is not necessarily achieved only after so much toil. Beauty, he says, "is momentary only the way time is, a regime of moments; and that no moment is to dictate its significance to us, if we are to claim autonomy, to become free. Acceptance of such objects achieves the absolute acceptance of the moment, by defeating the sway of the momentous."<sup>31</sup>

Rothenberg's *First Horse*, Kawara's *Jan. 4, 1966*, or Albrecht's *Cardinal* could all have remained single, stand-alone works, but due to the artist's unresolved intrigue, unresolved premise, or simply the discovery of a self-generating automatism, these paintings instead instigated the entire series of which they ultimately become single, intrinsic

examples. Cavell's insights highlight what a series of paintings can do that a single painting cannot; he describes how a series can run parallel to our experience of time in space as a series of beautiful temporary moments. A painted series can represent the momentary – moments repeating in endless variation, each as insignificant as the one forever lost in an established past, or as infinite as the possible future moments yet to be realised.

## THE EFFIN' INEFFABLE

Elizabeth Helmuth Margulis proposes that within Franz Schubert's use of repetition there is a certain invocation of the inexpressible, something that lies beyond our subjectivity: "As the music repeats, it casts my ear more and more in the direction of the unsayable thing beyond the notes." Within the temporal span of a piece of music, a repeated passage can be a way of lingering, a way of extending a moment to contemplate that inexpressible something that the music is on the verge of all-but-revealing. As Margulis puts it:

To me personally, repetition in Schubert always seems to point and re-point to the music as a kind of edge, or liminal entity. The refusal to modify and develop serves to reiterate the implication that the repeated passage is the furthest music can go toward the inexpressible thing it's butting up against; there can be no progress or advancement because the border has been reached.<sup>32</sup>

The mode of repetition is choosing to pend, it's choosing to loop rather than to resolve, to return rather than to abandon. Across the span of a series of paintings the painter adopts this intentional mode of repetition. Serially producing things is a ritual of reiteration, and of dedication perhaps; however, until the series is definitively terminated (or the artist is), it is a ritual without a telos. Perhaps, this too is an attempt to loiter at the border of the inexpressible. In theory, there could be anything beyond that border; there could be everything, but (at the risk of repeating myself) in reality, unless it's some thing, it's actually nothing.

## TIME DO YOU CALL THIS?<sup>33</sup>

My phone rings, my eyes flick open like a pair of Zippos. Look, there's a bin in the sun with a bottle on top, light shines through brown glass. The screen tells me *Work* is ringing, *slide to answer*. "In transit," I say.

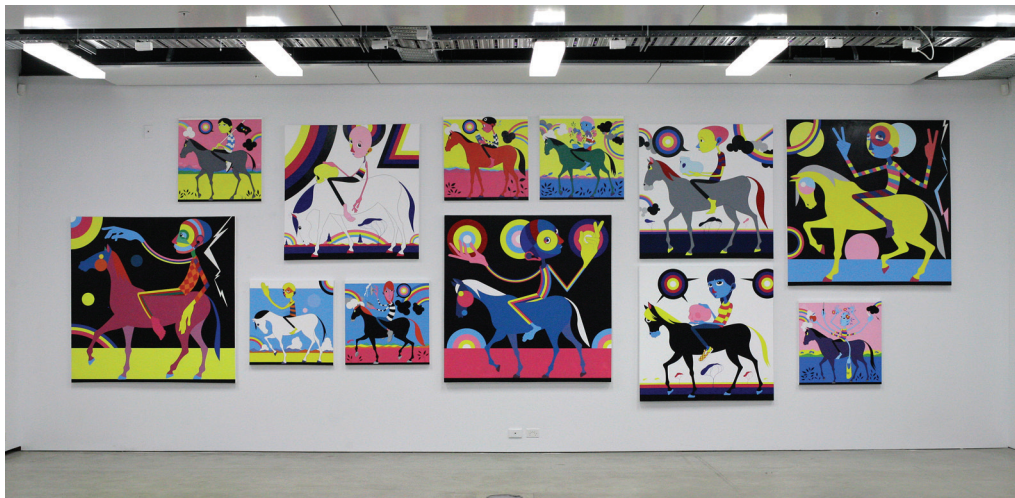


Figure 1. Michael D Cooke, *So On And On We Go*, (twelve paintings from the *One Trick Pony* series), DSA Gallery, Installation view, 2020.

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- 1 Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.
- 2 Ibid., 37.
- 3 Ibid., 43.
- 4 "Agnes Martin, Morning, 1965," Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martin-morning-t01866> (accessed 18 June 2021).
- 5 Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 58.
- 6 Ibid., 58.
- 7 See <https://www.gretchenalbrecht.com/Paintings/sheba/Large/sheba.htm> (accessed 18 June 2021).
- 8 Margulis, *On Repeat*, 148.
- 9 Ibid., 149.
- 10 "Gretchen Albrecht, Luke Smythe: Between Gesture and Geometry," interview by Kim Hill, Saturday Morning, RNZ, 13 April 2019, audio, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018690881/gretchen-albrecht-luke-smythe-between-gesture-and-geometry>\_See image gallery at foot of page (accessed 18 June 2021).
- 11 Ibid. (accessed 20 June 2021).
- 12 David Hockney and Larry Rivers, "Beautiful or Interesting," *Art and Literature*, 5 (Summer 1964), 94-117. Reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), 238-43.
- 13 Ibid., 242 (Rivers).
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 ibid., 242 (Hockney).
- 16 Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 6.
- 17 Ibid., 6.
- 18 Ibid., 56.
- 19 "Susan Rothenberg, *Tripphammer Bridge*, 1974," MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/100307> (accessed 20 June 2021).
- 20 Rothenberg, interview by Joan Simon. See Joan Simon, *Susan Rothenberg* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 88.
- 21 "On Kawara: Long-term View, Dia Beacon," Dia Art Foundation, <https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/on-kawara-exhibition>, (accessed 18 June 2021).
- 22 See Pamela M Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: MIT Press, 2004).
- 23 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 116.
- 24 Ibid., 104.
- 25 Ibid., 107.
- 26 Gretchen Albrecht, in Karen Bates and John Bates, dir., *Reflections: Gretchen Albrecht*, 2006, television documentary, Bates Productions, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/reflections-gretchen-albrecht-2006> (accessed 9 July 2021).
- 27 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 116.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Margulis, *On Repeat*, 148.
- 33 And yes, I have been reading too much Matthew Collings lately.