

SERIAL ART, SYSTEMS, SOLIPSISM* by Mel Bochner

An interest in systems and serial methods has characterized some recent art. One writer, Lawrence Alloway, writes that the word *serial* ". . . can be used to refer to the internal parts of a work when they are seen in uninterrupted succession."† Another point of view is taken in this essay by Mel Bochner, an artist working with series, who defines *serial* as a procedure. He points out that "Individual parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in how they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole." The work of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Sol LeWitt is discussed in this article, but a number of artists are working in similar areas.

Mel Bochner was represented in the Finch College Museum "Art in Series" exhibition in 1967. He was born in Pittsburgh and has written for *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, and *Art and Artists*. He is now teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

"Go to the things themselves."—HUSSERL

"No object implies the existence of any other."—HUME

"There is nothing more to things than what can be discovered by listing the totality of the descriptions which they satisfy."

—A. J. AYER

If it can be safely assumed that all things are equal, separate, and unrelated, we are obliged to concede that they (things) can be named and described but never defined or explained. If, furthermore, we bracket-out all questions that, due to the nature of language, are undiscussible (such as why did this or that come to exist, or what does it mean) it will then be possible to say that the entire

* Revised version of the article "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism" which appeared in *Arts Magazine*, Summer, 1967.

† "Serial Forms," in the exhibition catalogue *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967.

being of an object, in this case an art object, is in its appearance. Things being whatever it is they happen to be, all we can know about them is derived directly from how they appear.

What is thought about art is usually only thought about because it has been thought about that way before. Whatever art is, it is, and criticism, which is language, is something different. Language comes to terms with art by creating parallel structures or transposing, both of which are less than adequate. (That doesn't mean, however, I think that it is true that nothing can be said except about language itself.)

Criticism has traditionally consisted of one of three approaches: "impressionistic" criticism, which has concerned itself with the effects of the work of art on the observer—individual responses; "historical" criticism, which has dealt with an *a posteriori* evolution of forms and techniques—what is between works; and "metaphorical" criticism, which has contrived numerous analogies—most recently to scientism. What has been generally neglected is a concern with the object of art in terms of its own material individuality—the thing itself.

Two criteria are important if such an attempt is to be made. First, the considerations should be concrete (deal with the facts of the thing itself). Second, they should be simplificatory (provide an intellectually economic structure for the group of facts obtained). The latter is necessary because description alone can never adequately locate things. In fact, it very often confers upon them an enigmatic position. Nonetheless it offers more interesting possibilities than the impressionistic, historic, or metaphoric approach.

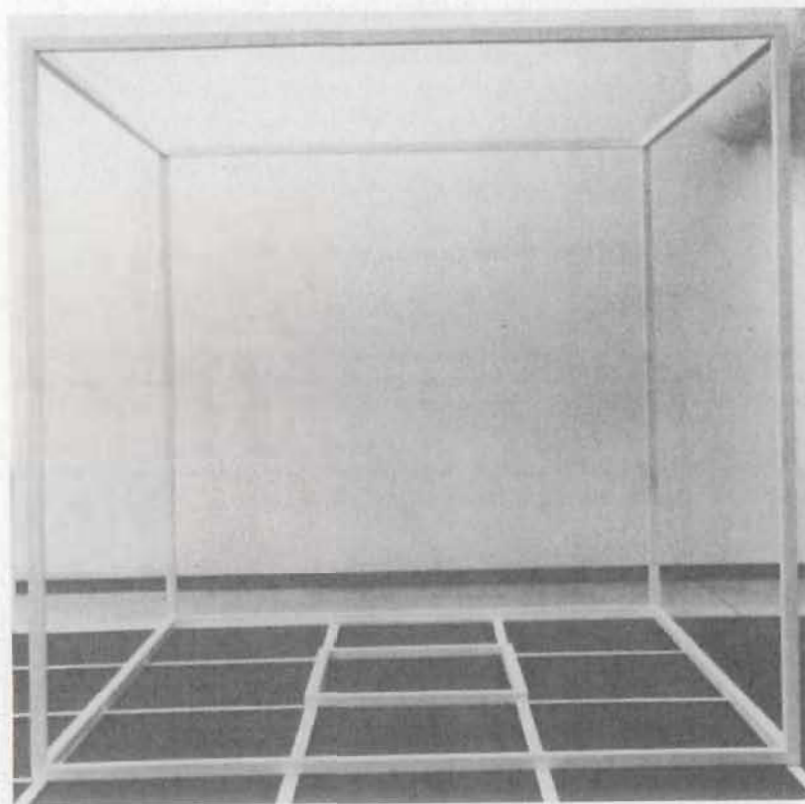
Everything that exists is three-dimensional and "takes up" space (space considered as the medium in which the observer lives and moves). Art objects are qualitatively different from natural life yet are coextensive with it. This "intrusion factor" is the basis of the *unnaturalness* of all art.

The above is relevant to an examination of certain art being done today. This work cannot be discussed on either stylistic or metaphoric grounds. What it can be said to have in common, though, is a heightened artificiality because of the clearly visible and simply ordered structure it uses. For some artists order itself is the work of art. Others manipulate order on different levels creating both con-

ceptual and perceptual logic. These different kinds of order and the way in which resultant works of art exist in their environments are what I would like to examine.

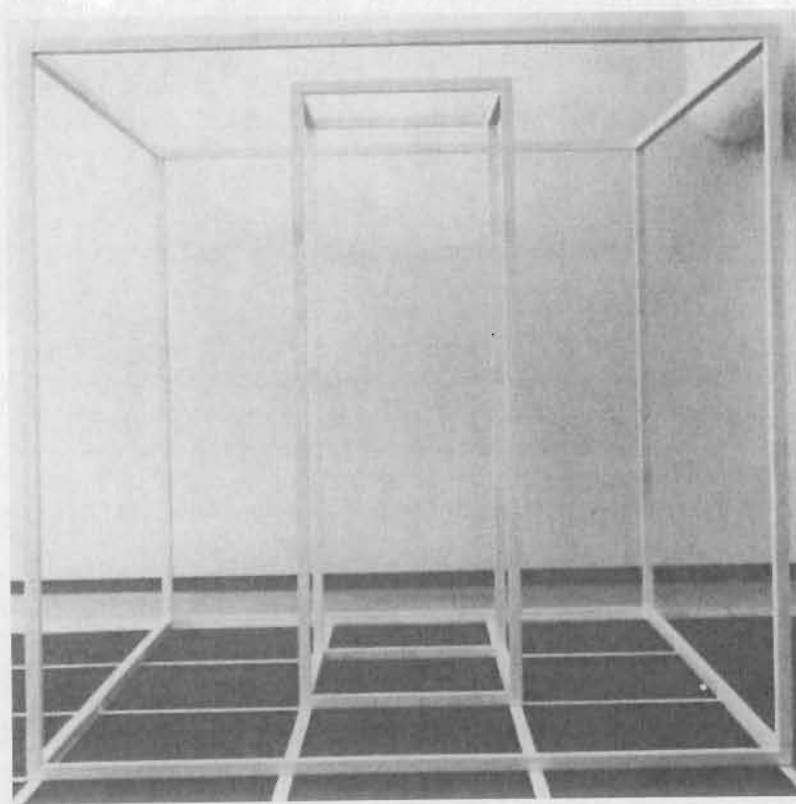
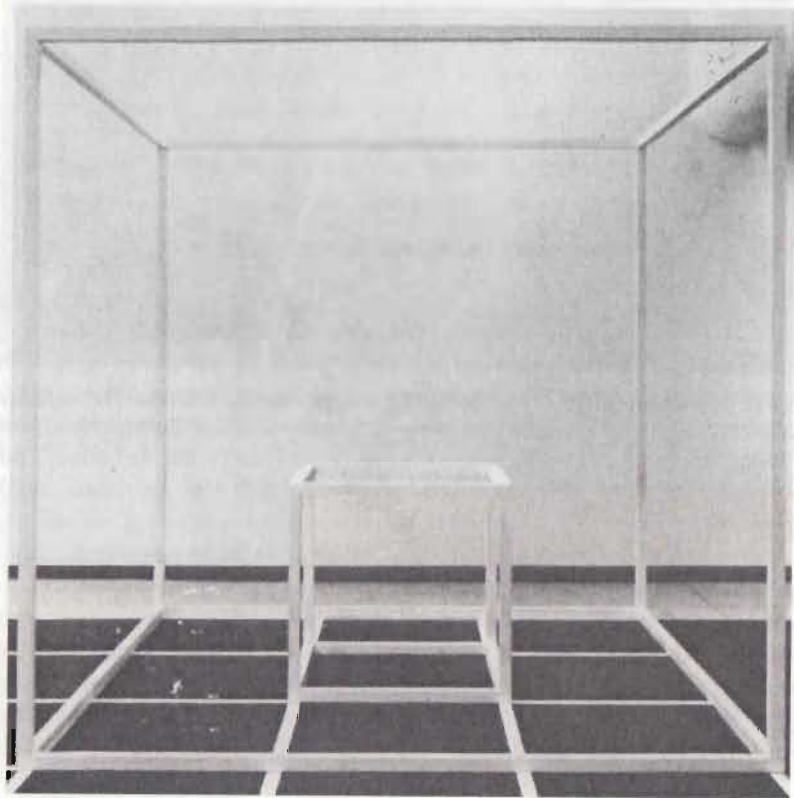
Carl Andre works within a strict, self-imposed modular system. He uses convenient, commercially available objects like bricks, Styrofoam planks, ceramic magnets, cement blocks, wooden beams. Their common denominators are density, rigidity, opacity, uniformity of composition, and roughly geometric shape. A number of *a priori* decisions govern his various pieces. One and only one kind of object is used in each. Individual pieces are specifically conceived for the conditions of the place in which they are to occur. The arrangement of the designated units is made on an orthogonal grid by use of simple arithmetic means. (The word "arrangement" is preferable to "composition." "Composition" usually means the adjustment of the parts, i.e., their size, shape, color, or placement, to arrive at the finished work, whose exact nature is not known beforehand. "Arrangement" implies the fixed nature of the parts and a preconceived notion of the whole.) The principal means of cohesion in Andre's pieces is weight (gravity), the results of another *a priori*: no use of adhesives or complicated joints. This necessitates their appearance on the floor in horizontal configurations, like rows or slabs. Although earlier pieces made of Styrofoam planks are large and space consuming (a principal quality of Styrofoam being its "bloatedness"), recently Andre's work has tended to be more unassuming. Height is a negligible dimension in these recent pieces, probably partly because of the instability of unadhered stacks. At any rate this causes the pieces to exist below the observer's eye-level. They are made to be "looked down upon," impinging very slightly on common space. It is, however, just this persistent slightness that is essentially unavoidable and their bald matter-of-factness that makes them in a multiple sense *present*.

Artists like Andre are further differentiated (as all artists are) by their individual methodology, which in relation to the methodology of the past can only be termed systematic. Systematic thinking has generally been considered the antithesis of artistic thinking. Systems are characterized by regularity, thoroughness, and repetition in execution. They are methodical. It is their consistency and the continu-

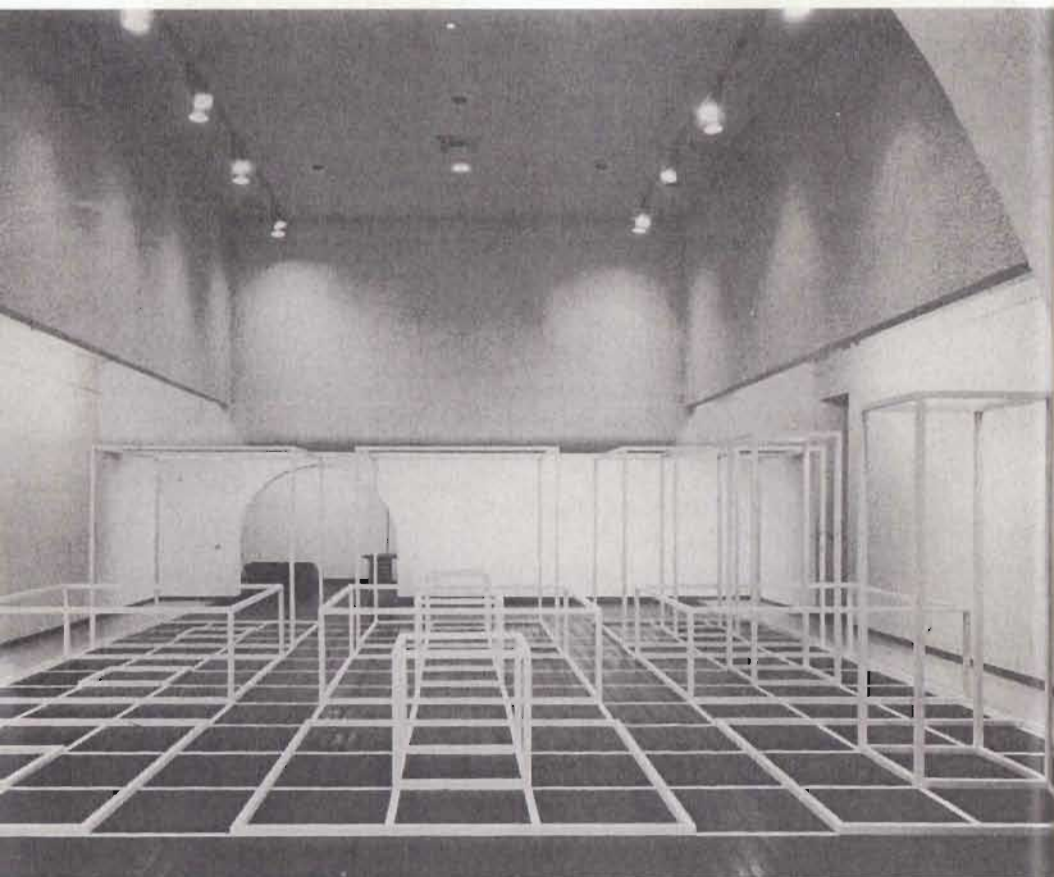


Sol LeWitt: *Series A #7*. 1967. Baked enamel on aluminum. Inside: 1½" x 28" x 28". Outside: 81" x 81" x 81". Photograph courtesy of Dwan Gallery, New York.

Sol LeWitt: *Series A #8*, 1967. Baked enamel on aluminum. Inside: 28" x 28" x 28". Outside: 81" x 81" x 81". Photograph courtesy of Dwan Gallery, New York.



Sol LeWitt: *Series A #9*, 1967. Baked enamel on aluminum. Inside: 81" x 28" x 28". Outside: 81" x 81" x 81". Photograph courtesy of Dwan Gallery, New York.



Sol LeWitt: *Series A*. 1967. Installation view. Baked enamel on aluminum. Photograph courtesy of Dwan Gallery, New York.

ity of application that characterizes them. Individual parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in the way they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole.

One of the first artists to make use of a basically progressional procedure was Dan Flavin. A salient example of this is his 1964 *Nominal Three—to Wm. of Ockham*. (“Posit no more entities than are necessary.”—William of Ockham.) The simple series involved can be graphically visualized as $(1 + [1 + 1] + [1 + 1 + 1])$.

Flavin, however, is difficult to come to terms with in even a quasi-objective discussion. For, although his placement of fluorescent lamps parallel and adjacent to one another in varying numbers or sizes is “flat-footed” and obvious, the results are anything but. It is just these “brilliant” results that confound and compound the difficulties.

Although in no way involved with environmental art, both Andre and Flavin exhibit acute awareness of the phenomenology of rooms. Andre’s false floors, Flavin’s demolished corners convert the simple facts of “roomness” into operative artistic factors. In Flavin’s most recent exhibition (January, 1967) he restricted his modules to cool-white lamps in 8-foot, 6-foot, and 2-foot lengths. These, in various combinations, were placed in the corners or directly in the center of the walls. The fixtures themselves were obliterated by cross shadows, and the light, which also intensely accentuated all the phenomena of the gallery—the tilted floor, false wall, leaning door, excessively baroque fireplace. Consequently the room seemed dematerialized and a vacancy ensued that was as much part of the work as the arrangement of the fixtures. Flavin’s gaseous light is indescribable except as *space*, if, once again, we consider space as a medium. Flavin “fills” the space in direct proportion to his illumination of it.

Up until about fifteen years ago all light came as points. All sources of illumination, including the sun, were singular and radiated from a point source. With the proliferation of fluorescent lighting a perceptual revolution occurred with probably deeper significance than the invention of the light bulb (which still created chiaroscuro shadows). Light now occurs in long straight lines obliterating shadows. It can, in effect, surround. For Flavin (who does not “use” light in the sense of the so-called “light artists”) this is an

important fact. It is due to this that he attains such a high degree of artificiality and unnaturalness (what Bertolt Brecht referred to as "the alienation effect").

"It is, of course, a misnomer to speak of my experience. Experience is simply whatever experiential facts there happen to be. It is quite impersonal and is not in any sense mine. In fact, except in the sense that 'I' am a certain configuration of experience, the word 'I' has no significance."—J.R. WEINBERG

For the solipsist reality is not enough. He denies the existence of anything outside the self-enclosed confines of his own mind. (Sartre refers to solipsism as "the reef," for it "amounts to saying that outside me nothing exists." Schopenhauer speaks of the solipsist as "a madman shut up in an impregnable blockhouse.") Viewed within the boundaries of thought, the random dimensions of reality lose their qualities of extension. They become flat and static. Serial art in its highly abstract and ordered manipulation of thought is likewise self-contained and nonreferential. Such diverse artists as Edward Muybridge, Jasper Johns, Larry Poons, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Jo Baer, Robert Smithson, Hanne Darbroven, Dorothea Rockburne, Ed Ruscha, Eva Hesse, Paul Mogensen, Dan Graham, Alfred Jensen, William Kolakoski, and myself have used serial methodology. Seriality is premised on the idea that the succession of terms (divisions) within a single work is based on a numerical or otherwise predetermined derivation (progression, permutation, rotation, reversal) from one or more of the preceding terms in that piece. Furthermore the idea is carried out to its logical conclusion, which, without adjustments based on taste or chance, is the work. No stylistic or material qualities unite the artists using this approach because what form the work takes is unimportant (some of these artists have ceased to make "things"). The only artistic parallel to this procedure would be in music. J.S. Bach's *Art of the Fugue* or works by Schoenberg, Stockhausen, and Boulez exhibit similar ideas about how works of art can be made based on the application of rigorous governing logics rather than on personal decision making.

Sol LeWitt's serial work takes a particularly flat, nonemphatic position. His complex, multipart structures are the consequence of a rigid system of logic that excludes individual personality factors as much as possible. As a system it serves to enforce the boundaries of his work as "things-in-the-world" separate from both maker and observer.

LeWitt's recent West Coast exhibition (one-quarter of the proposal he exhibited at the Dwan Gallery, New York City, "Scale Models" exhibition) is an interesting example of seriality. First, a governing set of decisions are made. The first cause is an open frame square placed on the floor in the center of a larger square, ratio 1:9, which in extension becomes a cube within a cube, ratio 1:27. The next limitation that is made are the three height variables:

- 1) LOW—the height of the cross-section of the bar of which the entire ensemble is constructed.
- 2) MEDIUM—the height of one cube (arbitrary).
- 3) HIGH—three times the height of 2).

Then the variable combinations of open frame and/or closed volume are considered in the four binomial possibilities: open inside–open outside; open inside–closed outside; closed inside–open outside; closed inside–closed outside. No mathematics are involved in operations like these. Happily there seems to be little or no connection between art and mathematics. When numbers are used it is generally as a convenient regulating device, a logic external to both the time and place of application.

When one encounters a LeWitt, although an order is immediately intuited, how to apprehend or penetrate it is nowhere revealed. Instead one is overwhelmed with a mass of data—lines, joints, angles. By controlling so rigidly the conception of the work and never adjusting it to any predetermined ideas of how a work of art should look, LeWitt arrives at a unique perceptual breakdown of conceptual order into visual chaos. The pieces situate in centers usurping most of the common space, yet their total volume (the volume of the bar itself) is negligible. Their immediate presence in reality as separate and unrelated things is asserted by the demand that we go around them. What is most remarkable is that they are

seen moment to moment spatially (due to a mental tabulation of the entirety of other views), yet do not cease at every moment to be flat.

Some may say, and justifiably, that there is a "poetry" or "power" or some other quality to this work that an approach like the above misses. But aspects like those exist for individuals and are difficult to communicate using conventional meanings for words. Others may claim that given this they are still bored. If this is the case, their boredom may be the product of being forced to view things not as sacred but as they probably are—autonomous and indifferent.

THE RAZED SITES OF CARL ANDRE* by David Bourdon

The sculpture of Carl Andre is more than simply flat. In the pieces discussed in this article Andre demonstrates a new use, or possibly non-use of space. Several conclusions can be drawn from these sculptures: that it is the lowest level of space that counts most; that the space above that level can be filled without being enclosed; and that, ultimately, it is human scale that determines sculptural scale.

David Bourdon was born in Los Angeles in 1934. He is a graduate of Columbia University, and a former art critic for *The Village Voice*. He has written for many publications including *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Art and Artists*, *Domus*, and *Konstrevy*. He is an Assistant Editor at *Life* magazine.

One of the most drastic works in the Jewish Museum's "Primary Structures" show last season was Carl Andre's *Lever*—a single line of 139 unjoined firebricks. This brick causeway, meeting one wall perpendicularly, ran across the middle of the floor for 34½ feet, stopping short of a doorway. Like most of Andre's work, *Lever* was designed for a specific area. Andre deliberately chose a room with two entrances, so that from one entrance the spectator had a vista of an unbroken line of bricks, while from the other entrance he confronted its terminus. The title referred ironically to the French infinitive "to raise" as well as the English word denoting a rigid bar. Though *Lever* was singled out by critics as one of the half-dozen key works in the Jewish Museum show, Andre had already razed structure to practice the art of zoning. His own terse account of modern sculpture goes like this:

- The course of development
- Sculpture as form
- Sculpture as structure
- Sculpture as place.

* Reprinted from *Artforum*, October, 1966.