

Art in America

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More than Minimalism: The Algorithmic Turn at the Kitchen

by Charles Eppley



View of Mary Lucier's installation *Color Phantoms with Automatic Writing*, 2015; in "From Minimalism into Algorithm," 2016, at the Kitchen, New York. Courtesy the Kitchen, New York. Photo Jason Mandella.



In 2016 you'd be hard-pressed to find artists working in any medium who don't consider the role of technology in their work. But the history of artists' response to technological innovation has gone underexplored. "From Minimalism into Algorithm," an ambitious program at the Kitchen unfolding over the 2015-16 season, considers the roles of seriality, speculation and networked communication in art from the 1960s to the present. A slate of performances and one exhibition unfolding in three parts (on view Jan. 8-30, Feb. 4-27 and Mar. 3-Apr. 2) consider the past half-century of art through this algorithmic lens. Spanning from static objects to the digital and performing genres, the ambitious program includes over 50 artists, who helped organize the program along with the Kitchen's curatorial staff.

A.i.A. spoke to Tim Griffin, the Kitchen's executive director, about the nonprofit's history of showing new-media work, its position as a dialogue generator, the role of corporate aesthetics in this exhibition, and more.

CHARLES EPPLEY The title "From Minimalism into Algorithm" sets up a certain momentum. This exhibition is not about Minimalism necessarily, but rather viewing the practices of Minimalist artists as points of origin . . .

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TIM GRIFFIN . . . or acknowledging our own place even as we look back. The Kitchen is a nonprofit, so we do not have a museum collection to offer the pretense of historical accuracy—perhaps there is no such thing exactly—but one can nevertheless acknowledge one's position. Certainly that is a reason why artists seem excited by "From Minimalism into Algorithm," because it's talking about a contemporary situation, and yet you're also seeing it with a reflexive historical perspective.

EPPLEY The curatorial text talks about the ideas of space and place as they informed a theatricality in Minimalism, as well as the increasingly mediated sociospatial contexts of an emergent digital age. I am thinking of artists like Dan Graham, who used magazine and broadcast media, and about your own transition from editorial to curatorial work. Environmental or mediated space seems to be a core element of the show—a "through line," as you put it—which connects disparate artistic practices. The show places into dialogue artists who are not often shown together, e.g., Laurie Spiegel and Charles Gaines.

GRIFFIN There are two ways in which the idea of space is most clearly taken up in this exhibition: the viewer experience, and material conditions. Under the sway of theatricality and phenomenology, the viewer's traversal of space became a way to complete the object: this was how Minimalism was prominently discussed in its own time. More recently, attention to experience in a postindustrial context has overtaken the object in some regards, and we can ask how that manifests in terms of artistic production and how we relate to objects. And as a corollary to that, our experience of materials is different now than it was 40 or 50 years ago, due to the introduction of new media and various technologies. The way we encounter a Judd today is not the same as how we may have encountered it 40 years ago.

EPPLEY You and others involved in organizing this show are trying to manage this conversation primarily through a theme of seriality. Do you find seriality different than serialism?

GRIFFIN The exhibition emerged, in part, through looking at the Kitchen's history and seeing how a seriality in musical composition paralleled a seriality in artistic production. Artists such as Philip Glass and Richard Serra, or Laurie Spiegel and Tony Conrad, were living near each other and seeing each other's work, and yet that connection has never really been explored or articulated very significantly to my knowledge. If, instead of privileging a vocabulary of visual art, we can look at what happened in musical composition—where, say, the heirs to Philip Glass have literally used algorithms—we might be able to learn something through an analogy to visual art.

There is a particular mode of seriality put forward here in the work of Glass, Conrad, and Vera Molnar, which on the one hand deals with a kind of repetition, but on the other

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suggests a nascent algorithmic programming—a way in which protocols are set in motion. So it becomes a speculative departure point.

EPPLEY The concept of serialism is complicated when one tries to discern connections between postwar music and art. People play lip service to these connections without, as you say, looking at them with critical nuance or without an aim to find out how these connections manifested. Thinking of Glass as a serialist is interesting, given the weight of the term in music, which associates the concept with composers like Arnold Schoenberg, who wrote atonal music using a 12-tone row system. There is a connection through a mode-mechanized algorithmic composition, but Schoenberg's music is much different from that of Glass aesthetically and philosophically.

And so regarding the connection of Glass, and perhaps Steve Reich, to serialism broadly, did these works actually point toward a new mode of serialism—or a post-serialism?

GRIFFIN We are hoping to have evening discussions where this conversation is parsed. For example, Spiegel very much says, well, there is Minimalism and serial repetition, but there is also phasing and gradients. There are a number of musical terminologies that she wants to introduce that might offer interesting implications for visual art.

EPPLEY The ideas of serialism and algorithm, if we think of them bluntly, are quite static. Spiegel is referencing, as are many works in the exhibition—such as Molnar's early use of algorithmic computer illustration and Cheyney Thompson's paintings composed by the Brownian motion theory in finance—a mode of serialism where algorithmic systems are toppling, folding on themselves, or generating forms beyond a simple concept of repetition. This idea of generative systems as tangential to the artist's original mark or gesture, setting forms into an ecological system, is striking. If we think about Glass and his music as a mode of serialism, then it is a morphing type—not quite auto-generative because it is composed—but there are unforeseen results. Spiegel does this in her computer art by employing customized software to generate evolving formal systems.

GRIFFIN If you look at the Donald Judd sculpture on view, it is literally folded onto itself, like it is one and yet two.

EPPLEY I am eager to hear what people say about these connections. There is a lot of work to be done because someone can say, okay, consider Philip Glass, Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Yoshi Wada, Charlemagne Palestine, Walter De Maria—the downtown scene had many convergences of avant-garde music and art. But have these intersections been taken for granted?

GRIFFIN What you are saying tempts me to note, or be mindful of, the fact that many of these individuals have disavowed the term Minimalism. This is fine for our purposes, but it is worthwhile to say that there is a skewed view put forward in the gallery. We sought to acknowledge our own position literally, insofar as many of the works have been

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shown at the Kitchen before. Maybe they appeared here in 1974 or 1982. To make the site itself speak, or to have the history speak through the site, is what we wanted to do. There are many variances beyond the tale that the Kitchen might tell.

EPPLEY You mentioned that the Kitchen is not a museum with a permanent collection. What does the space offer to this type of art historical investigation?

GRIFFIN I'd certainly be curious to see what this exhibition would be with museum resources. I will say that we can move with a different sense of immediacy, both in terms of what objects are shown and with the notion of live conversation. In this particular program, we sought continuing input from the artists. The Agnieszka Kurant sculptures were made by termites, through a kind of collective authorship; that collaborative piece evokes a great deal when it comes to the creation of narratives in a contemporary media environment. This exhibition took advantage of that collectivity: "Charles Gaines, who would you like to see in the show?" "Zoe Leonard, who would you like to see in the show?" "Ed Atkins, who would you like to see in the show? How does this make you think?" Not everything figures into the exhibition but there is an implicit acknowledgment that there is a discursive field generated by the participants, and that can be undertaken in a more immediately exploratory way by a place like the Kitchen.

In a less highfalutin way, it's just interesting to see a Judd in a space like this, or a Max Ernst collage.

EPPLEY Do you feel that this ability to cultivate a sense of immediacy, openness, and collectivity is somehow written into the DNA of the Kitchen itself, as an artist-founded and generally autonomous institution?

GRIFFIN It is definitely written into the Kitchen. But it is also something you have to respect and sustain in the space. The Kitchen doesn't have the same resources as larger institutions, but it has the luxury of letting a project unfold according to its own logic. There is some place for the unknown here.

EPPLEY One striking work in the show is the Mary Lucier installation, which is a conglomerate of materials and sounds belonging to the late composer Robert Ashley, including the recorded composition *Automatic Writing* (1979). This is a seminal work of experimental music, but again it is rarely discussed in an explicitly art historical context. There is a moment in the composition, which you can listen to in the installation, when you actually hear music from Ashley's neighbor, or some contiguous room, bleed into the recording. The intrusion evokes an ecology.

GRIFFIN When Ashley died we were working on a piece for the Kitchen, and his wife, Mimi Johnson, wanted to continue that project. So his new opera piece with Steve Paxton, *Quicksand*, will be presented [from Jan. 28-Feb. 6] in the program in the theater

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downstairs. Lucier wanted to do something related to that work, and she ended up making something of a memorial project. The piece includes her own video piece *Phantoms* (1971) along with many objects that Ashley owned. He is a phantom presence. For Lucier that intersected with her understanding of technology and the increased mediation that affords us access to each other within networks, but nevertheless pushes one away. The installation is the exhibition's playful subconscious.

EPPLEY The show also contains a subtle display of corporate identity. The symbols of capital and commercial technology are a recurring presence. That technology has not been destroyed, detoured, or is even hand-built, but is rather clearly manufactured and industrialized. You see the names of corporations that manufacture computer paper, as in the work of Tony Conrad and other computer graphics pieces, or, in the case of Spiegel, the Apple logo. She was hired to produce music software for the company that was bundled in an early operating system. How does this corporate specter intersect with other themes of criticality, media saturation and networked identity?

GRIFFIN For the exhibition's first phase, we wanted to set up the historical consciousness of the role corporations played in our understanding of identity, as well as the construction of our lived environment. Two decades ago, the art world was very alarmed by the corporatization of art and culture, on the one hand, and the use of Minimalism and its tenets in contemporary design, on the other. So an awareness of those dynamics and of that moment is implicated here.

I would say that Richard Serra's video *Television Delivers People* (1973), for example [in the first round of the exhibition], is not only critical in illustrating these positions, but critical in its adversarial position vis-à-vis those dynamics. That piece looks at media and its informing of identity through corporate forces. It also is played out through Paul Sietsema's use of sections from the *Financial Times*, which makes the actual color of the paper a means of branding the drawing. Later phases of the exhibition will begin to register the shifting relationship of the individual to corporations, modes of production, and the aesthetics of administration in art, from 1971 to today.

EPPLEY The Conrad printout piece, which he produced while working at *Life* magazine, which I had never seen . . .

GRIFFIN [Laughter] Nobody has.

EPPLEY . . . has quite a bit of anti-corporate antagonism. The act of printing out a hundred or so pages of a single letter over and over—in this case, H—was explicitly wasteful. He was depleting company resources.

GRIFFIN It's an excellent example of doing your own work on the company's time. Many artistic practices now take on corporate identities in their work. This was a very

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present if not ubiquitous theme in the middle to late 1990s. It's worth looking at that again.

EPPLEY The work in this initial exhibition seems very prescient. It's significant that these artists did not feel the need to cut off the strip that says "Printed by this company," or to conceal the fact that they worked for a corporation at the time they were making the work.

GRIFFIN Conrad was very forthcoming about what he was doing. The artists in the appropriation generation that came up after him, like Richard Prince, were also pretty free in saying they were using, for example, the editing tables at magazines to make work critiquing the media at large—using the industry's own tools in order to offer a rejoinder. Being in that environment, having tools and a proximity to media, feeds the work.

EPPLEY This exhibition is unusual in that it will change form over its three-month duration. It's evolving, and seems to have something of a tripartite, networked format. There is also a theater performance program. How is the show going to change over coming months?

GRIFFIN The performances are part of the exhibition. I'll be curious when Glenn Branca shows up to perform in February. The gallery will be open, so you'll see his performance and go upstairs. That's a moment of contiguity without a doubt. We will have composers like Nico Muhly, Julius Eastman, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk, Tristan Perich and Eliane Radigue, and others artists like Tauba Auerbach and Charles Gaines. Since we wanted the exhibition to be in motion, we thought about generating a score, but it ended up feeling too formulaic.

The addition-removal model kept with that spirit.