



SERIALITY AND INSANITY: THE AESTHETICS OF ADMINISTRATION REVISITED

ANNE FERRAN'S 1-38

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This dispassionate title, *1-38*, might suggest a method drawn from the heyday of conceptual art. Or if not a method, an attitude: *1-38* recalls what Mel Bochner described as the serial attitude.¹ The serial attitude is neutral, detached, focussed on cataloguing the results of a proposition, like a scientist would, or as Sol Le Witt so clearly perceived, like a bureaucrat. Le Witt described his own aims in precisely these terms:

The aim of the artist would not be to instruct the viewer but to give him information... One would follow one's predetermined premise to its conclusion, avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste, or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of the premise.²

And does *1-38* conform to these aims? Partly, but the attitude of detachment and the method of repetition are perversely turned to expressive ends. It is this reinvention of seriality that is the focus of this essay.

The serial attitude is most evident in the central component of Ferran's recent exhibition at Stills Gallery in Sydney; the component, like the exhibition, is titled *1-38* (2003). This work is my central concern. It is comprised of thirty-eight separate but identically sized inkjet prints on paper, assembled into a long continuous sequence running along one wall and turning the corner onto the next. The sequence is punctuated by strips of white which join and separate individual photographic cells. From a distance the photographs have a pristine, crisp quality, the carefully controlled tones and consistent format recall the self-imposed limits of Bernd and Hilla Bechers' serial photography, but without the severity. In Ferran's work the preference for a consistent tonal range of subdued greys is enlivened by the addition of a variety of soft tints, and the width of the photographs and corresponding white borders also varies slightly. In combination, these subtle variations allow something like a rhythm to develop across and between the thirty-eight modules. Following Bochner and Le Witt, we can clearly see that a procedure has been conducted thirty-eight times and it follows a consistent method: the result is thirty-eight instances of a phenomenon showing thirty-eight permutations of

a proposition. And the result is a series, governed by this proposition. But what is the proposition?

To answer this question we need to shift away from dispassionate method, and breathe life back into what has been rendered as mere numerical phenomenon. The phenomena are women. Women, Ferran tells us, who were photographed in 1948; female patients in a Sydney psychiatric hospital. Ferran found an archive of photographs of these women. The original photographs were all three-quarter-length portraits of women posed outside the hospital buildings. Ferran reports that the patient is always roughly centred in the image and that a nurse, or nurses, appears in about half of the photographs; sometimes just their hand appears, at other times they too are included in the picture. Ferran has tried to investigate the origins of this archive, however, the photographer remains unknown, as does the purpose of this catalogue. The hospital records from the 1940s, indicating the names of the male and female patients and dates of admission and discharge, were not correlated with the photographs. The identity of the individuals photographed is thus irretrievably lost.

Ferran further preserves their anonymity by showing us only a small slice of the original

photograph: an enlarged mid-section of the body, sometimes with hands, their gestures rendered somehow more intense by being divorced from the more usual index of feeling—the face. One might think that the face was the central subject of this photographic scrutiny, following the nineteenth-century desire to find the face of insanity or criminality, although what Georges Didi-Huberman describes as the very first ‘photographs of lunacy’ taken of women in the Surrey County Asylum in 1851 by Doctor Hugh W. Diamond, similarly favour the three-quarter length portrait.³ In Diamond’s photographs, we can clearly see the proposition being illustrated or demonstrated: each was surmounted by a legend to designate the subject investigated, and this subject was not the particular woman but the type she exemplified. The hands of one woman clasped in prayer then become crucial to demonstrate the legend, ‘religious mania’; the poor body tonus of another shows ‘melancholy passing into mania’.

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conceptualism, such as those of Bochner and Sol Le Witt. Buchloh’s term brings to mind the idea that the artist simply follows a method in an impersonal (perhaps even mindless) manner, without question, without deviation, like a good civil servant. And the good civil servant, we should note, can stretch from Adolf Eichmann to the concentration camp commander.⁵ To transpose Buchloh’s term to

institutional photography of both the nineteenth and twentieth century reveals not so much the origins of this method of art practice but the very peculiar nature of its reoccurrence in the 1960s. The serial method of institutional photography is repeated by the neo-avant-garde, and the serial artist, like the unknown photographer, merely administers a method expressly designed to minimise their presence in the results.

Buchloh links the evacuation of responsibility that results from this method to the questioning of

the fuzzy kind of intentionality that art displays. To set oneself the task of measuring a room and notating all its dimensions on the walls themselves (Mel Bochner, *Measurement Room*, 1969), or documenting every building on Sunset Strip (Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on Sunset Strip* 1966) are acts with no justification beyond the completion of the task itself.

Joseph Kosuth’s idea that conceptual art is fundamentally tautological is well demonstrated by these examples; the premise of the work simply is the work, certainly nothing new is discovered. However, the pointlessness of these tasks and their deadpan execution also underscore a kind of inductive reason made ridiculous. The catalogue that results from the actions merely discloses the arbitrary set of examples chosen, nothing typical emerges, and most importantly no concept or clear and distinct idea can be deduced from the examples. Serial art in other words shows the impossibility of showing a concept. The so-called ‘examples



opposite page and above: Anne Ferran, detail 1-38, 2003. 38 inkjet prints on archival paper, each 32.8 x 48.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney.

Without such explanatory legends, the purpose of the archive Ferran has uncovered remains a mystery. We can assume that the photographs were not used to identify the particular individuals concerned in the manner of a police record or this information would have been carefully preserved with the photographs. Perhaps they served a similar purpose to their nineteenth-century cousins, but surely by 1948 the visual catalogue of insanity was already complete? All we can clearly discern in the archive is the eye of some kind of institutional surveillance and the operation of what we might call an ‘aesthetic of administration’.⁴

This expression was coined by Benjamin Buchloh to describe the serial practices of early

authorship and in particular to Barthes’ infamous essay ‘The Death of the Author’ which appeared in the same issue of *Aspen 5 + 6* as Sol Le Witt’s essay quoted above. Buchloh’s analysis ultimately favours conceptual practices that perform a more pointed form of institutional critique, but perhaps this misses the madness in the method of the aesthetic of administration, which could be construed as a very powerful critique of modern bureaucracy.

These neo-avant-garde practices show an extreme form of over-compliance with bureaucratic methods, the propositions they explore are truly indicative of purposiveness without purpose, which, we should recall, is Kant’s definition of

obdurately refuse to cohere into a generalisation instead they constantly threaten to break away from the uneasy control of the series, fragmenting into ever more miniscule particulars. The exercises then, like so many futile bureaucratic exercises (in which, unfortunately, we are all engaged) are time-wasting collections of useless data.

Ferran’s archive of photographs, without identifying legends, similarly lays bare this folly of inductive reason. She encourages us to have a kind of split attention on the question of inductive reason; to her work in the present and the archive on which it is based. When we think of the archive we cannot see any concept being illustrated; we can see only the remnants of the method. The method



nonetheless encourages us to assume that the photographs aimed to discover something just like their nineteenth-century precedents, that the women stripped of individual identity were assumed to be, or treated as, examples of something; that they were not simply cases, but case studies who could be said to be typical or in some way exemplary of some psychic ailment. But we also cannot avoid the contrary proposition that they were simply an arbitrary sample of patients who happened to be in the psychiatric hospital in 1948 and were subjected to the photographic process. In other words, by the mid-twentieth century the method may have degenerated to the status of a tautology brought

Pain is much more discrete, indirect and mundane in Ferran's images. It surfaces slowly through implication and a kind of interrogation of the possible meanings of the details Ferran has selected. Let me run through just some of the disturbing details and the questions they might pose: a glimpse of a very creased woollen jacket (how did this get so crumpled?); a coat radically misbuttoned (why capture for all time this sorry mistake?); part of a body awkwardly tilted away from the camera as if reeling back from an assault (what caused this eloquent and disinhibited startle response?); the side of a body with one hand shown with fingers strangely splayed (is this an expression

the contagious tone of sadness. The serial method serves this variety well: the pitiable circumstances of the women in straightjackets do not eclipse or allow us to forget the neatly dressed women with a canister in her hands. As John Coplans so insightfully remarked, each individual work in a series has equal value, its particular qualities becoming more emphatic when seen in context rather than in isolation.⁸

In Ferran's work, one carefully attends to each permutation of the institutionalised woman, scrutinising every small indication of age, demeanour, fragility, dependence, distress, neglect and so forth. In other words, the dissolution into



to the fore by neo-avantgarde serial practices—it is a method that generates nothing, no insight, no knowledge, just data.

When we look at the images reconfigured by Ferran, a concept does emerge from the thirty-eight examples. Following Didi-Huberman, we can say that they all speak to us of pain.⁷ Not the dramatic representation of psychic pain we might see in the Salpêtrière photographic archive, which is Didi-Huberman's object of study. In those images the hysteric's convulsed body is shown in action and, as it were, scene by painful scene; each facial grimace and contorted pose of her affliction is documented in sequence to illustrate the phases of 'the great hysterical attack'.

of fear, alarm or is it an involuntary spasm?); a close-up of a v-necked tunic with puckers straining the fabric backwards (this dull institution garb, is it a straight-jacket?); an arm arched and pulled well away from the body by the nurse's firm two-handed grip (is the strange position of the arm the result of the patient exerting a counterforce, trying to escape?); a kind of sack-like form (is this another figure sheathed in some immobilising garment?).

Not all of the images are open to this kind of analysis; some fragments show no obvious sign of distress, disarray or neglect. They are more enigmatic or less decipherable participants in this strange catalogue of human frailty, but as part of the ensemble of internment they also are infected by

particulars allows a rehumanisation of these unnamed women. Curiously, we are encouraged to consider them as distinct individuals precisely because they are represented in partial and fragmentary form. We are, as it were, given the task of reassembling them, delivering back to them some of the specificity that time and the institutional eye may have taken from them. Like a homeopathic method, seriality combats seriality. The nineteenth-century quest to extract the typical from a series of examples hits up against a series of recalcitrant particulars. Or to put it another way, the lesson of neo-avantgarde serial practice, its refusal to rise above the immanent, is renewed and turned to some practical use.



opposite page and above: Anne Ferran, detail 1-38, 2003. 38 inkjet prints on archival paper, each 32.8 x 48.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney.

'Practical' is perhaps an awkward and misleading word to use here; it suggests a utilitarian attitude to art, or worse a purely instrumental use of this method. Neither of which applies to Ferran's work. It would be more accurate to say that what distinguishes Ferran's serial method is the uncoupling of the link between seriality and certain kinds of refusal. An extensive list of such refusals could be compiled, however, three refusals characteristic of the neo-avantgarde are particularly relevant here: the refusal of artistic responsibility (*à la* Death of the Author), the refusal to speak other than in tautology, and the refusal of the aesthetic—the famed deskilling of conceptual art. Ferran has

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not used the serial form to abrogate responsibility, she is very definitely in aesthetic control of this archive: cropping, tinting, size, scale and so forth are clearly the result of careful and thoughtful aesthetic decisions. And the result is that the images are quite beautiful. This term also needs scare quotes and careful use. By invoking beauty, I do not mean to join the chorus of American critics who are heralding the return of beauty as the demise of anti-aesthetic conceptual practices or to twin this return with the embrace of romantic expressivity.⁹ Rather, I want to suggest that beauty and emotional engagement are not incompatible with conceptually informed practice.

Of course, there are compelling critiques of the aestheticisation of social issues such as that made by Alan Sekula. He rails against liberal social documentary, which he acerbically calls the 'find-a-bum school of concerned photography'.¹⁰ He, like the defenders of beauty, makes a strict division between critical practice and aesthetics. He argues: 'The subjective aspect of liberal aesthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of "great art",

supplants political understanding'.¹¹ It is interesting to consider whether this strict division, adhered to by both sides of the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic debate, is actually plausible. Do we really believe that feeling is so overpowering or disorganising that understanding is supplanted?

Certainly, if we consider Ferran's work, the feelings of pain and sympathy aroused by the images are not incompatible with understanding, on the contrary feeling and thinking work in concert as the fragments are deciphered. Similarly, beauty is not so seductive that we somehow lose our heads, nor do we take pleasure in forms of misfortune rendered innocuous by the Midas touch of beauty.

Rather, beauty has a slight anaesthetic effect; it veils what might be overwhelming, giving us time and space to digest. In other words, it works with the serial method to create a distanced thoughtful engagement with the disturbing subject matter. Here, we can see the contemporary relevance of Kant's idea of the disinterested liking that characterises the subjective attitude to the beautiful: the detachment of disinterest provides the distance or space for contemplation and thought.¹²

And thought does not have to take the path of crude critique to be critical. In the earlier days of feminism, the 1980s to be more precise, the institutionalisation of women might well have generated a work which called into question the 'construction of insanity'. This was a time when all negative or painful images of women were subject to relentless deconstruction, after all these images were only constructions, weren't they? Another serial artist, Cindy Sherman, celebrated this inessential woman. Her *Film Stills* cleverly embodied the idea of gender as serial performance. But surely feminism is older and wiser now, and can welcome ambiguous works such as Ferran's

that do not follow this or any other line. And surely we can finally tolerate seeing real signs of psychic disturbance, not a construction we might want to wish away. □

notes

1. Mel Bochner, 'The Serial Attitude', *Artforum*, December 1967.
2. Sol Le Witt, 'Serial Project No.1 (ABCD)', (1966), *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer, Phaidon, London, 2000, p.226.
3. Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria*, trans. Alisa Hartz, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, p.38.
4. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art, 1952–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.
5. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963, and Slavoj Žižek, 'The Concentration-Camp Father', *Trauma and Memory: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Franz Kaltenbeck and Peter Weibel, Passagen Verlag, Vienna, 2000, pp.167–81.
6. Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999.
7. Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria*, op. cit. p.3.
8. John Coplans, *Serial Imagery*, exh cat, Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, 1968, p.11.
9. For example, Bill Beckley posits the return of beauty in contemporary art as a rejection of the anti-aesthetic tradition, which he characterises (or caricatures might be more accurate) as a mordant rejection of sensuousness and pleasure. Bill Beckley, 'Introduction: Generosity and the Black Swan', *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics*, ed. Bill Beckley and David Shapiro, Allworth P., New York, 1998, xiv.
10. Alan Sekula cited in Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate and the Museum', *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., p.170.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, pp.45–6.

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