Rhetorics and Technologies

Stuart A. Selber, Carolyn A. Miller

Published by University of South Carolina Press

➡ For additional information about this book

http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781611172348

Serial Composition

Geoffrey Sirc

Here is the problem: since the first-year composition course began in the late nineteenth century, the primary instructional text, the expository essay, has remained the field's formal constant. To illustrate, we can use John F. Genung's influential 1892 text, *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric*, to limn the stock scene of academic composition. The program proceeds as follows: Selecting material is important, of course, but then comes the real work, "the business of building this material together into literary forms. . . . Out of the scattered elements at command is to be formed a structure of thought, which is to be no crude congeries jumbled together as it happens, but a unified, coherent, organic system. It is to such skilled combination alone that we can rightly apply the name style" (108). The process becomes an orchestration, in which various elements inflect both one another and the larger whole: "How words are related to one another grammatically; how they sound together; how they refer to what precedes or prepare for what follows; how their position is so to be determined as to give them force and distinction in themselves or make them a support to one another,—such questions as these arise at every step, questions to be answered only by constant and studious attention to the logical relations of the thought" (108). It is the theme, the "working-basis" of the work (248) that provides the determinant template for this part-to-whole orchestration; the theme "must be an idea so definite and clear-cut that the writer can resort to it for every step of his work. It is that nucleus-thought, expressed or implicit, which must be in his mind as a central point of reference, a constant determinator and suggester of the scope and limits of his subject" (248–49).

Once the theme is determined, the writer's task is set: namely, to "examine anew the various hints and shades of suggestion that lie involved in the theme, and systematize these into a plan of discourse, in which the accumulated material

shall appear in properly subordinated, proportioned, and progressive sequence" (260). An outline or skeleton plan is constructed, to ensure that properly proportioned sequence, and then comes development of points and ideas, which Genung refers to as *amplification.* There are conventional means by which writers amplify their thoughts (enumerating the particulars of general statements, repetition, and illustration), as well as tools to use (quotation, allusion, suggestion). Editing and polishing follow, of course.

Such, in a nutshell, is the whole of college writing: generation of an essay theme, completion of a topic outline, and stock strategies and techniques for fleshing out the essay, making sure the parts all work together to inflect the whole, helping to produce that *properly subordinated, proportioned, and progressive sequence.* Over the years, about the only thing that has changed in college writing has been the amplification pattern offered students; so, for example, by the seventh edition of *Writing with a Purpose* (1980), McCrimmon offers the following under the rubric "Common Patterns of Development": illustration, comparison, classification, process, and definition (63–89). Roughly 120 years of college writing instruction have elapsed, with all the concomitant changes in culture and technology, and students in first-year composition work the same project in the same form with the same media.

Such has not been the case at all in other scenes with the idea of "composition" as a central focus: artists working in those fields (painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and so on) have understandably chafed under the constraints of established conventions and so created new formal strategies and genres; as those became established, further changes occurred. That dynamic of formal revolution was never mirrored in writing instruction. In this essay, then, I revisit a few of those other compositional scenes to see why, when other fields have changed in interesting ways, college composition has remained static. I choose a few scenes from the 1960s because that was an era when the discipline of writing instruction came closest to radical change, change that would have put college writing on a par with other fields doing intensive interrogation of the forms, means, and institutionalization of their compositions. In the 1960s, artists particularly wanted less ornately inflected styles, using simpler forms and materials, as an alternative to more complicated compositions made with relatively rarefied materials (whose uses one had to study formally to master). Today, with such pervasive technological mediation in our writing courses, we seem to be on another cusp; it is my hope that recuperating prior histories might offer productive reflection for contemporary practice.

Scene 1: Primary Structures

In January 1963 there was a group show at the Green Gallery in New York City, one of a handful of key galleries then clustered together on the Upper East Side. The Green, which opened in 1960, quickly became known as one of the trendiest

in town, always ahead of the curve for showing new art. In fact, the name "Green" was chosen for the gallery to imply newness. This particular 1963 show captured the spirit of newness through its very title, "New Work: Part 1." And among the artists exhibiting in the show were several that were soon to become dominant figures in the history of American art: Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin. Those three, along with Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Anne Truitt, were poised to launch a new movement on the art scene—minimalism—a movement that would hit the international community with amazing force in the next several years; so much so that the first major show of minimalist art, occurring three years later at the Jewish Museum, would be a black-tie affair, swarming with TV crews and paparazzi. That show, the title of which, "Primary Structures," fittingly captured the cool, neutral, reductivist aesthetic of the art, would earn incredible reviews: "A new aesthetic era is upon us," was how Hilton Kramer put it; "This year's Landmark Show," announced the *Times* (qtd. in Meyer 13). Although the excitement over the art is long past, the ideas of the minimalists persist today—not just as expressed in their art, but in their criticism, for they were among the first generation of artists to become known almost as much for their art texts as their art works.

Basically, the minimalists strove to further the abstract expressionist project: to establish a truly modernist art by ridding the artwork of all elements that were not exclusive to it. For minimalist sculptors, the best way to clear out the anthropomorphic illusionism of representational narrative and imagery was by reducing the work to a neutral object. And just as the modernist painters' focus on the materials of painting proved formally generative for them (that is, think of the effects Jackson Pollock achieved using enamel house paint, sticks, and glass basting syringes), so too the minimalist sculptors found that concentrating on matter rather than image changed the entire scene of their composition "from particular forms, to ways of ordering, to methods of production and, finally, to perceptual relevance" (Morris 67–68).

Robert Morris, in a 1966 manifesto of minimalist art entitled "Notes on Sculpture," reacting against perceptual ambiguities in work with "clearly divisible parts," noted that "simpler forms . . . create strong gestalt sensations. Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation" (6). To achieve this strong gestalt, he urged a sculpture of "unitary forms," regular and irregular polyhedrons, which prevented complicated part-to-part or part-to-whole relationships from being established. But the viewer was warned against an easy dismissal of such simple shapes: "Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them. . . . They are bound more cohesively and indivisibly together" (8). SHAPE, then, was "the single most important sculptural value" (8). Minimalist work excluded details, such as colors, sensuous material, or interesting finishes, which Morris believed were "factors

in a work that pull it toward intimacy by allowing specific elements to separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work" (14). The idea, then, was not that highly inflected, complicated style of painting or sculpture in which major and minor themes orchestrate together to form a dense text. That kind of work had been done; rehashing it was *rétardaire*, resulting in work Morris dismissed as "candy-box art," "indulgently focused on surface, . . . coruscat[ing] with the minor brilliance of the '*objet d'art*'" (25).

Seriality became a key part of minimalist grammar because, as these artists realized, "Of all the conceivable or experienceable things, the symmetrical and geometric are most easily held in the mind as forms" (Morris 64). Seriality proved the perfect text grammar for a shape-oriented composition of primary structures. It was the most basic compositional method, simple parataxis or repetition—"one thing after another," as Judd put it (qtd. in Meyer 179)—a method in which there was no complicated, overarching compositional whole to keep inflecting (Meyer 171). Indeed, it was a method, not a style, according to the minimalist artist and critic Mel Bochner (*Solar System and Rest Rooms* 42), who notes, "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" ("Serial Art" 100). Bochner describes the serial grammar that serves as a modular system for Carl Andre's sculptures, pieces Bochner prefers to call "arrangements" rather than compositions, capturing the almost offhand, arbitrarily arrived-at nature of the work: "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. . . . Only one kind of object is used in each [work]. . . . The arrangement of the designated units is made on an orthogonal grid by use of simple arithmetic means" ("Serial Art" 94). Witness, for example, Andre's piece in the "Primary Structures" show: *Lever*; a single row of 139 firebricks installed in a room with two entrances so that the viewer could stand at either entrance and have an unbroken, material vista, nicely capturing Andre's notion of sculpture as no longer form but rather "place" (qtd. in Bourdon 103).

So, the cube, brick, or metal plate—when these are serialized in a basic grid-type frame, generating a larger whole from initial bits or cuts, we have the morpheme and syntax of the minimalist text-logic. It is "the simplest ordering of part to whole," Morris claimed. "Rectangular groupings of any number imply potential extension; they do not seem to imply incompletion, no matter how few their number or whether they are distributed as discrete units in space or placed in physical contact with each other. . . . From one to many the whole is preserved so long as a grid-type ordering is used" (29). Minimalism was not an adversarial reaction to abstract expressionism, despite appearances—cool,

cerebral, industrial forms rather than highly charged whipping and slashing of paint. Both of them were attempts to complete the modernist project of reducing the work to its essential elements. Morris revered Pollock as perhaps the most scrupulous investigator of forms and means. It was Pollock who defined the basic scene of composition: "tools, methods of making, nature of material" (Morris 44–45). But by reducing it, of course, he expanded it, as materials could now include sand, nails, keys, cigarettes, and aluminum fence paint. Drip painters such as Pollock and Morris Louis showed that compositional form was what "*resulted* from dealing with the properties of fluidity and the conditions of a more or less absorptive ground"; such forms were "not a priori to their means" (Morris 44, emphasis added). Composition itself became an investigation of means; otherwise, it was mere formalism. New materials needed to result in new forms.

There is an elemental poetry in minimalism, and so one thinks, perhaps, of Wallace Stevens's jar on the Tennessee hill, equally minimalist, "gray and bare," ordering relationships in the modest form of the anecdote. Or John Ashbery, whose method was to find the poetic possibilities in ordinary language, and who conceived of each of his poems as an empty oblong box—a primary structure, a minimalist form—and filled them with cuts from a variety of material sources: "people talking, journalese, pop culture, cracker-barrel philosophy, high-flown poetic diction" (MacFarquhar 92).

Scene 2: Kitzhaber/Andre

In 1963 the field of composition had its own "landmark show," the publication of Albert Kitzhaber's book *Themes, Theories, and Therapies: The Teaching of Writing in College*, the first major critical examination of college writing instruction in the modern era. Kitzhaber's book was actually the report of the Dartmouth Study of Student Writing, a study funded by the Carnegie Corporation undertaken to examine why professors at Dartmouth were less than enchanted with the writing abilities of their students, especially given the two-quarter sequence of composition nearly every freshman had to take. The central question the study was designed to determine was "Can English composition at Dartmouth be taught more effectively?" (ix).

Clearly, the study was a daunting task. As Kitzhaber notes early on, there are all sorts of curricular ways to foster growth in writing in a ten- or fifteen-week period, "as long as the students are reasonably normal and are doing some writing under supervision" (4). Tracing exactly how or whether a given intervention strategy helped a student is almost impossible. It is also a stretch to think that any one- or two-course sequence can foster substantive growth in writing, can, in Kitzhaber's words, "develop a well-stocked mind, a disciplined intelligence, and a discriminating taste in language and fluency in its use. None of these can be acquired without hard work over a period of years" (7). As part of the project,

Kitzhaber and his assistants studied 495 essays from a cross section of Dartmouth's first-year literature-based composition classes; they "classified and recorded all errors, infelicities, weaknesses, and other negative criticisms that the teachers had noted on the papers" (42), from errors in focus down to those in diction and spelling. One of the first things Kitzhaber noted was that even when the course parameters narrowed the focus to Milton and Shakespeare, instructors still permitted students to write more informal, personal essays on topics like beatniks and school spirit. Astonishing, too, was the wide variety in marking and grading. Most instructors overmarked: as many as seventy-five errors might be highlighted in a three-page paper. As Kitzhaber describes such instructors, "A misused semicolon or an off-center idiom afflicts them like an uncontrollable itch, and they are not comfortable again until they have scarified the error with a red pencil" (58–59). Some undermarked, "placing three or four marks in the margin, a gnomic comment at the end, and a C⁻ at the top" (59). Some corrected papers by simply using "rule numbers and cryptic abbreviations" (65) keyed to the handbook code. Kitzhaber felt particularly bad about the student who got a paper back covered with such coded symbols and only a single written comment: "You misspell 'Shakespeare'—for shame!" (65).

In his study's final recommendations, Kitzhaber addresses many of our as-yet unresolved issues—staffing, teaching load, instructional focus, assignment design, course content, and grading policies. His most interesting suggestion, however, is a modest (too modest, perhaps) plea for variety in the genres students should work through in order to become better writers. He suggests a host of small assignments, such as expanded definitions, close readings of a passage, parodies, and analyses of style and structure, to augment the series of analytic, expository essays that will be the student's main focus in the course. I say "too modest" because Kitzhaber earlier complains about how "nothing is being done in the colleges to reform the freshman course. There is no widespread impulse to think through afresh the premises and purposes of this course (or perhaps one should say to think them through for the first time)" (98).

Minimalism was probably too new for Kitzhaber to be aware of at the time—a shame, because the writings of minimalist sculptor Carl Andre would have provided interesting options for the textual variety Kitzhaber advocated in first-year composition. Andre was like many of our students when it comes to writing—uncertain, resistant: "I have never been a writer of prose," he claimed. "I have never felt comfortable writing prose; it is something that is very difficult for me. . . . My own mind moves by no means of prose" (3, 125). Hence, many of the texts Andre wrote, as his editor, James Meyer, points out, were less than a hundred words long. Unlike our students, though, he had no strictures against sustained work in forms where brevity was an option. Meyer (4–11) provides a taxonomy of Andre's preferred genres: the *statement*, generally fifty words or less, crafted for an exhibition; the *dialogue*, the record of a written or oral

interview, in which questions prompt reflections, which prompt more questions, a perfect form for a resistant writer, in the way "writing begets more writing" (5); the *epistle*, letters of varying lengths to varied recipients—another attractive genre for a resistant writer, as such correspondence "may be informally composed or carefully wrought, a lengthy missive or a postcard" (6); *epigrams* and *maxims*, terse, witty, insightful statements containing "few asides, parenthetical remarks [or] dependent clauses" (7), often in the form of chiasmus or syllogism; and his *planes*, experiments in planar poetry, where words are fugued together in a grid pattern.

Such a concept, refiguring the curriculum around shorter assignments, allowing student resistance to be the engine of student writing, is doubtless a tough sell. A recent report on undergraduate learning at the University of Washington, for example, found that "first-year students generally find shorter papers easier to write than longer ones, and they often do not spend much time or effort writing papers that are fewer than four pages long" (Beyer, Gillmore, Baranowski, and Panganiban). One can only wonder at the assignments UW students were given in those short papers, whether they truly attempted to develop the pithy, the poetic, or whether the assignments were simply less challenging opportunities to practice the prosaic.

The writing class, then, as a space where students primarily learn writing through a series of conventionally organized essays had not, in 1963, changed much at all since the field's nineteenth-century origins. In Dartmouth's first semester course, it was seven themes of eight hundred words; the second course entailed three more of those essays plus a research paper of about two thousand words. In writing initiative after writing initiative, we have never really questioned the strategy of teaching the essay by having students write essay after essay, despite persistent disenchantment with the essays that get written. Andre believed that "any task can be accomplished if you divide it into units small enough" (275). We too often offer students a curriculum in which "quality" is the key criterion, a questionable goal, perhaps, for learning the craft of writing in the first year. "Whenever you see or hear the word 'quality' in art, understand the word 'commodity' is meant," reads one of Andre's maxims (30).

Andre's textual genres are focused on the material stuff of language, on words. No surprise—when he was growing up, the dictionary was his family's bible; his mother was an amateur poet and his immigrant father loved to come home with new words he had learned at work, springing them on his family, after which they would look up their etymology. Words became his textual emphasis, much like the individual material unit, whether brick or metal plate, had primacy in his sculpture. Meyer sums up Andre's method: "He developed a *nonsyntactical syntax* that stresses the part (the 'cut') rather than the whole. Where the old syntax is predicated on an established, a priori grammar, the new

syntax is based on the *unit*'s grammatical potential. The work's form is continuous with its internal elements—their shape, their density, their size. The relation is no longer that of part to whole, but of whole to part" (12).

Andre's writing, then, is a series of "cuts," strung together by a minimalist grammar of seriality. Kitzhaber's flaw, a persistent one throughout the history of writing instruction, is maintaining an unquestioning insistence on aestheticizing the form of first-year composition as the thesis-driven college essay, where all elements inflect together in that critical part-to-part/part-to-whole emphasis so as to cohere into an autonomous work. There was no revision of the object of practice in Kitzhaber's critique of the scene of first-year writing, just the way it was taught. In my analogy, it is as if the formal structure of cubism has never been ruptured in writing instruction. In the visual arts, modernism meant, in part, questioning that highly determined cubist program, with its division of the picture-plane into a carefully planned, organically articulated structure. Pollock was arguably the most influential American artist in history, for his experimentation with form, process, and materials, casting aside the academic tradition's "painterly-artistic elements," to use Kasimir Malevich's words for the traditional conventions then haunting the scene (qtd. in Morris 51). The sculptor Richard Serra summed up the influence of Pollock's bold disregard in noting that he was "not playing the same game as Vermeer": "We evaluate artists by how much they are able to rid themselves of convention, to change history. Well, I don't know of anyone since Pollock who has altered the form or language of painting as much as he did" (qtd. in Kimmelman). Andre wanted more *kunsthalles* in America, museums with no permanent collections, so as much work as possible could be seen and appreciated, without the commodification of art and reification of quality that comes from its institutionalization in a collection. Dartmouth students, when the compositional world was changing, and new materials made new forms possible, were stubbornly judged by the prescribed forms of a traditional aesthetic. Forms never interested Andre as much as materials. He loved matter, the properties of stone or metal or wood or hay. He combined them but never joined them permanently with welds or rivets, so as to preserve their quality as pure cut as much as possible, rather than transmute them through an arbitrary, predetermined combinatory logic. A serial grammar was ideal for a focus on the actual stuff of the compositional unit in the way, as Frank Stella noted, the use of repetition "drew attention to 'the thing itself'" (Meyer 169–170). The art critic David Bourdon traces the origin of Andre's method.

> From 1960 to 1964 Andre worked as a freight conductor and brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Newark. Though he had already begun to work with preexisting, standardized materials, four years of coupling and uncoupling freight cars confirmed him in his use of regimented, interchangeable units. Because any part could replace any

other part, the materials did not lend themselves to relational structures. In refusing to determine the mutual relations of forms, he suppressed his desire to compose. (104)

Our current insistence on throwback notions of expository analysis is tired not just stylistically, but rhetorically. We cling to the received notion that the ultimate goal of a given essay is to convince or persuade a reader. Longinus, the classical theorist of the sublime, would die laughing. What he was after should be the goal for every writing class: excellence in discourse, figuring out how "the greatest poets and prose writers have acquired their pre-eminence and won for themselves an eternity of fame," and it was certain to him that they never won it by bothering to persuade anyone of anything.

> For the effect of elevated language is not to persuade the hearers, but to amaze them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer. Inventive skill and the proper order and disposition of material are not manifested in a good touch here and there, but reveal themselves by slow degrees as they run through the whole texture of the composition; on the other hand, a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the power of the speaker. (114)

Even more than catharsis, then, the goal is ecstasy. "All art everywhere all the time," Andre advocated in one of his statements (30).

Scene 3: Cassette / Mix Tape

In 1963 the world outside the college classroom kept turning. That was the year, for example, that the Royal Philips Company of the Netherlands unveiled a new product, the compact audiocassette. It took a few years to perfect the mechanism, but by 1966 the new audio format had been standardized. Not until 1979, of course, when Sony introduced its Walkman, did the cassette became a hugely successful, transformative part of the cultural landscape. As a result, James Paul, critic for London's *Guardian*, claimed, "Our relationship with music has never quite been the same since. . . . It allowed us to listen to music differently, privately. And it brought out the librarian in us: listing, labeling, indexing. With LPs you collected music; with cassettes you possessed it."

Once you owned it, you could refigure it any way you wanted; hence, the birth of the mix tape, a serial form drenched in a collector's obsession, termed by Luc Sante "a paradigmatic form of popular expression" (22). To demonstrate, here is a snapshot from mix tape history, courtesy of Thurston Moore, then-dishwasher, soon-to-be guitarist for the postpunk band Sonic Youth:

Around 1980–81, there was a spontaneous scene of young bands issuing singles of super-fast hard-core punk, most of which subscribed to a certain formula of thrash. Bands like Minor Threat, Negative Approach, Necros, Battalion of Saints, Adolescents, Sin 34. . . . They were great live and they made really great records. Very on-the-cheap and each tune was hardly a minute long. I was fanatical and bought them all as soon as they came out. I would stop each day at the Rat Cage on Avenue A and buy any new hardcore 7" they'd have on the wall. . . . But I also felt I needed to hear these records in a more time-fluid way, and it hit me that I could make a killer mix tape of all the best songs from these records—and since they were all so short and they all had the same kind of sound and energy, the mix would be a monolithic hardcore rush. . . . I made what I thought was the most killer hardcore tape ever. I wrote "H" on one side, and "C" on the other. That night . . . I put the cassette on our stereo cassette player, dragged one of the little speakers over to the bed, and listened to the tape at ultra-low thrash volume. I was in a state of humming bliss. The music had every cell and fiber in my body on heavy sizzle mode. It was sweet. (10)

Given the mix tape's status as highly prized alternative text, mix tape artists search for and theorize "the perfect mix tape." Their strategies in that search form a post-album-format "elements of style." Jack Tripper, on the Tiny Mix Tapes site, justifies the mix tape as compositional genre, differentiating it from the randomness of shuffle technology: "It takes enormous amounts of outlining and planning before executing a perfect mix tape. Sure, you can throw a bunch of random songs together, but don't come crying to Jack Tripper when that special someone dumps you or your new best friend ditches you—because they will. I promise you, if you follow these little guidelines, you'll have that special someone or best friend for at least a month longer."

First, you need a theme. A host of standard mix tape themes have evolved: the romantic mix, the breakup mix, the friendship or platonic mix, the intro-to-genre-X mix, the road-trip/airplane mix, and the party mix. To those stock themes, some have added the workout mix, the ambient mix, the sleep mix, the hangover mix, the alphabetic mix, and the mix of all cover songs. But, of course, in a genre where the coolly sublime is highly prized, we find even more outlandish themes showcasing a mix taper's style and wit: "cleaning up after the party" mix, "lost my damn job" mix, "scare your neighbors" mix, "being laid up sick in bed for two weeks" mix, "i really wish i was a pirate" mix, "for my pets while i'm not at home" mix, "can't understand a word they are saying" mix, "no song more than 30 seconds" mix (*Art of the Mix*); even the "songs whose 'titles would make awesome T-shirt slogans'" mix (Wilson).

After your theme comes the tracklist selection. About song choice, Tripper cannot overstate: "Don't throw on any shitty songs. I don't think they will

appreciate listening to shit." Music critic Sara Bir describes the desired skill: "If you get the right flow going, it's possible to move from Donovan to the *My Fair Lady* soundtrack to Wilco without losing continuity." This tracklisting, which Tripper considers the "single most crucial aspect of mix taping" should be painstakingly experimented with and reviewed because, after all, Tripper adds, "Radiohead almost broke up over the tracklisting for *Kid A*."

The first song in the playlist is the toughest; it cannot be "obvious, cheesy, or predictable. And it can't be too obscure" (Tripper). A good first-song choice can act as the genesis for the rest of the tracklist. Also important are transitions between songs, especially if your theme calls for a variety of genres: "You can't just go straight from pop rock to detached, experimental post-rock. You need a link. Come up with songs that may fit in between, and if you can't find any, then one of those songs has to take a hike" (Tripper). *Globe & Mail* critic Carl Wilson describes how he "learned to finesse transitions: same key, new speed; same tempo, new key; startling counterpoint; found-sound bridge; chill down; epic climax; quick comic coda. . . . I would build narrative arcs, Socratic dialogues between, say, Billie Holiday and the Pixies." Nick Hornby offers one of the most oft-quoted mix tape directives in his novel *High Fidelity*:

> A good compilation tape, like breaking up, is hard to do. You've got to kick off with a corker, to hold the attention . . . , and then you've got to up it a notch, or cool it a notch, and you can't have white music and black music together, unless the white music sounds like black music, and you can't have two tracks by the same artist side by side, unless you've done the whole thing in pairs, and . . . oh, there are loads of rules. (89)

What the mix tape offers composition is proof of how a minimalist citational logic can achieve maximum ideational effect. The tracklist, especially when combined, as often happens, with the gloss of a mix taper's commentary for each song, becomes a kind of "primary structure" or "unitary form" grammar: the cut, and the comment, in serial order. Denial of the significance of such a popular form—both as learning-tool and as an end-text in itself—seems cranky and wrong-headed. All the complex painterly-artistic elements and part-to-whole inflections of the essay are wonderful, but hyping that genre so exclusively to students—as Kitzhaber & Co. did in 1963, cassette tape lurking in the wings, "New Work: Part 1" appearing in the gallery—is asking students to believe in the ordered logic of the album, to re-constitute the pre-recorded CD as serviceable form. And that, in the era of digital downloads, is impossible.

The mix tape ruptures the text of the accreted past. To possess the music is to be able to re-stage the scene of its fate. Longinus saw it coming: "the true sublime uplifts our souls; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaunting joy, just as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard"

(120). A fitting comment, since Longinus's textual method is to re-stage the scene of his own favorite cuts, offering a mix tape of quotations as a treatise on rhetoric. Anne Carson describes Longinus's achievement in *On the Sublime*:

> "You will come away from reading its (unfinished) forty chapters with no clear idea what the Sublime actually is. But you will have been thrilled by its documentation. Longinus skates from Homer to Demosthenes to Moses to Sappho on blades of pure bravado. What is a quote? A quote (cognate with *quota*) is a cut, a selection, a slice of someone else's orange. You suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away. (45)

The critic Matias Viegener, likening mix tapes to the cento and avant-garde forms like the cut-up, Xerox art, and sampling, appreciates this documentarian banditry, the way mix tapes make "the existing world tell tales it does not intend to tell. You get the world to send you a message it never meant to send" (qtd. in Moore 35).

I am uneasy, certainly, with the way a simple minimalist text-logic like the mix tape can, with all its finessed transitions and Socratic dialogues, become just as highly determined as the most belletristic essay. At its most accessible, though, the mix tape is the product of a simple, linear combinatory logic, its thematization acting as the sole inflective principle, much like a chord or scale acts as the sole determinant for a minimalist composer. The theme enables that building of structure through the repetition of discrete cells that served as the necessary criteria for composers of minimalist music, where the end result was that genre's slow, harmonic build (Moore's "state of humming bliss"); it is text as audible structure. The most Longinian thematization-principle, possibly, becomes DJ Yoda's "I record anything I think is cool."

And then, of course, there is this: In 1992 Maxell sold 350 million blank audiocassettes, according to its vice president, Peter Brinkman; ten years later that figure was 140 million. Projections are that by the end of this decade, the audiocassette format will be obsolete (Stuever). This evokes in some the elegiac, the fetishistic. Sara Bir, who has grudgingly made the switch to mix CDs, writes longingly of the cassette medium, "as beautiful in its hiss as medieval manuscripts are in their decay." "It seemed enchanted," Carl Wilson writes. "CDs and iPods can't match the Proustian pungency of the cassette—Dolby hiss, Crayola scent, brittle weight in hand, paper, marker, glue." Mourned, too, is the defining limit of the audiocassette's side A / side B format, which determined a different kind of textual logic than the simple storage-space limit of a CD (not to mention the seeming limitlessness of an iTunes playlist). The *Washington Post*'s Hank Stuever calls the cassette's two sides a "crucial dialectic." Bir writes of them as "allowing for a first act, an intermission and a second act."

But whereas the cassette may be dying as a medium, the mix tape is certainly robust as a genre, thanks to MP3 audiofiles, the ability to download them, the click-and-drag ease of fashioning them into playlists, and—with burning technology—the simplicity of making a mix CD. Purists, of course, bemoan the craft, the personalism of the hand, and hence, the aura, the presence, missing in the digital mix tape. University of Wisconsin journalist Chris Vinyard, typifying this retro snobbishness, sneers at the mix CD: "It can be argued that the ease with which these mix CDs are made has taken away from some of the genuine qualities behind the mixtape and music sharing. Whereas in the past, one might have spent hours next to a tape recorder while recording every song in real time, 80 minute CDs are burnt in a few minutes flat. Now that mixes are so easy to create, there are more of them being made than ever."

"Thoughtless tune dumping" is how Carl Wilson terms it. This is the academy's anxious suspicion about any composition, when a supposedly painstaking process to master can be dashed off so easily. Joel Keller, writing in *Salon*, for example, after detailing his own hours-long process, including getting recording levels right and finding just those perfect-length songs that would take him to the exact end of a tape, mourns this loss of mystic presence (now termed "connection"): "The process of making a mix tape gave people a connection with music that the electronic version can't replace. Because it is so easy to drag and click a mix into existence, the sense of satisfaction with making what many feel is a work of art gets diminished." And, when the craft and aura are emptied from the scene, quality and discernment go as well; and so he sniffs, "Fewer people who are connected to the music they listen to translates into a less critical and picky audience for the crapola that the record companies and radio stations promote. The quality of music overall goes downhill."

It is like hearing mandarins scoff at the first photographs, denying them art status because the craft and presence of the painterly were gone; the camera, too, democratized composition, with the same point-and-click ease. But, far from being easier and more thoughtless, the digital mix tape is vastly more complex because now a tracklist is created not just from one's own record collection, but countless other available MP3 files offering an incredible range of material. The Longinian cut, then, becomes an even more crucial compositional value. And Andrew Leonard, an editor at *Salon*, claiming the technology has "helped usher in a renaissance of mix-tape brilliance" (indeed, he feels the making of mix CDs is what computers and the Internet were made for), sees the technological ease in the making of the actual mix CD as allowing for increased focus on material selection: "more time to pay attention to what really counts: the music. More time to be a perfectionist with regard to the essence of a compilation—the act of song selection." "The hardest thing in art," Andre writes, "even before you find your limits, is to find that which pleases yourself" (32).

The digital age has also evolved an interesting variant of the mix tape, the MP3 blog. Combining both musical selections and commentary, they have been described as "a slow-motion mix, a mash note to readers" (Wilson). They literalize, in a sense, the grammar of the typical blog, in which the postings so often consist of cuts from another source with the blogger's reflections. The blog, then, with its serial grammar of the cut and the commentary, acts as a textual interzone between the popular form of the mix tape (as catalog of pure cuts) and the academic essay, with its rejection of seriality in favor of a highly inflected arrangement of analytic exposition. The MP3 blog combines the time-fluid contingency of the mix tape with the canonical autonomy of the essay. The minimalist work, in its large, simple scale, was more public than intimate. So, too, the rectangularly grouped blocks of blog text are meant for a highly public readership (witness how often blog text is culturally recirculated). What typified the new sculpture of the 1960s for Morris was that its "order is not based on previous orders, but is an order so basic to culture that its obviousness makes it nearly invisible" (27). One does not worry in a blog about such "painterly-artistic elements" as a strong opening, a clear thesis, sufficient development, or a clever conclusion. More often than not, well-chosen cuts and a few lines of interesting commentary will suffice. Blogs, then, support the minimalists' claim that seriality, whether regular or irregular, can bring to material a de facto cohesiveness, because the viewer brings a way of reading that looks for "significant clues out of which wholeness is sensed rather than perceived as an image" (Morris 61). Sometimes a bunch of hard-core 7" LPs are all you need for a really rich text.

College Writing might not care that both the production and reception sites for text are changing so rapidly, but the rest of the world does. Ironically, writing teachers maintain an allegiance to a nineteenth-century essayist program when, today, the very nature of reading is drastically morphing. Cultural critic Nicholas Carr describes the change: "Immersing myself in a book or lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle" (57).

Carr knows the cause: It is the way so much of his textual life has switched to the computer screen, particularly Internet-based reading, the "universal medium" for textuality, as he terms it, "the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. . . . What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a

swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski" (57). Textual technology has changed text processing; Carr speaks of people who could once handle lengthy texts like *War and Peace* easily, but now are lucky to get through three or four paragraphs of text online. A serial composition of short, staccato bursts seems essential as a compositional strategy for our age. This is exactly the kind of writing found on MP3 blogs. Here is Matthew Perpetua, from the audioblog site Fluxblog. He has posted the MP3 file of 'Accidental,' a track by Inara George and Van Dyke Parks, to which he appends the following brief commentary: "Inara George & Van Dyke Parks 'Accidental'—Van Dyke Parks' arrangement is in constant motion—swirling, twirling, dancing off in tangents. Nevertheless, the piece feels strangely static, as if Inara George's whimsical reverie was confined to a very small space, like a large scale musical theater production in a studio apartment. George comes across like a neurotic young woman wishing herself into the role of the romantic ingénue, and largely succeeding despite an inability to shake off her anxiety, or totally dial down her bitterness." This is exposition for that distracted reading Carr describes. Perpetua has mastered the style of offering just enough relevant detail and theme to convey an impression of the song. The reader listens to the track, and either agrees or disagrees with Perpetua, but in any event can appreciate the substance in his on-the-fly critique. Then, the reader hops back up on the Jet Ski.

This style of MP3 commentary has at least one precedent: the brief gallery reviews published in the 1960s by such minimalist artists as Donald Judd and Mel Bochner, who lent their textual talent and critical sensibility to art publications at the time in order to supplement their income. Here is one of Bochner's reviews, this of a December 1965 show of James Hans's work—"James Hans: Hans throws the works at every picture. They burst with eclecticism, as if in homage to a mythical god of art magazines. Photographs, photostats, collages, impasto, drip, 'fool-the-eye,' copied bits of Van Gogh, etc., only serve to deaden the viewer despite the sense of bravura that Hans certainly displays" (*Solar System* 1).

Pithiness, *le mot juste*, telling metaphor—these are the new elements of Internet-based style we have to teach. And even though Carr seems to pose the change in reading habits as dichotomy (either Tolstoy or Google), the effect of serial style—short, well-chosen bricks of meaning combining to form a rich whole—means we do not need to value brevity at the expense of that complexity of meaning traditionally thought to be available only through the studiously inflected part-to-whole thematized exposition of essayist prose. *New York Times* media critic Virginia Heffernan writes about the phenomenon of everyday viewers posting comments in response to videos they watch on YouTube. In particular, she focuses on the video "The Truth about Islam from an Ex-Muslim Lady," which at the time (November 2007) had prompted the most comments

(200,000) of any video on the site. Heffernan demonstrates the power of serial logic when she describes the cumulative effect of one brief comment after another, the way what might seem like a "ceaseless shouting match" actually coheres into a thoughtful text: "Part atavistic race riot, part religious disputation and part earnest effort at enlightenment, the expansive commentary is fast becoming a full-blown novel of world religion, one that dramatizes the fascinating and often shocking preoccupations of today's desk-chair ideologues" (23). Juxtaposition creates its own dense meaning.

Longinus's simple *ars rhetorica*, the stringing together of cut-and-comment, becomes the simplified text-logic of writing in an expanded field. Carl Andre has claimed, "The forms of my work have never particularly interested me. What has always been my search really is for material, a particle of material. It's finding a material or unit of material like a brick of the right size and the right shade and density and so forth—from finding this particle, I would combine it with others to make a work. I never in my mature work start with a form, a completed form. . . . The origin of the works has been finding things in the world to combine" (99).

Conclusion

I worry that we are replaying the panic scene of Comp '63: a refusal to reduce, to empty out; no trace of minimalism's "cool" aesthetic of refusal; rather persistent faith in traditional forms and materials; an insularity, still, from both the theories and practices of high art as well as the forms and desires of the popular. I am advocating the possibilities of reduced geometries in our conceptions of composition. Writing not as a highly detailed system or grammar but as simply a practical field. A nonsymbolic approach, focusing on the materials involved and their basic combination. The contingent, rather than the canonical; reconstituting banal objects and juxtaposing them in interesting ways. I am betting students can learn more about writing from iconological projects named "Driving in Cars While Smoking," "Seduction Theory," or "Oral Surgery Disasters"—to cite the titles of some of the cherished mix tapes in Thurston Moore's collection—than from analytic exercises such as "The Purpose of a Hobby," "The Unskilled Worker and Life," or "A Comparison of the Resurrection of Christ and Pagan Resurrection Myths," a few Dartmouth theme topics. A textual goal far more fruitful in the first-year composition class than *quality*, which "is judged by reference to the standards not only of the old masters but of the great moderns, . . . an encomium bestowed upon aesthetic refinement," is *interest*, "an avant-garde term, often measured in terms of epistemological disruption" and which can "license critical inquiry and aesthetic play" (Foster 46).

Brian O'Doherty's insight about the minimalist sculptors—that they were not interested in making art, "just making" (253)—provides a way to refigure the composition classroom, shifting its focus away from a highly determined, overly

prescriptive formalism and onto the simpler idea of making form. The need for first-year composition to emphasize the making of different forms is especially salient now in this era of expanded means and materials. Morris ends the final part of his "Notes on Sculpture," post-Pollock, post-Duchamp, with a reclamation of process at the expense of the iconic, finished form, which he terms "the craft of tedious object production" (68): his definition of art in that piece is "mutable stuff which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space" (68). Morris, then, preserves and extends Moore's need for time-fluidity in composition (the MP3 playlist is always being tweaked). The art of the present, as Morris wrote in 1966 (anticipating the digital text as an in-process series of evolving iterations), is characterized by impermanence; a "conclusion" can be forced on it only by "'freezing' it into a static form." As indeterminate, contemporary work "can have any number of 'records'—the work itself does not come to rest with any of them" (69). The operative gerund for writing becomes *forming*. The criteria for a minimalist aesthetic of text-as-sculpture might include: symmetry, nonhierarchic distribution of parts, general wholeness, openness, extendability, accessibility, immediacy. Text as simple ordering of whole to part; cuts loosely assembled, rather than glued or riveted, so material can be prised out and linked again; with the parts as interesting as possible; a low-boredom writing; the ultimate goal—producing that Moorean (or is it Longinian?) monolithic hard-core rush. The blog, then, as essay manqué. In fact, the operative principle of the blog is captured in the very title Morris used to sum up his aesthetic of change, paradox, and rupture: *Continuous Project, Altered Daily*. "To whom is the artist responsible?" Andre was asked in a 1976 interview; his answer, "To the values of a craft—a process of making and selecting—and to the task of making that craft intersect with contemporary life as it is felt and seen" (40).

Works Cited

Andre, Carl. *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004.* Edited by James Meyer. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

Art of the Mix. Accessed 23 July 2008, http://www.artofthemix.org/writings/history.asp.

Battcock, Gregory, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology.* New York: Dutton, 1968.

Beyer, Catharine H., Gerald Gillmore, Matthew Baranowski, and Naomi Panganiban. *Writing at the UW: The First Year.* Report. University of Washington, Office of Educational Assessment and Office of Undergraduate Education, February 2003, http://www.washington.edu/oea/pdfs/reports/OEAReport0303.

Bir, Sara. "Mix Emotions." *Metroactive*, 22 June 2005. Accessed 23 July 2008, http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/06.22.05/mixtapes-0525.html.

Bochner, Mel. "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism." In Battcock, 92–102.

———. *Solar System and Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965–2007.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.

Bourdon, David. "The Razed Sites of Carl Andre." In Battcock, 103–8.

Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic*, July/August 2008, 56–63.

Carson, Anne. "Foam (Essay with Rhapsody): On the Sublime in Longinus and Antonioni." In *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera.*, 43–57. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.

Genung, John F. *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric.* Boston: Ginn & Co., 1892.

Heffernan, Virginia. "God and Man on YouTube." *New York Times Magazine*, 4 November 2007, 22–23.

Hornby, Nick. *High Fidelity.* New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

Keller, Joel. "PC's Killed the Mix-Tape Star." *Salon*, 22 Jan. 2004. Accessed 22 January 2009, http://dir.salon.com/story/tech/feature/2004/01/22/mix_tape_one/index.html.

Kimmelman, Michael. "A Drip by Any Other Name." *New York Times*, 12 February 2006, sec. 4.

Kitzhaber, Albert R. *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.

Leonard, Andrew. "Praise Be to the CD Burner." *Salon*, 22 January 2004. Accessed 22 January 2009, http://archive.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/01/22/mix_tape_two/index.html.

Longinus. "On the Sublime." *Classical Literary Criticism.* Translated by Penelope Murray and T. S. Dorsch. London: Penguin, 2000, 113–66.

MacFarquhar, Larissa. "Present Waking Life." *New Yorker*, 7 November 2005, 86–97.

McCrimmon, James. *Writing with a Purpose.* 7th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.

Meyer, James. *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.

Moore, Thurston. *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture.* New York: Universe Publishing, 2005.

Morris, Robert. *Continuous Project, Altered Daily.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.

O'Doherty, Brian. "Minus Plato." In Battcock, 251–55.

Paul, James. "Last Night a Mix Tape Saved My Life." *Guardian*, 26 September 2003. Accessed 23 July 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/sep/26/2.

Perpetua, Matthew. "Where's the Knife? Where's the Fire?" *Fluxblog*, 23 July 2008. Accessed 5 January 2009, http://www.fluxblog.org/2008/07/wheres-the-knife-wheres-the-fire.

Sante, Luc. "Disco Dreams." *New York Review of Books*, 13 May 2004, 22–24.

Stuever, Hank. "Unspooled." Posted 29 October 2002, accessed 1 February 2006, http://www.hankstuever.com/death.html.

Tripper, Jack. "How to Make the Perfect Mix Tape." Tiny Mix Tapes. Posted 19 October 2001, accessed 23 July 2008, http://www.angelfire.com/indie/tinymixtapes/columns/10.15.01_how_to_make_the_perfect_mix_tape.htm.

Vinyard, Chris. "I'm Gonna Make You a Mixtape!" *Emmie Magazine*, 31 January 2006.

Wilson, Carl. "Cassette Mythos: Elegy." *Zoilus*, 4 June 2005. Accessed 1 February 2006 http://www.zoilus.com/documents/in_depth/2005/000455.php.