

**Combining repetition and labour intensity together in artwork
to approach aesthetic functionalism**

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Abstract:

Content and form are major elements in artwork. Different valuing of their proportion will lead artists' creation follow different genres. Based on the idea of neo-formalism and how aesthetic form can play a role with explanatory function in contemporary art. It is significative to comprise repetitive form, repetitive creating action as aesthetic resources in artwork. In what ways these repetitions are inspired from, and how they display their function in artwork to spectators should be considered. Referencing artists: Yayoi Kusama and Agnes Martin as strong evidence to support the idea about aesthetic function through repetitive form and intensive labour, can give a specific explanation. Simple repetitive mark from each artist: dots and grids; women labour in masculine action and intensive painstaking labour; making artwork to fight back to saving oneself to involve others, or creating pic to encourage to reach sublime beauty to share philosophy... These are different appearances from two artists in terms of repetition, labour and concept. Meanwhile, their artworks do leave huge influences in art history: formalism, conceptual art, minimalism, etc. Art historical functions they left for other researches are rich and their artworks successfully reach aesthetic purpose. By using repetitive form and minimalist structure, their works offer chances for the spectator to interact, based on its aesthetic function.

Key words: repetition, labour intensity, aesthetic form, aesthetic function, concept

Repetitive form and affective labour intensity are outstanding elements in artwork. They have inherent ability to emphasize process and effect, to build up clues for audiences to interact, to offer a time-space for artists themselves to review and adjust their purpose of creation. Especially in recent century, borrow simple repetitive form and intensive labour into artwork to identify a unique value and subjective abstraction has become a welcome modality for artists. At the same time, artist chooses their own repetitive form which can functionally contain ideas with aesthetic satisfaction. Providing aesthetic satisfaction for both artist and spectator is a way of reaching aesthetic functionalism. In the following context, it will explain why repetitive forms work functionally, in what way intensive labour plays function, and what kind of functions are offering, by comparing and contrasting two artists: Yayoi Kusama and Agnes Martin with their work.

Artistic form in artwork can play explanatory, descriptive function. Especially the repetitive form can play a role of emphasizing, evolving and meditating. In the context of contemporary art, neo-formalism appeared as a superior repairing of formalism. It suggests content and form are related in satisfyingly appropriate manner by the neo-formalists. (Carroll, 2012)

Artist figures out some helpful repetitive forms to support their creative content. Like Yayoi Kusama, she draws dots in a repetitive way of making painting which is recognized as “polka dots”. Through back to her early sketches, her preference of painting dots appears very straightforward. This is a portrait drawing for her mother when she was ten years old. (Fig.1)



Fig.1 Yayoi Kusama, *Untitled*, 1939.

We can see there are different stages/surfaces in this sketch. The dark background belongs to the very far stage, then is the figure portrait in the middle, the repetitive dots covered the top layer. Kusama said her mother treats her violently which left traumatic experience for her. (Pollock, 2006) That might be a reason why she used repetitive patterns trying to block her mother's figure, or she just cannot control herself to doodle on the portrait to release unhealthy emotion. This could be one of the previous references for her to include depth and spacious effect in her painting. Also, when Kusama talks about her painting: "With just one polka dot, nothing can be achieved. In the universe, there is the sun, the moon, the earth, and hundreds of millions of stars. All of us live in the unfathomable mystery and infinitude of the universe. Pursuing philosophy of the universe through art under such circumstances has led me to what I call stereotypical repetition." (Pollock, 2006) Repetitive dots exist as a way to explain the idea about creating space, infinity universe, and meditate her personal neuroses in series of her works. (Fig.2)



Fig.2 Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Dots*, 1960.

This painting challenges my eye not only by its colour but also the intensive, repetitive, radically structured dots. The first reaction pops up into my mind is what I usually see when I close my eye. The senses are precisely the same thing. I always think it occurs another dimension when we close our eyes. As spectator, we can describe how much we receive from the repetitive patterns: what kind of overwhelming emotion, how infinity space surrounds us when we take part in the painting. These abstract repetitive mark helps viewers to explore personal reaction links back to their own experiences. Seeing Agnes Martin's grids as another example, she aims to catch an abstract perfection related to inner sublime which is represented through drawing repetitive grids. These geometric forms are meditative in their repetition. She thinks the grid can be associate with expressions of innocence which suggest a general desire to avoid imbalance. (Lawrence, 2004) Because balance, beauty, perfection,

happiness these constituents belong to her sublime domain. For example: in this painting *The Island*. (Fig.3)

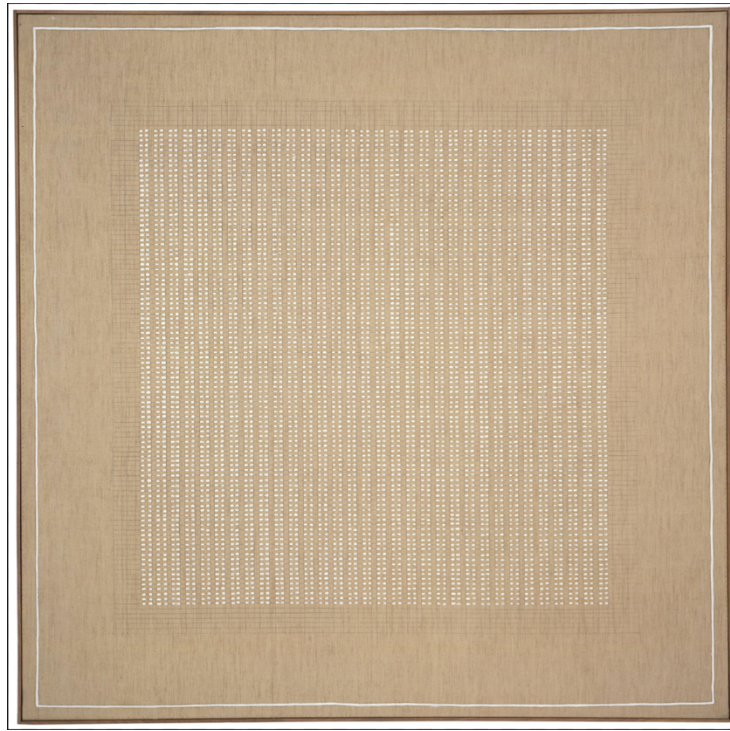


Fig.3 Agnes Martin, *The Island*, 1961.

The horizontal lines and vertical lines interact each other and the grids appear within systematically highlighted white. Viewing this pic very close up will get the motion of human effort and stay far away will understand the perfection of balancing. Most of the titles in Martin's artworks act as a clue. The low-key brown and milky white colour depict a peaceful, clam condition. The pencil made lines are notoriously difficult to recognize but it is truly there as a stable bottom layer. They are kind of abstractly reflect on the title "*The Islands*", island's colour & shape, how island stands in a natural space. Repetitive artistic form from Kusama and Martin offers their function to express artists' aesthetic experiences and concepts, introducing them effectively to spectator.

Intensive Labour as affective element can deliver content to the spectator. Artwork made by intensive human labour might provide an effective dimension for the audience to

comprehend. At the same time, people are always fascinating about the natural strength --- time. For example: the changing seasons, growing life, disappearing... Spending huge time on making artwork come out of the stage with labour intensity also shows the power of time in relation to the human effort. "The more a work looks like relationship, the more important the place of affect and emotion may be to critical engagement with it." (Doyle, 2020) For examples Kusama's net paintings, they are made in a large scale with strong energetic action, women's action. (Fig.4)



Fig.4 Yayoi Kusama, *No.F*, 1959.

As we can see from this painting, on top of the grey layer, thick white brushstrokes interact each other. Some of them are slightly laid on the surface. Some hardly stick on top with strong volume. She said: "The whole surface was a mash of net. There were neither composition, nor focus, nor even a splash of paint." Also, Kusama talks about the idea about why she makes her action painting : "Action painting, but actually it is because butt-headed art historian made a major upset to the penis methodology by searching for the trace of pattern on the earth drawn down by the action of Jackson Pollock pissing on the white snow or on the concrete. For the sake of the penis, the sun shines. The earth spins for the penis." (Pollock, 2006) This is how her feminine ideal reaction to the masculinism in abstract

painting. Also, she paints her net painting start with one area until her repetitive thick brushstrokes filled the whole surface. We can image the entire action, her women size body shifting behind or on top of the painting, her strength to hold the brush for such long time. It is the way she is not only challenging herself but also the male-dominated art world. “her unceasing restatement of the Infinity Net is also a re-affirming of her persona, a defiant ‘I exist.’” (Pollock, 2006) As for Agnes martin, she was influenced by Taoism and Zen philosophy. Her time-intensive labour activity seems to catch a spiritual stage of superior. Martin’s work has been mentioned to have “the quality of a religious utterance, almost a form of prayer.” (Batchelor, 2020) Her lines and unchangeable way of practicing are just trying to accomplish something perfectly.

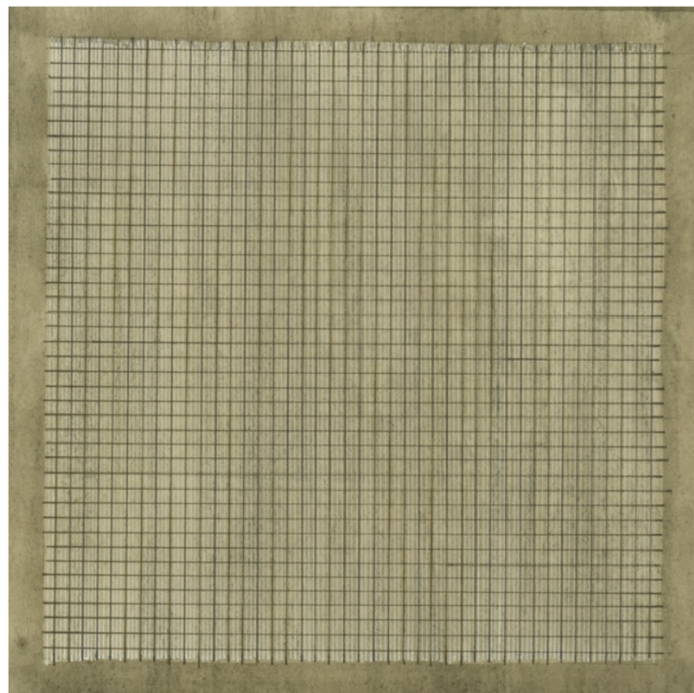


Fig.5 Agnes Martin, *Wood I*, 1965.

In *Wood I* (Fig.5), we can see the pencil lines, white lines even some washed texture. These elements are painted painstakingly which does not allow any error. The balance and harmony in her painting are influenced by the Taoist pursuit. Said by Martin: “My paintings are not

about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in mind.” (Prendeville, 2008)

Kusama and Martin, they work as artist creating work to embody their life/ideal condition.

Meanwhile, they are real living person who has identity stand, perception of the world, and idea about affirmation. Artists make artwork sitting life experience as a direct reference.

Their creation represents themselves as ordinary as they truly are in society. That is why they become affective labour in their work. Their work can better communicate with spectators.

Considering aesthetic function in making artwork is essential because it can improve artist’s creation and enhance interaction with spectators. (Hansson, 2005) Most of the artworks are created base on artist’s own perception about understanding appropriate beauty, in terms of using this to combine content and form together. “Aesthetic functionalism maintains that something is an artwork if it is intended to provide the person who contemplates it for its own sake with an aesthetic experience of a significant magnitude on the basis of an appreciation of its aesthetic features, provided the perceiver is in an appropriate frame of mind.” (Davies, 2016) Artworks from Yayoi Kusama and Agnes Martin, abstractly introduce their life and inner experiences. Their choice to using repetitive form as painting language enhance the purpose of artwork: time & spacious, affirmation, sublime beauty, perfection, etc. Based on artists’ intellectual effort on identifying vital experiences, the object they painted start to have form in a definitive sense. And the form is liberated from limitation to a specialized end. The form is esthetic. (Dewey, 1980) Kusama decides painting dots because of experiencing hallucinations. Her aesthetic choice based on the vivid vision of her body. Martin using grids with perfectly straight and horizontal lines according to her idea about “absolute perfection”. The grids, lines in her artworks look unaided. “She pursed her art with the single-minded dedication of an ascetic. She believed that you have to get rid of everything in life that interferes with your primary inspiration and vision.” (Batchelor, 2020) The dots, grids and

colours work together providing artists' experience and concept to spectator functionally in an aesthetic way. Meanwhile, displaying artwork in front of people as a way to communicate need to include the idea of esthetic, appropriate beauty which is a precondition for the spectator to interact. According to Merleau-Ponty's idea: "Art, and the pictorial arts in particular, is uniquely well qualified to help us understand our perceptual engagement with the world. The work of art performs a kind of phenomenology insofar as it shows us something in such a way that we can understand it more perspicuously than we did before." (Parry, 2011) The well qualified phenomenon is the rustle exhibit to the audience, the artwork. And it is a direct way of affecting people's engagement with art pics. In this circumstance, it is necessary to consider the aesthetic function in artists' creation. Back in the mid-nineteenth century, Yayoi Kusama chose her formalist aesthetic preference as "the elimination of traditional composition and the assertion of nonrelational design", which is appropriate and art-critical intelligence at that anti-art ages. (Munroe, 1989) Her works within such aesthetic function expands the comprehension, interpretation of art to the audience. Explore Agnes Martin's minimalist esthetic through "her mature style by adjusting the balance between lexicon and syntax, or element and structure", "the grid resides in its ability to erode the distinction between artifice and intrinsic quality". (Lawrence, 2004) Her works introduce some prime relations links to spectator's daily life by such minimalist aesthetic function. Both Kusama and Martin, their work using simple repetitive form to challenge viewers' perception about art and beauty. They expose their experience, their thought to viewers and offer a stage for communication, introspection. The repetitive dots, grids are elementary objects and they use such basic elements to create aesthetic synaesthesia in their work of art.

In conclusion, repetitive form and intensive labour can enhance the connection between artwork and spectator. They also help to offer aesthetic function in artwork by organizing iconic form and activity of artists' previous aesthetic experience, and summarizing them into an aesthetic way of creating satisfaction. Repetition and labour intensity is common action that everybody can reach as long as they want to. The more common the behavior is the more infectious action it will be. "Art is not representational, but is an experimental process by which the form of representation is overcome, and through which something new emerges." (Zepke, 2005) By the time artist marking repetitive form, it might offer a progressive value for both artist and audience. For artist (producer), they contemplate repeating with intensive activity as meditation, evolution, alteration. As for spectator (receiver), they are brought into that aesthetic meditation/evolution/alteration by affective mark and labour. It seems like commonplace repetition and labour intensity provide a sense of synaesthesia between artist and spectator. So using repetitive form and affective labour can play aesthetic function through creating synaesthesia which is significance for artwork.

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