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Towards an Infinite Geometry

In “Specific Objects,” written in 1964 and published the following year, Donald Judd pithily described the then just emerging Minimalist sensibility as a case of simply putting “one thing after another.”ⁱ For Judd, repetition and seriality represented strategies through which traditional compositional logic, which strove for formal balance, could be challenged. His configurations of forms, though specific, were always contingent. Never intended as absolute truths, they represented somewhat arbitrary sections of an infinite progression, and as such were freed from the burden of significance and the attendant task of holding and communicating some profound inner meaning.ⁱⁱ Repetition and seriality rendered composition insignificant. Meaning was pushed out to the object’s surface. Form became literal.

The potential of repetition, as a formal and compositional strategy, to approach if not arrive at the infinite is also what draws Rana Begum to it. Begum, whose substantial oeuvre demonstrates a sustained and sincere engagement with and commitment to the aesthetics, polemics, methodologies and materials of Minimalism, locates the origins of her interest in geometry, symmetry, pattern and repetition in childhood encounters with Islamic art, architecture and ritual practice in Bangladesh. She assimilates the lessons of Minimalism with older traditions of using geometric patterns to visualize the unknowable and divine in Islamic art and aesthetics, and of using repetitive action as a way of transcending the bounded self and communing with the divine in the Sufi ritual practices of *sama* and *dhikr*. For Begum, repetition retains an element of ritual; it is always also the “repetition of recitation,” an allusion to the ritualized reading aloud through which the Quran is memorized.ⁱⁱⁱ In her artistic practice, “one thing after another” emerges as one of the key strategies through which one can test and transcend the boundaries of geometric form and composition, through which one can gesture towards the boundless and the infinite.

Though it has often tested the limits of the rectangular frame, much of Begum’s wall-mounted work has retained a structural relationship with the pictorial format, has remained bound to if not by it.^{iv} In 2011, Begum created a series of wall works whose compositions were arrived at through the repetition of a primary geometric unit: the triangle, which the artist identifies as the most honest and pure of shapes.^v Always directional, the triangle is an active and activating form, as compared to the rectilinear square and rectangle preferred by Minimalism, which are neutral and static. The simplest of this series of works consist of a single line of equally sized metal triangles (perfect equilaterals in *No. 279* and vertically elongated isosceles in *No. 275-No. 278* (all 2011)), alternately pointing up and down, and precisely spaced about an inch apart. The sequential units also vary in terms of material and surface treatment: matte raw

steel alternates with slickly painted aluminum, bringing Carl Andre's literal use of materials and the bright colors and finish fetish typical of Minimalism's West Coast strain together in the same work. Energized by the inherent dynamism of the triangle, and bisected by a thin white zig-zag of the gallery wall behind it, each array pulses rhythmically. Colour oscillates between the intrinsic and the applied. While the natural surface of steel registers as flat, appearing to sit flush against the wall, the painted aluminum is reflective, mirroring the viewer and her environment, expanding by incorporating the surrounding space. The result is a subtle perceptual undulation across the composition. Begum is careful not to circumscribe these works. The alternating copper-tinged raw steel and yellow aluminum triangles of *No. 279* can be exhibited as either a horizontal row, suggesting a frieze, or a column-like vertical stack, based on the demands and limitations of the exhibition context.

Regardless of the orientation, in these works the potential for expansion is restricted along one axis. The more complex works in this series, made up of two or more stacked rows, open up to other directions; the pattern of alternating triangles in a single row is mirrored along one or more horizontal axes to create a field of rhombi, like a Harlequin pattern. In *No. 603* (2011-2015) an inverted teal aluminum triangle is neatly wedged between two upward pointing raw steel triangles. This trio is mounted low so that the horizontal edges of the steel triangles sit an inch from the bottom of the wall. The pattern is then doubled on the adjacent floor suggesting continuity between two typically discrete architectural surfaces. While the triangles in *No. 603* come together to form a stretched hexagon, *No. 278* (2011) uses a more complicated array of triangles on both the wall and floor to create an irregular composition that feels like it has been arbitrarily extracted from an infinite pattern. In these works the poetics of the fold—the focus of another of Begum's recent bodies of work—is exported beyond the rectangular frame of the pictorial, transforming it into a spatial and architectural element, drawing the viewer's eye and attention to the often overlooked angle between the wall and the floor.^{vi} Extending the composition across this threshold emphasizes the potential of the pattern to extend endlessly into the infinite, covering any and every available surface. While the hard edges of the individual geometric units remain intact in these works, their repetition makes the boundary of the overall composition uncertain and contingent.

Juxtaposed against these earlier works, Begum's latest body of work presents a clever challenge to the hard edges of the individual geometric units. Each piece in the series is an array of three or more partially overlapping squares of painted mild steel mesh. Each square of gridded mesh seems to uncannily dissolve before our eyes, allowing the colour to float free of its physical substrate. While the gridded mesh retains its material chromaticity, it allows the colour it carries to interpenetrate that of others, creating a discrete but translucent layer of pure colour that can be formally and compositionally repeated and reconfigured like a bounded geometric form, but that mixes like a beam of coloured light might. These works disentangle our experience of color from that of form, making it a quality that is perceptual rather than material. Colour is experienced as diffusion, no longer a material fact but a phenomena somewhat closer to light, vulnerable to shifts and changes in both the viewing body and its surrounding environment.

^{vii}As a compositional strategy, repetition allows for endless continuity, an infinity of possible iterations, permutations and combinations. But while repetition may enable one to approach the infinite, the infinite itself resists capture in form. Introducing porosity and fragility into the form itself, Begum's gridded mesh works subvert the resolute opacity of geometry that is typical of Minimalist structures. By softening both its edges and its interior, the gridded mesh mutates form itself into an experience akin to light making it appear boundless, infinite, illustrating the end to which repetition was always simply just the means.

- ⁱ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74-82.
- ⁱⁱ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 243-266.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick Morrissey, "Interview with Rana Begum," *Saturation Point*, accessed October 12, 2015.
http://www.saturationpoint.org.uk/Rana_Begum.html
- ^{iv} Murtaza Vali, "Perceptual Difference," *Rana Begum* (London: BISCHOFF/WEISS, 2012), n.p.
- ^v Rana Begum, interview with the author, October 2, 2015.
- ^{vi} Kevin Jones, "Rana Begum," *ArtAsiaPacific* 85 (Sep/Oct 2013): 145.