

ONE GOOD EYE *-)

Why I rarely make serialized work

By [Jeff Page](#) - June 6, 2017



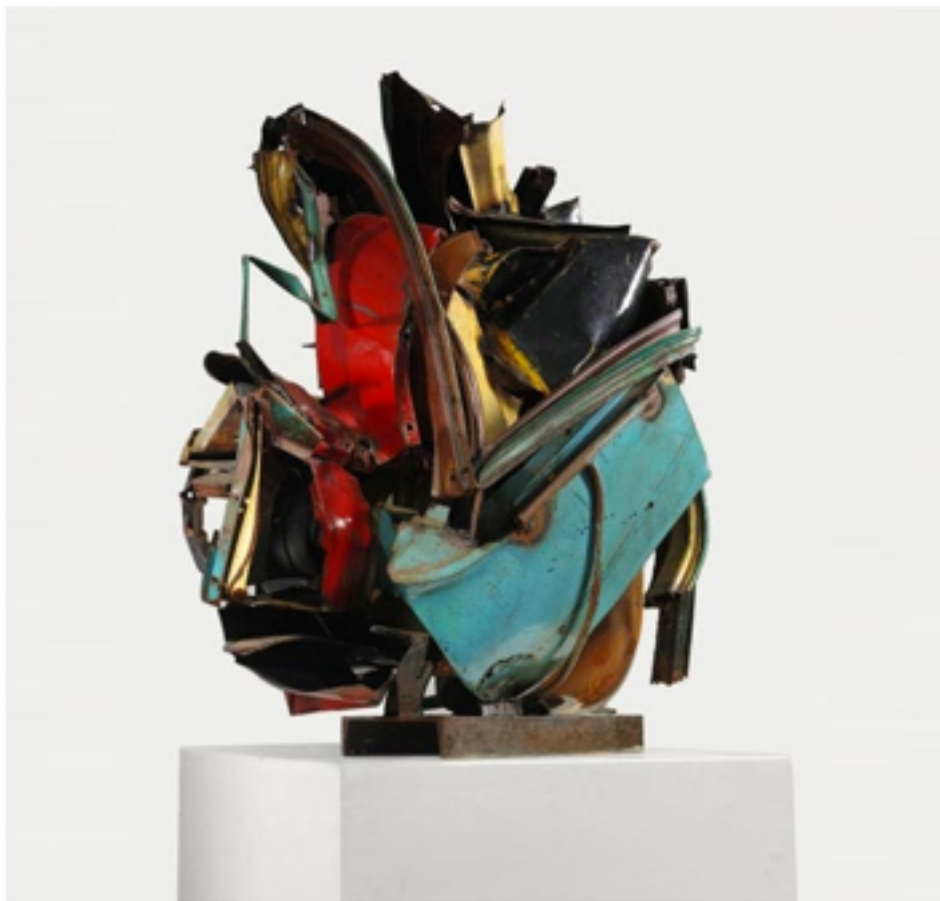
John Chamberlain's work is full of surprises.

Do you know about [John Chamberlain's](#) other works? He also made videos, paintings, compressed foam sculptures and large-scale, interactive couch works. These couch sculptures are meant for viewers to lounge on while they view Chamberlain's dream-like, orgiastic videos, which are played on nearby monitors. He had an intensely multi-disciplinary, nuanced practice.

I had never heard about these works until recently. Chamberlain, for most people, is defined only by his signature pieces — those famous metal sculptures made from automobile parts. After I saw some of these other works, it got me thinking about something that I'm constantly grappling with: making long-term serialized work. Why do so many artists create in this way? It's a mixed bag, in my view. In some ways it's helpful; limiting to one's practice, no doubt, but a necessary method in our commercial world.

The benefits of making highly-focused, serialized work are obvious. First, it's great for marketing. Consciously or not, working in this manner creates a bite-sized, easily marketable answer to the question "what do you make?" Second, it generates a reliable inventory for collectors to access, engage with and purchase. Third, it can be a highly effective creative working strategy — a strategy that can provide structure to one's creative practice and a way of developing concepts further.

However, there can be many dangers to turning your studio into a factory. First, is monotony. When artists are tasked with churning out a product, it taxes creativity and can lead to stale, stagnant work. Second, it stifles growth. I am a big fan of taking ideas through different media to see what the different results are. This is a great way to tease out other elements and ideas within the work. I tell my students, "Nice painting, now pursue those same ideas in a performance or installation." Third, and somewhat related to the prior point, it limits the capabilities of your work. Making the same painting or sculpture over and over inhibits varied experiences of your work and discourages thorough inquiry.



Chamberlain's more famous style. We're using him as an example here of how artists can make varied works – though it is the serialized pieces that make them rich and famous.

And yet, despite these risks, too many artists prefer this formulaic method of working. And why wouldn't they? We are all encouraged from every angle to do so. Whenever artists find a body of work that sells they are told to "stick with it", make 30 more in various colors and sizes and... keep going. The potential for commercial success is too alluring to pass up. And selling work is a great thing. Living off your work? I'm certainly jealous. But for me, the risks of restricting your practice to a predictable formula are too great to ignore.

So, what formula do I follow? Here are a few ways of describing it:

EXAMPLE 1: I make something; this gives me a new idea for something else. I make that; this gives me an idea for something else. I make that, and so on. This makes it sound more linear than it actually is, but you get the idea: I follow what excites me.

EXAMPLE 2: Forward rolling, side-stepping, forward rolling, spinning around, rolling over, flipping backward...it's a tumbling, sloppy gymnastics routine.

EXAMPLE 3: While in graduate school, one of my professors told me that I should be "the peel guy" after I made a video that involved peeling myself off from things I was stuck to, implying that I should make many more versions of that video...develop my brand, essentially. However, after I made this video piece, I was done with it. I wanted to create adjacent works at that point. Works in other materials that spoke to ideas that came up in that video. I ended up making these weird sculptural pieces out of found wood, paint, and latex that were later exhibited alongside the video.

Adjacencies, nuance, multitudes, outliers....these are energies, perspectives, adjectives and methods that are important to me. My practice is about creating a vast vocabulary. Each finished piece, although different, is meant to be viewed alongside each other like lining up words in a sentence.

I'm reminded here of [a review of Isa Genzken's 2013 retrospective at MOMA by Roberta Smith in the New York Times](#) in which Smith mentions Genzken's shifting practice: "[Genzken] seems to change ideas and approaches rather than develop them." This is a valid concern I often think about. There certainly is value in fully developing one's work. However, I would argue that shifting ideas and approaches in the studio can also be an expression of development within that work. Development is not necessarily linear (especially in art) and doesn't always take the form of creating more of the same works. Sometimes work is developed by taking a right turn onto another trajectory.

Multiplicity can be an effective framework. Although following this framework makes it considerably more challenging for packaging and marketing. It can be done though. Artists like Bruce Nauman and many others have effectively carved out incredible careers based on this formula of making.



You know Nauman...this piece is currently on display at the Denver Art Museum.

Ultimately, everyone's creative practice is uniquely their own and it's actually quite common to follow a hybrid model of making serialized work while simultaneously creating disjointed experimental works. And yet narrow attitudes persist about what artists should be doing. Many of my talented artist friends follow wonky, inconsistent models of making in their studios — and they are misread as "unfocused," "still exploring," "hasn't found his/her thing yet," "changes ideas too much," "isn't serious" and more.

It's these misreadings that compel me to write this. That coupled with the fact that there is so much money pouring into Denver right now and an increasing energy around the art scene. If we don't acknowledge these issues, we risk creating a system too rigid for artists of all types to thrive.

While the debate between commercialism and artistic integrity is an ongoing conversation in the art world, these concepts are worth revisiting in order to understand the impacts of commercialism in our art community. I see the expectation that artists make highly-focused serialized work as a direct influence of market concerns and a symptom of very limited views on what art is and can be.

We need to remind ourselves to widen the lens on how we think about "bodies of work," how we approach studio visits, making sure to ask to see the other works. And we always need to keep pushing for more inclusivity, radicality, risk-taking and more rigorous weirdness in all art spaces, institutions and organizations. Artists should be continuously encouraged to make all kinds of work, however unrelated, unpolished or misunderstood that work might be.

I'm not advocating that artists ignore the market. That is naive and destructive. But there are major consequences for artists in pursuing excessively formulaic practices. When too many artists follow these commercial models, it dilutes the art scene as a whole. Ideally, for artists and arts institutions there is a balance to strike — a dance between interacting with commerce systems and creating space for art to do what it does best: tweak the status quo, create new languages, weird us out, make us think.... like a room filled with John Chamberlain's multiple creative trajectories might do. All that aluminum, foam, car parts, paintings, videos speaking that vast vocabulary he worked long and hard to create. John Chamberlain's work is full of surprises.

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