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An Investigation as to the Character of Minimalist Art

Peter Schnore

This essay will examine and evaluate the thesis laid out by contemporary art critic Michael Fried (and initially, his predecessor Clement Greenberg,) concerning the relationship of minimalism to modernist art. I will start with an examination of Greenberg's definition of the conditions determining modernist art, since this is the definition Fried uses. Next, I will examine how Fried differentiates minimalism from modernism. I will then end with my own explanation for the differences between the two. I believe that the trait of "presence" that Fried ascribes to minimalism is evidence that the power of the sublime, as described by Edmund Burke, is the reason for the human interest in these works of simple design.

A Definition of Modernism

For reasons that are not altogether clear, Greenberg characterizes the modernist movement as being the self-criticism of art. In this self-criticism art becomes aware of its "area of competence"¹ and, naturally, "good" art is that which focuses its concerns within this area. The impetus for this self-criticism was rational examination much like that seen during the Enlightenment. This examination began in philosophy with Kant's logical criticism of logic, and through the nineteenth century was called on by all fields of social activity. To survive this rational "inquisition", each field had to "prove itself"; the arts had to demonstrate

that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other activity.

Each art, it turned out, had to perform this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain.²

Greenberg would have us believe that the reason that the arts steered themselves into modernism was either to survive rationalism by showing that they had intrinsic value that could not be attained through rational activity or by other

means, or to solidify their status in the world, to promote those characteristics that made them “arts” apart from anything else. Thus painting pursued the traits that that were characteristic of painting alone, two-dimensionality and literal shape. Or in other words, quite simply, a two-dimensional geometric form.

This short description of the modernist’s theory of the evolution of modernism seems to beg for criticism. Greenberg’s definition seems far-fetched to me. Greenberg points to David and Ingres as artists who were participants in the beginnings of modernism. When I look at their work, I simply see naturalism and three-dimensionality in the painted images, not any **attempt** to indicate the actual two-dimensionality of the material object, the flat linen canvas.

John Canady, for many years the highly respected art critic of the *New York Times*, has written the following concerning Ingres:

... classicalism in painting was dedicated to a revival of the intellectual purity and the moral force of ancient Greece and Rome as they were currently imagined by philosophers and aestheticians. But before long, classicalism degenerated into a fettering code of arbitrary rules and standards. By the middle of the century the demigod of the school was a pedantic tyrant and a great artist named Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres who mercilessly dictated these sterile recipes, yet rose above them in his own art.³

Canady states that there was a movement in nineteenth-century French painting of following “arbitrary rules and standards,” of “carefully controlled drawing,” and “limitation of color within sharply defined boundaries,”⁴ but that consciously or unconsciously Ingres did not follow those rules himself. He goes as far to say that Ingres had much in common with the romantics (who regarded themselves as the true classicists).⁵

This example should serve to raise some doubts about Greenberg’s explanation of the beginnings of modernist painting. Greenberg, with 20/20 hindsight, had the opportunity to formulate or even invent an explanation. If we had been able to inquire of David and Ingres whether they were consciously attempting to save painting by defining its special characteristics, two-dimensionality and literal shape, how would they have replied?

Fried’s Differentiation Between Modernism and Minimalism

Keeping in mind Greenberg’s definition of modernist artwork, let us turn to Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” to examine the objections he has to minimalist art. The first point that Fried makes is that minimalism is not the same as modernist painting or modernist sculpture, but finds its place somewhere outside the two. It is

"...in relation both to modernist painting and modernist sculpture that [minimalist] art defines or locates the position it aspires to occupy... Specifically [minimalist] art conceives of itself as neither one or the other; on the contrary, it is motivated by specific reservations, or worse, about both; and it aspires, perhaps not exactly, or not immediately, to displace them, but in any case to establish itself as an independent art on a footing with either.⁶

This may seem unimportant at first glance, but remember: each art form had to "define its boundaries" so to speak, to survive the rationalists.

Fried then gives an account of the reasons given by the minimalists for their turning away from modernist painting and sculpture. Here is a quote from minimalist Donald Judd:

When you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole - the rectangle of the canvas - and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole maybe and no parts, or very few.⁷

If, Judd seems to ask, the goal of painting is to limit itself to two-dimensionality and defining the shape, it would seem that the easiest thing to do would be to limit the subject of the painting to one form the same size as the painting! Anytime the painting contained more than one object it would detract from the two-dimensionality (i.e. one object/shape would inevitably seem to float above another) and allow the eye to visualize a form other than the literal shape. The perfect example of the complications that occur when two shapes are introduced would be found in Frank Stella's pieces containing two geometric objects. The invading shape seems to rise above or push below the invaded.

The only conceivable instance when shapes and objects might not be objectionable is when they emphasize or enhance the literal shape. The perfect example of this is Frank Stella's work, especially the aluminum stripe pieces. Each line, or each area between the lines, follows the strict guide of the literal shape of the whole piece, thereby **enhancing** that shape. We are reminded of the literal shape as many times as there are outlined objects.

I would like to note that this involves the risk of the reverse occurring. Two problems arise. First, the partitions may lead us to visualize the depicted shape as that which is most important, and the literal shape as something designed to lend support to it, the reverse of what was supposedly intended. Second, the partitioning of the literal shape created by Stella "fools the eye" into seeing a protruding or receding "step pyramid" thus turning the work into an op-art piece. This detracts from the two-dimensionality so important to modernist art. The safest bet, it seems, would be to stick to one congruent literal shape.

Fried continues with another objection to modernist painting put forward by the minimalists.

It [the establishment of the importance of literal shape] also establishes the rectangle as a definite form. It is no longer a fairly neutral limit. A form can be used in only so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements within it.⁹

Fried then adds, "The use of shaped rather than rectangular forms can, from the literalist point of view, merely prolong the agony."¹⁰ In principle this is true: when one limits his options he has fewer choices. The more limitations one incurs, the fewer the possible variations in the theme. There is of course room for plenty of experimentation within the bounds of modernist art, although under such strict rules less and less new art will truly be new, or it will fail to meet the requirements of modernism. Therefore, we can reason that more and more art will simply be a regurgitation of past work, or "failures" (that is fail to meet the requirements laid out by Greenberg), or less and less modernist work will be produced.

Fried shows us that the minimalists feel much the same about modernist sculpture. Their main complaint is that it is "anthropomorphic". The minimalists describe their own work as

assert[ing] the values of wholeness, singleness, and invisibility - of a work's being, as nearly as possible, "one thing", a single "specific object". Morris devotes considerable attention to "the use of strong gestalt or unitary-type forms to avoid devisiveness"; where Judd is chiefly interested in the kind of wholeness that can be achieved through the repetition of identical units...for both Judd and Morris, the critical factor is shape. Morris's "unitary forms" are polyhedrons that resist being grasped other than as a single shape: The gestalt simply is the "constant, known shape."¹²

Fried notes:

Above all they are opposed to sculpture that, like most painting, is "made by part by addition, composed" and in which "specific elements...separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work."¹³

I sense that the minimalist's dissatisfaction with modernist sculpture is that the blending or association of parts detracts from the aesthetic experience that the minimalists were interested in. This argument, that the power of the artwork rests in the gestalt of the shapes is an important one: it underscores my thesis as to the

attraction of pure minimalism. We will come back to it.

Presence

The concept of the power of the solid form comes up in the second section of Fried's article. He cites a passage from Clement Greenberg's essay, "Recentness of Sculpture", mentioning that Greenberg discusses "...presence, which, from the start, has been associated with [minimalist] work."¹⁶ In this paragraph he mentions Anne Truett, whose work shares the simplicity associated with minimalist work. Her work however does not have the untainted Gestalt quality of a large cube that we may associate with the work of Robert Morris or Tony Smith, nor the effect caused by a succession of identical objects that we see in Donald Judd's work.

Truett's art did flirt with the look of non-art, and her 1963 show was the first in which I noticed how this look could confer the effect of *presence*. That presence as achieved through size was aesthetically extraneous, I already knew. That presence as achieved through the look of non-art was likewise aesthetically extraneous, I did not yet know. Truett's sculpture had this kind of presence, but did not *hide* behind it. That sculpture could hide behind it—just as painting did—I found out only after repeated acquaintance with minimal works of art: Judd's, Morris's...minimal art can also hide behind presence as size: I think of Bladen... as well as some of the artists just mentioned.¹⁷

The key word in this paragraph is, of course, presence. Note that Greenberg attributes presence to two things: First, an artwork achieves presence through size; and second, it is achieved through the look of non-art. It is important to note that "presence...is aesthetically extraneous." I believe that he means that presence is "outside the realm of true art".

In the last half of section two and throughout section three Fried develops his thesis on the true and most meaningful difference between modernist and minimalist art.

His argument starts with the notion that presence is "...conferred by size or by the look of non-art.[That is, 'Objecthood']"¹⁸ Let us put aside the issue of size for the time being and examine, with Fried, "the look of non-art." The definition of what is and is not a painting is not static; that is to say, the definition changes and is dependent upon the historical perspective of any given time. In our time, or at the time of Fried's writing, painting fit Greenberg's definition, which as I have stated includes the concepts of two-dimensionality and literal shape, or to put it another way, "...flatness and the delimitation of flatness".¹⁹ Since we now consider this as our definition of a painting, a stretched canvas falls under the definition, and can be considered a painting. Since even an untouched canvas is a

painting and a painting is art, all stretched, untouched canvases are pieces of art. Those of an earlier era were not paintings; they were still just a piece of cloth on a piece of wood, just plain objects.

This means that if you are interested in examining the boundary between art and non-art these days, you had better look in the three-dimensional world of sculpture. "Painting had lost the lead because it was so ineluctably art, and now it devolved on sculpture or something like it to head art's advance."²⁰

Fried now wishes to separate modernist sculpture from the look of non-art. He again cites Greenberg, who criticizes the lack of "art-ness" in minimalism.

The look of machinery is shunned [by the minimalists] now because it does not go far enough towards the look of non-art which is presumably an "inert" look that offers to the eye a minimum of "interesting" incident - unlike the machine look, which is arty by comparison (and when I think of Tinguely I would agree with this). Still, no matter how simple the object may be, there remain the relations and interrelations of surface, contour, and spatial interval. Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today - including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper...yet it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment.²¹

I sense that Greenberg and Fried would be perfectly happy concluding that minimalism were not art at all, but simply the production of objects.

Two points are especially important to remember about the issue of presence. First, Greenberg uses the term to describe an *effect*. I will later show that this effect is a phenomenon caused by uniform gestalt shapes and uniform successions of objects we see in minimalist works of art. Second, presence is not dependent upon art per se. Whereas art is necessarily man-made, (or at the very least discovered and labeled), presence is produced by observing certain objects; it is not produced by the observation of artwork, necessarily.

Burke and the Sublime

I would like to compare the nature of minimalism with Edmund Burke's description of the sublime published nearly 250 years ago in Part II of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, in Astonishment; and Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being

produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.²⁴

This effect caused by the great in nature, which Burke calls Astonishment, I link closely to the effect which Fried and Greenberg have termed "presence". This is the thing which Greenberg describes as "aesthetically extraneous". He is correct: this presence does not enhance the work. It does not make it better art, but it is the core of the power in minimalist work. "Presence" is Burke's "sublime". What Fried and Greenberg overlook is that this presence has a strange, intrinsic power that though it may have nothing to do with aesthetic quality, is intrinsic to the forms themselves. Also, as we look at the effects of the sublime caused by Gestalt shapes, we see that large size, the artificial infinite, and lesser important attributes compound the sublime "Astonishment...admiration, reverence, and respect" we feel while viewing these pieces.

Another strong source for the sublime comes from the obscurity²⁵ of these works. Today, all people (most notably in the West) are innundated with art of many types, especially painting, sculpture, music and dance. We import art from far away cultures and carefully preserve art from past centuries. Even so, we have very little experience with dominating six foot cubes. Another facet of their obscurity is the undetermined interior aspect of these forms: An eerie feeling of presence develops when we contemplate what strange things could be inside such a cube.

Power²⁶ is also a source of the sublime, especially the risk of destructive power. A large, faceless, nameless, enigmatic, even "other worldly" form, due to its obscurity, certainly does not suggest a benign force. "Whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime..."²⁷ There is no inherent use for these objects, they only sit there confronting us...waiting...

The strength of these works I would ascribe to *innate* power. That is, the force they have comes from them, not from the ability of the artist. The less they are associated with art or the artist, the more power they have. These forms are so basic that it is as though they have existed in nature long before the artist used them.

"Vastness", or "Greatness of dimension",²⁸ are attributed to the sublime as well, especially forms in the vertical position. In minimalist art we have no deep crevices to examine, but we do have pieces teetering on the brink of disaster, easily big enough to kill someone. For an example I submit Bladen's *The X*.²⁹ Note that this piece stands more than twenty-two feet high.

Next is infinity, or more specifically Succession and Uniformity.³⁰ In Donald Judd's pieces we see

Succession; which is requisite that the parts may be continued so long, and in such a direction, as by their frequent impulses on the sense to impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits.³¹

In the perfect cube or sphere we also see uniformity. I can imagine being awe-struck by a seven-foot-high silver sphere: “That is *so round!*” This is the sensation of the sublime.

Difficulty is a source, Burke notes, and this also falls under the “That is so round!” (and therefore difficult to build) category. This is a category where minimalism falters simply because of its execution, not because of the nature of the objects.

Below I have listed some important issues that I have not addressed earlier that are important to the subject of minimalism, objecthood, and the sublime.

First, I have chosen my examples carefully. I have chosen the simplest, most gestalt minimalist works to discuss, and have ignored the more complex ones. Perhaps this is acceptable, since the more complex a work is, the farther it is from true minimalism.

As far as sublimity and color goes, black would be the sublime color of choice. It does not seem to be the case that more minimalist works are black, although I think that those that are black are more sublime because of it, e.g., *The X*. One reason for an insignificant increase in the percentage of black works might be that this would make black less obscure, and therefore less sublime.

Lastly, Donald Judd, in an interview with Robert Morris, says that his six-foot cube was designed not to be *too* big. For the sublime, size is an important factor. Why, if Judd were utilizing the sublime nature of things, did he not desire to make the object as big as he could? Perhaps the answer lies in the possibility that he was after a particular source of the “sublime” - that caused by shape alone. His aim was to give his work significance through shape rather than vast size.

Conclusion

I believe that Fried’s commentary on minimalism provides strong evidence as to the true character of minimalist art. There are two major clues: first, Fried believes that minimalist works are not works of art, but objects. We should raise an eyebrow when the art world produces and presents “non-artwork” for public study and appreciation. We should ask ourselves, “If it is not art, then why are we asked to see it, review it, consider it as if it were art?” Second, Fried (quoting Greenberg) describes that there is an effect caused by the observation of these objects. This effect, which he calls “presence”, is limited to being a quality of objects which seem to share certain traits, three of which are a degree of obscurity, larger than human size, and a simple, one-shape design.

Not surprisingly, some clues as to the quality of minimalist artwork can be found in the artwork itself, if we keep these forms in mind as we study Burke’s descrip-

tion of the traits of those things which are sublime. For instance, size is an important factor, as is difficulty of creation (if the minimalist executed his idea well), obscurity, and succession. What becomes evident is that identical traits are being used to describe the necessary elements of work that imparts "presence" and objects that are "sublime". The power of the minimalist's work is not produced by their artistic genius, and certainly not by their execution of an idea, but in the sublime power of the gestalt shapes they use.

Endnotes

1. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), p. 85.
2. Ibid., p. 86.
3. John Canady, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, (1959), Opposite first color print, page (unnumbered).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., next page, (unnumbered).
6. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), p. 117.
7. Ibid.
8. This may not be the case, however, since Stella's later pieces seem to approach minimalism.
9. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), p. 118.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 118.
12. Ibid., p. 119.
13. Ibid., p. 118.
14. Ibid., p. 119.
15. Gregory Battcock, Ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968), p. 283.
16. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), pp. 120-123.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 123.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 124.
22. Ibid., p. 125.
23. Gregory Battcock, Ed., *Minimal Art*, p. 426.
24. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), University of Notre Dame Press (1958), p. 57.
25. Ibid., p. 58.
26. Ibid., p. 64.
27. Ibid., p. 66.
28. Ibid., p. 72.
29. Gregory Battcock, Ed., *Minimal Art*, p. 426.
30. Edmund Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 74.
31. Ibid.