The Year of Living Minimally

In response to several recent shows, the author rethinks Minimalism as the outcome of shifting formal imperatives, a global current, a forebear of postmodernism, a child of continental philosophy—in short, as anything but the monolithic movement its first exponents made it out to be.

BY PEPE KARMEL

In March 1967, the cover of Arts Magazine posed the question: Would there be “A Minimal Future?” Thirty-five years later, we can give a definite answer: yes. Together with Pop art, Minimalism continues to provide the basic language of contemporary art. It has become the great patriarchal symbol against which artists and critics rebel, championing Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Realism or Neo-Mad Magazine, only to succumb to Minimalism’s repetitious, all-embracing spell. But what is this art that retains such a hold on us? Three major exhibitions of 2004 undertook, directly or obliquely, to find out.

During the summer, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, “A


Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958-1968" set canonical works by Frank Stella, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson into a broader American context. The curator, Ann Goldstein, included numerous paintings and sculptures by artists who utilized monochrome surfaces or simplified geometric forms but are not usually considered Minimalists, as well as some obscure works by the better-known Minimalist artists.

Goldstein’s comparative approach was put to dramatic use right at the beginning of the exhibition. Entering the first room, the viewer encountered a grid of dark steel squares arranged on the floor, accompanied by a series of black canvases hung on the walls. The juxtaposition exemplified the majestic grandness of New York Minimalism, while signaling the personal links between the two artists, Carl Andre and Frank Stella: both men attended the prep school Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., in the early 1950s, and Andre wrote the catalogue statement for Stella’s breakthrough exhibitions of 1959, at Oberlin College and the Museum of Modern Art.

Walking into the second room of the exhibition, the viewer entered a different universe. Here, John McCracken’s Yellow Pyramid and Blue Post and Lintel I were accompanied by Craig Kauffman’s wall reliefs of curved, vacuum-formed Plexiglas, tinted with translucent pastel colors. It was the visual hedonism of Los Angeles “Fetish Finish”—the high-art version of the surfboards celebrated by the Beach Boys and the customized hot rods elegized in Tom Wolfe’s 1963 article, “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.”

A related exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s-70s,” opened up a different series of alternate universes. (Happily, the dates of the two L.A. shows overlapped. LACMA’s exhibition is on tour,

Photo David Heath.

and can currently be seen at the Miami Art Museum.) At LACMA, curator Lynn Zelevansky placed Minimalism in a broad international context of movements employing a vocabulary of repetitive geometric forms. Drawing on examples from the United States, Latin America, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, England, Austria, Portugal, Eastern Europe and Japan, Zelevansky demonstrated the parallel and divergent evolution of numerous currents of abstract painting and sculpture during the four decades of the show's purview. A 1977 installation by the Polish artist Stanisław Dłotkoz provided a metaphor for the exhibition as a whole. The letters of the Polish word "miedzy" (between) were painted in shifting sequences on the walls, floor and ceiling of a white room. Visitors were invited to doff their shoes and enter the room, so that they were physically "between" the linguistic elements of the room, which seemed potentially to spell out an infinite number of words. Zelevansky's jam-packed exhibition provided enough unfamilair artworks (unfamiliar, at least, to most American art viewers) to keep scholars busy for some time.

Earlier in the year, back in New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum had presented "Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present," a history of the "reductive sensibility." The title, "Singular Forms," evoked that moment in the mid-1960s when everyone recognized that a distinctive new kind of art had emerged, but no one was sure what to call it. (Donald Judd suggested "specific objects," Robert Morris came up with "unitary forms," while the curator Rynasten McShine called his groundbreaking 1966 exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum "Primary Structures." In a 1965 article on this developing tendency, Barbara Rose called it "ABC art.") Roughly two-thirds of the Guggenheim's exhibition was devoted to the period 1958-75.

Of the works from this period, more than half came from the Panza collection, from which the Guggenheim had acquired a significant body of work in 1990-92. The Panza acquisition was the subject of considerable debate at the time, in part because the Guggenheim financed it by selling early modern masterpieces by Kandinsky, Modigliani and Chagall, and in part because some of the sculptures in the Panza collection existed only as plans or instructions. Although the Guggenheim has frequently included Panza works in other shows, this was the first major New York exhibition of Minimal sculpture from the collection. In that sense, it was a vindication for Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, who defended the acquisition in 1990 by saying, "I think the artists we've acquired in the Panza collection will be among the most important artists of the 20th century...I believe that half of what we acquired at the very least are masterpieces."

"Singular Forms" confirmed Krens's claims: the works by Flavin, Andre, Brice Marden, Judd, Morris, Richard Serra, Bruce Naumann, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler and Robert Irwin from the Panza collection are unmistakable landmarks of 20th-century art. Although the ramp of the Frank Lloyd Wright building was inhospitable to some of the work (Flavin's nominal three of 1963 suffered particularly from being placed in an open-sided niche with a sloping back wall), the museum's large tower galleries provided perfect spaces for installations by Los Angeles "Light and Space" artists such as Turrell, Irwin and Wheeler. Curators Lisa Dennison, Nancy Spector and Susan Cram drew on a variety of public and private sources to flesh out the first part of the show, and to bring their narrative up to the present.

The publication, in 1962, of Camilla Gray's The Russian Experiment in Art sparked a new wave of interest in Constructivism. Indeed, Gray's description of Constructivism as an art of "real materials in real space" could have served as a battle cry for the new art that would soon become known as "Minimalist." Morris's first sculptures were made from humble plywood; Judd advanced from wood to sheet metal and Plexiglas; Flavin used ordinary fluorescent light fixtures. All three artists placed their works directly on the floor or attached them boldly to the wall, eliminating the virtual space of the pedestal or the picture frame.

A third key component of Minimalism was the idea of systemic or serial composition. Frank Stella's black paintings of 1959 furnished an early impetus. In Bruce Glaser's influential 1964 interview with Stella and Judd, Stella opposes his work to the "relational painting" of "the European geometric painters," who strive for balance: "You do something
in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner. In contrast, the black stripes in Stella’s paintings are regular and symmetrical. The picture seems to offer no trace of intuition or personal sensibility. Stella decided on the pattern of stripes before beginning the work, and then executed it as impersonally as possible, like a sign painter. Stella’s pictures provided a key example for a new generation of work in which “all of the planning and decisions were made beforehand and the execution was a perfunctory affair,” as LeWitt put it. From here, it was a short step to the idea of hiring fabricators to make the work, following the artist’s instructions. And from there, it was just a short step to the idea that the work could consist of instructions without any permanent physical incarnation.

It is tempting, therefore, to adopt these criteria—real materials, real space and systemic composition—as defining features of Minimalism. The problem, as “Beyond Geometry” made unmistakably clear, is that they are also characteristic of a great deal of other art being made in the 1960s. In the sections of the exhibition devoted to the themes of “The Object and the Body,” “Light and Movement” and “Repetition and Seriality,” Minimal and non-Minimal objects mingled like long-lost cousins. “Beyond Geometry” also demolished Judd’s contention that “anti-relational” art was a distinctively American innovation, breaking with the tired estheticism of European abstraction. In fact, real materials, real space and systemic composition were central tenets of the school of “concrete” art launched by Theo van Doesburg in 1930. Opposing the kind of painting that began with a perceived image and then “abstracted” it into generalized forms and colors, van Doesburg and his followers began with the literal materials of painting and sculpture and made compositions that owed nothing to nature.

In contrast to Oiticica’s yellow installation, the gray slab by Morris scarcely looked like art at all; the floor piece seemed at first glance to be a pedestal awaiting a sculpture.

Above rear, Robert Morris’s Floor Slab, 1961/2001, plywood, 18 by 96 by 96 inches; in “Beyond Geometry.”

Left and partial view above, Hélio Oiticica: Nucleus 6, 1969-63, 10 painted panels and ceiling structure, 72 by 96 by 75 inches. Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.

This early history of “concrete” art lay beyond the chronological limits of “Beyond Geometry,” which picked up the story after World War II, when it gets more complicated and more interesting. After van Doesburg’s premature death in 1931, the Swiss artist Max Bill assumed leadership of the Concrete movement. Bill was a mediocre artist, whose bland paintings and sculptures seem tailor-made for corporate lobbies and plazas. However, when his work was shown in Brazil in 1950, at the São Paulo Museum of Art, it had a revolutionary impact. The following year, he won the sculpture prize at the first São Paulo Bienal, and he returned to Brazil to lecture in 1953. “Beyond Geometry” documents Bill’s impact on Brazilian artists such as Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, and the important connections between Bill’s work and that of Argentinian artists such as Tomas Maldonado and Gyula Kosice. All of these artists were more talented and more interesting than Bill himself, but their debt to him is undeniable.

By the 1960s, Oiticica and Clark, in particular, had arrived at experimental forms of construction and installation comparable in ambition to those of the North American Minimalists. To make this point at LACMA, “Beyond Geometry” staged a confrontation between Oiticica’s legendary monochrome yellow installation, Nucleus 6 (1960-63), and one of Robert Morris’s classic gray monoliths, Floor Slab (1961/2004). Both works depart decisively from the realm of sculpture, becoming architecturally scaled objects that engage the full space of the gallery and confront the viewer with their physical presence. However, the juxtaposition also confirmed the difference between them. The overlapping panels of Nucleus 6 clearly derive from the formal vocabulary of Cubism and Constructivism, a point that Zelevansky underscored by placing nearby a small 1967 relief by the Dutch Constructivist Joost Baljeu.
After 1962, the focus of the movement shifted rapidly from painting to three-dimensional objects, and it seemed doubtful that any painting could be considered truly Minimalist.

that looked like a study for Oiticica’s installation. In contrast, Morris’s gray slabs (there were two on view) scarcely looked like art at all; the floor piece adjacent to Nucleus seemed at first glance to be a pedestal awaiting a sculpture.

In fact, the rigid panels of Nucleus 6 were atypical of Oiticica’s work. By the late 1950s, he and his Brazilian peers had rebelled against Ettore’s fixed geometry, dubbing themselves Neo-Concretists rather than Concretists. In Oiticica’s Metasquemias, this rebellion is expressed by expanding, contracting and skewing the squares of the grid so that they seem to be in motion. As “Beyond Geometry” reveals, this was a widespread tendency in art of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Similarly skewed grids appear in Gino Manzoni’s Achrones, and artists such as Gianni Colombo and François Morellet took the next logical step by mechanizing components in their reliefs or sculptures. The exhibition provides a broad overview of kinetic art, a movement that seemed fresh and exciting for a decade and then fell off the map of the art world.13

What is most thought-provoking in Zelevansky’s survey is the association between kinetic art and the medium of the wall relief, which also played an important role in the early work of Judd, Morris, Flavin, LeWitt, Böchner, Smithson and Hesse. There is something inherently uncanny about the medium of relief. It is neither a disembodied image like painting nor a fully three-dimensional object like sculpture. Rather, a relief tends to look like a picture coming to life. It seems logical, then, that artists like Colombo, Morellet and the Belgian Pol Bury would have specialized in kinetic reliefs whose small, almost imperceptible movements suggest biological twitching rather than mechanical motion. Kineticism was also a central concern of the Düsseldorf artists Otto Piene, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker, the founding members of Group Zero. Although the dozens of nails hammered into Uecker’s relief Big Cloud (1965) do not literally move, they nonetheless give the impression of particles in motion, or fur bristling on the side of a living, breathing animal. It should be noted that Hesse spent a year in Germany between 1964 and 65, living near Düsseldorf, and some of her 1967 reliefs, such as Constant, seem like responses to Uecker’s work.14

“Beyond Geometry” also documents the international scope of Op art, which, like kinetic art, flourished and then fell abruptly from favor at the end of the 1960s. Some of the stars of this movement, such as Bridget Riley and the Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto, are enjoying revivals; others, like the Pole Wojciech Fangor, seem due for renewed attention. Fangor’s M 13 1966 consists of a series of brightly colored concentric circles, as if it were a melted Kenneth Noland. The blurred edges give the impression that the viewer’s eyes have drifted out of focus, but however much you try to bring it into focus the image remains blurry. (Ugo Rondinone employs a similar eye-boggling effect in some of his recent canvases.) For many critics, this quasi-physiological interaction made Op into the evil twin of Minimalism: yes, it created an active relationship between viewer and artwork, but this merely physiological interaction was not philosophically significant.

Other sections of “Beyond Geometry” explore “The Problem of Painting” and “The Object
Redefined," i.e., the rise of Conceptual art. Here, it sometimes grew difficult to follow the logic of the argument linking geometric abstraction with Manzoni's Neo-Dada objects of 1959-60, Eleanor Antin's series of photos tracking her weight loss or Sándor Pinczély's 1973 photographs of himself holding up an actual hammer and sickle to mimic the exhausted symbol of the Communist regime. It was unfortunate, also, that the exhibition was not given more space in L.A. Some of the works suffered from being crammed together in small galleries, while four key works, by Serra (Inverted House of Cards, 1962), Argentinian David Lamelas (Untitled Corner Piece, 1969/2004) and Maria Nordman (EAT Pum Room, 1967, and Drawings for Alameda Project, 1978) were exiled to a room far away from the rest of the show, on LACMA's second floor.

In the mid-1960s, just as Minimalism began to receive recognition as a key tendency in contemporary art, it also began to split apart, evolving into different movements such as earthworks, process art, Conceptual art, Post-Minimalism and Eccentric Abstraction. "A Minimal Future?" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, conveyed both the unity and the diversity of Minimal art in these years. The show focused, for instance, on the kinds of sculptures that emerging artists made in the mid-1960s, when they were still digesting the example of Judd, Morris and Flavin, but before they had discovered their own personal paths.

Extrapolating from the systemic art of Stella and Judd, other artists such as LeWitt, Bochner and Smithson adopted a new serial methodology. As Bochner wrote, this was "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."6 It seemed, in 1966, as if the simplest way to translate such mathematical series into three-dimensional form was by arranging stacks of cubes. Bochner assembled wooden blocks into a small but complex relief, stepping upward toward the center and receding toward the back plane, and painted red and orange. Smithson arranged white cubes into a kind of pyramid with mirrored sides, projecting from the wall. LeWitt constructed cubes, columns and slabs from grids of open woodwork, painted white.

Within a few months, each artist had transformed this shared, generic style into a distinctive personal idiom. LeWitt's breakthrough work, the Serial Project (ABCD), 1966/85, combined open and closed columns to explore permutations on the theme of the cube within a cube. The lopsided, asymmetrical arrangement of cubes seems even less "composed" than the symmetrical bands of Stella's black paintings, but its mathematical logic is strangely compelling. The Serial Project was displayed at MOCA in a 1985 version blown up to 16 times the area of the original (a 320-by-320-inch ground plan vs. approximately 50 by 50 inches). At this scale, only a quarter of the full Project could be displayed, but the enlargement gave it a tremendous physical impact. (Unfortunately, the sheer size of LeWitt's installation completely overpowered the paintings by Robert Ryman that had the misfortune of being hung in the same gallery.)

Between 1966 and 1968, Smithson reinvented his the name she adopted in 1872, Judy Chicago. Before turning to the symbolic, semi-figurative idiom of her well-known feminist work, Chicago established a significant reputation with angled arrangements of boxy forms, reminiscent of Morris's early Minimal work but tinted with subtle, spray-painted colors. In the "Fetish Finish" culture of Los Angeles, where Chicago went to art school, spray-painting was seen as a tough, masculine craft, but she deployed it to add a subjective, "feminine" dimension to her work. The juxtaposition of Chicago and Smithson at MOCA was motivated by the fact that they were both included in the 1966 "Primary Structures" exhibition, but this fact was not evident to a casual viewer. They also share some formal inclinations; Smithson, too, used odd pastel hues, and both were drawn to diagonals and angular compositions.

A large section of "A Minimal Future?" addressed the same "problem of painting" raised in "Beyond Geometry." Although Stella's 1959 paintings had played a critical role in the genesis of Minimalism, the focus of the movement shifted rapidly from painting to three-dimensional objects, and after 1962 it seemed doubtful that any painting could be considered truly Minimalist. Goldstein confronted this issue by assembling an impressive group of canvases that seemed to satisfy the Minimalist criteria for composition, if not the demand for "real materials in real space." Some of the painters in "A Minimal Future?" such as Ralph Humphrey, Jo Baer and Marden, adopted the strategy of emptying out

Bohdan W. Oppenheim, Santa Monica.
Even for a devoted gallery-goer, much of this work was familiar only from reproductions in old art magazines, and it was wonderful to get to see it. However, it did not answer the question of whether there was such a thing as Minimal painting. Subjectively, Marden’s dense fields of oil and beeswax and Russe’s blank surfaces framed with symmetrical lines seemed somehow Minimal, while the luminous stained canvases of Humphrey and Novros did not. But the work alone was not enough to resolve the issue.

The chronological narrative of “Singular Forms,” at the Guggenheim, began with a room of illustrious forebears: Ad Reinhardt, Tony Smith, Manzoni, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Rauschenberg. After this, the first four levels of the Guggenheim ramp and their adjacent galleries offered a parade of the reductive sensibility’s greatest hits, enlivened with works by lesser-known figures such as Ward Jackson and Mary Corse. The provocative part of the show began on the fifth level, which focused on art made after 1975. Here, the visitor encountered works by contemporary artists such as Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Charles Ray, Wolfgang Laib, Meg Webster, Roni Horn, Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Karin Sander, Glenn Ligon and Damien Hirst.

The link between the two parts of the exhibition often seemed to depend more on critical theory than on visual resemblance, a shift corresponding to changing interpretations of Minimalism. In the 1960s, taking their cue from the copious analytical or polemical writings of Judd, Morris, Smithson and other artists who defined the movement in its early phases, critics focused on the qualities of real space, real materials and systematic composition. In 1973, however, the critic Rosalind Krauss published an essay, “Sense and Sensibility,” arguing that the formal qualities of Minimalism were significant primarily as the expression of a new idea of the self. Rather than expressing the artist’s unique subjectivity, Minimal art demonstrated that there was no such thing as self. More precisely, subjectivity was an illusion produced by the impersonal mechanisms of language and society. The philosophical implications of Minimalism were thus congruent with the presuppositions of what would come to be called postmodernism. Krauss’s interpretation rapidly established itself as the new critical orthodoxy, reiterated in books and catalogues and in the influential journal, October, which she co-founded.

From this point of view, the postmodern artists of the 1980s, such as Levine and McCollum, are the legitimate heirs of Minimalism, using repetition and reproduction to deconstruct the “myth” of originality. McCollum’s Plaster Surrogates look like small black monochrome canvases. However, this multiple-element piece is really an exercise in permutation, like LeWitt’s Serial Project #1 (ABCD). Each of McCollum’s “surrogates” is unique—not because it is an expression of the artist’s sensibility, but because it represents a unique combination of his predetermined parameters: image size, frame size, frame color and so forth. The problem with putting postmodern works like Plaster Surrogates into the same exhibition with Minimalist works, however, is that they tend to operate at very different scales, with very different effects. After the heroic installations of Judd, Flavin and Andre on the lower floors of the Guggenheim, McCollum’s modestly sized, wall-mounted works looked, well, dinky. Their philosophical boldness did not translate into visual power.

By contrast, some younger artists operating within the intellectual framework of postmodernism, such as Rachel Whiteread and Liam Gillick, have produced works that maintain the visual and physical impact of 1960s Minimalism. Indeed, the single most...
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Walt Whitman the universe in a leaf of grass, so, too, Meireles evokes the duality of sky and earth, day and night, northern and southern hemispheres.

In contrast, Morris's gray boxes, Judd's brightly colored boxes and LeWitt's open cube all appear at first to foreclose any kind of metaphorical reading. After prolonged inspection, these works begin to yield up meaning, but their initial refusal remains a key element of that meaning. The same is true of Tony Smith's Diet (1962), a black steel box 6 feet on each side, which has become the archetypal image of the Minimal cube even though the artist did not think of himself as a Minimalist. What first impresses the viewer (the work was in "A Minimal Future?" is the physical presence of Smith's sculpture, along with the seeming absence of composition, color and surface incident. It is baffling that something so imposing should be so totally lacking in all of the qualities traditionally identified with art.

Eventually, the sculpture's title triggers meaningful associations—with death and mausoleums, or the haphazardness of tossed dice—but these remain secondary to the physical impression of the cube itself.

Beyond the obvious formal criteria, mainstream Minimal art often exhibits a kind of grim seriousness or even morbidity, evident in Andre's dull metal plates and in the mind-chilling permutations of LeWitt's serial sculptures. In "Looking at American Sculpture," published in February 1865, Barbara Rose wrote:

The work [of Morris, Judd, Andre and others] looked numbed and strangled, but nobody was budging an inch.... All the works share a certain clumsiness, cheerless quality, a directness so matter of fact that it was brutal. I suppose the most obvious common denominator was how empty everything was, how much effort went just into rejecting all but the very barest, irreducible minimum.28

Similarly, Judd himself, reviewing the 1964 exhibition "Black, White and Gray" at the Wadsworth Atheneum, described a series of boxes by Smith, Morris, Anne Truitt and James Lee Byars, and a blank white painting by Rauschenberg, and commented: "They are next to nothing; you wonder why anyone would build something only barely present."

Answering his own question, Judd embarked on what was, for him, a flight of metaphysics:

Things that exist exist, and everything is on their side. They're here, which is pretty puzzling. Nothing can be said of things that don't exist. Things exist in the same way if that is all that is considered—which may be because we feel that or because that is what the word means or both. Everything is equal, just existing, and the values and interests they have are only adventitious....
It is tempting to regard real materials, real space and systemic composition as the defining features of Minimalism. The problem is that the three also characterize a great deal of other art of the 1960s.

These facts of existence are as simple as they are obdurate.

Coming back to the particular sculptures, Judd added, "Morris' objects seem to express this flat, unevolving view. Western art has always asserted very hierarchical values. Morris' work and that of others in this show, in different ways, seem to deny this assertion."

Where did this numbed sensibility come from? The art-historical answer, at least for artists working in New York, is Jasper Johns, whose work was surprisingly absent from all three exhibitions discussed here, perhaps because he is usually considered a progenitor of Pop. But the facts suggest that he should be seen equally as a forefather of Minimalism. Stella's earliest stripe paintings descend directly from Johns' Flag (1954). The use of casting in the work of Morris, Nauman and Serra derives from Johns' Target with Plaster Casts (1956). Minimalism's grid first appears in Johns's alphabet and number paintings, while artists such as Böchner and Rizman Opalka echo his use of numerical series. More generally, the monochromy and density of Minimalist painting and sculpture is anticipated by the morose gray palette of Johns's canvases of the later 1950s, and by the clotted texture of his paint.

Minimalism also has numerous philosophical and literary sources, and coexisted with many kindred developments. Some of these were noted in Rose's essay, "ABC Art," published in the October-November 1965 issue of Art in America, but only a few have been investigated by scholars and critics. Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations was used as a source book—or even a manual—by some artists, while his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, written in 1921 but translated only in 1961, provided what might have served as a Minimalist motto: "What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." Wittgenstein enjoyed a kind of cult status in American universities, and in certain art-world circles as well. His leading American interpreter, Stanley Cavell, provided much of the intellectual framework for Michael Fried's 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," a bitter attack on Minimalism that nonetheless offered an insightful, useful analysis of it.

What has been almost completely neglected—probably because of Judd's vociferous disdain for European art and philosophy—is the influence on Minimalism of contemporary French avant-garde culture. In Glaser's 1964 interview, Judd explains that he and Stella reject European geometric abstraction, such as Vasarely's, because it is the visual expression of Cartesian, rationalistic philosophy.

“All that art . . . express[es] a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like.” “Discredited by whom?” Glaser asks. “Scientists, both philosophers and scientists,” Judd replies.

In fact, Judd's comments are a compressed version of the argument made in a book published two years earlier, Wylie Sypher's Loss of the Self: This is primarily an account of recent developments in French art and literature—in the nouveau roman of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the "anti-theater" of Eugene Ionesco and the "anti-paintings" of Dubuffet and Fautrier. However, Sypher sets these cultural activities into the context of 20th-century science, which has discredited traditional concepts of cause and effect, replacing them with a new paradigm of chance, statistical analysis and "operationalism." Operationalism is a matter of clearly defining procedures, carrying them out and noting the results. Instead of defining eternal truths, it yields only a set of empirical observations.

Sypher observes that the same operationalism is at work in an "anti-painting by Dubuffet, Pollock or any of the 'action' painters, whose painting is what happens when the painter goes through the operation of painting." The replacement of free invention by operationalism leads to other consequences familiar from Minimalism and postmodernism. To stress the primacy of process, painters like Dubuffet refuse "the nineteenth-century 'touch,' the signature of the individual temperament." To further under-


Left to right, Brice Marden's Nebraska, T.K.B. and The Dylan Painting, all 1966, oil and beeswax on canvas.

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to "cubes" and "replicas."

This was the same year that saw the publication of Jorge Luis Borges's influential *Labyrinths*. The translation of a volume of Robbe-Grillet's critical essays followed in 1965, replete with pronouncements like "the world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply." (In "ABC Art," Rose quoted this statement as a French equivalent to the thinking of the Minimalists.)

Two more of Robbe-Grillet's novels, *In the Labyrinth* and *Jealousy*, were translated in 1965, in a double volume with an introductory essay by Roland Barthes. This might be seen as the turning point where the influence of French literature began to give way to the influence of French critical theory. Structuralism had arrived in the United States in 1963, with the translation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*. Barthes's reflections on Lévi-Strauss, "The Structuralist Activity," appeared in the Winter 1967 issue of *Partisan Review*. His now-famous essay, "The Death of the Author," was published in 1967 in the journal *Aspen*, as part of a special issue devoted to Minimalism. Edited by Brian O'Doherty, this issue also included Susan Sontag's essay "The Aesthetics of Silence": a do-it-yourself kit for a cardboard sculpture by Smith; instructions for installations by LeWitt and Beuoncer; conceptual poetry by Dan Graham; phonograph recordings of music by Morton Feldman and John Cage; phonograph recordings of texts by Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs and Robbe-Grillet; and a film by Morris. It was in this rich context of art, music and literature that American readers first encountered Barthes's unnerving statement that "It is language which speaks, not the author."

These links to the anti-humanism of Dubuffet, Robbe-Grillet and Barthes seem at first glance to confirm Krauss's argument, in "Sense and Sensibility," that Minimal art was essentially an allegory of the object-like nature of the self, revealed as a social construct, stripped of the illusion of subjectivity. This reading is at odds, however, with the firsthand experience of Minimal objects. As Fried noted, the viewer often has the sense of being in "the silent presence of another person." What appears to Krauss to be mere inanimate objecthood is for Fried a willed silence, an important mode of human expression. This is the subject of Sontag's essay "The

mine traditional painting, Pauvtrier "has intentionally duplicated 'originals' in series... throwing on the market a large number of the same 'original' so that he can undermine the commercial and artificial value of the unique painting." He has, in other words, anticipated Levine and McCallum.

The appearance of *Loss of the Self* announced—or provoked—a new wave of translations of foreign literature. Sartre's hyperventilating horror at the mere thingness of things, in his prewar novel *Nausea*, arrived in English in 1964, as did Robbe-Grillet's affectless descriptions of a world of objects, in *The Erasers*. (When the detective in *The Erasers* eats lunch, it is in an automat where food is reduced
With Minimalism, what appears to Krauss to be mere inanimate objecthood is for Fried an important mode of human expression: the sense of being in "the silent presence of another person."

Aesthetics of Silence" and of Wittgenstein's statement in the Tractatus, quoted above.

Wittgenstein's observation is subject to two mutually exclusive interpretations. One is that anything that cannot be stated clearly does not exist, and therefore is not worth discussing. In practice, this interpretation requires that we abandon most of the traditional concerns of philosophy. The other interpretation is that there are ethical and spiritual matters of supreme importance that cannot be discussed clearly. These do in fact exist. However, they will be distorted and perverted by any attempt to discuss them. They are best expressed by falling silent at the moment when philosophical chatter threatens to transgress onto sacred territory. It might be argued that what Minimal art aims to communicate is precisely this sense of supreme and therefore inexpressible meaningfulness.

Here, too, Fried's observations are illuminating: "The apparent hollowness of most literalist work—the quality of having an inside—is almost blantly anthropomorphic. It is... as though the work in question has an inner, even secret life." It seems significant, in this regard, that Judd's box-like sculptures generally have an aperture or transparent panel promising access to their interior. Sometimes it is a small opening or slot. Sometimes the side or top of a box is completely open, perhaps revealing a recessed panel of brilliant color, compensating for a drab exterior. A recent exhibition of Judd's early "single stack" pieces, at Van De Weghe Gallery in New York (Feb. 23-May 28), showed how the sensual color of Plexiglas could overflow its metallic container, flooding the adjacent wall and floor. After experimenting with single units of this type, Judd decided instead to display them exclusively as stacks of identical units, limiting the viewer's access and restraining the refraction of color somewhat. These are indeed sculptures with an inner, secret life.66

Nauman's Lighted Performance Box of 1969, in "Singular Forms," made the same point in a blunter fashion. The piece consists of a square aluminum column, recalling the gray plywood column that Morris constructed for a dance performance at Judson Theater in 1961. Morris's column—arguably the first Minimal sculpture—was in fact intended to house a human performer. Nauman's sculpture contains, instead, a 1,000-watt spotlight, linked to the outside world by a heavy black cord emerging from the column's open top. When the piece is switched on, a brilliant light emerges from the column, casting a white square on the ceiling while its source remains invisible. The column becomes very hot. Is the light intended as a metaphor for spiritual illumination? Or is it meant to evoke the disorienting spotlight of a midnight interrogation? The glamour of a Hollywood premiere, or the terror of police arriving on a crime scene? Arousing uncertainty, anxiety, astonishment and exhilaration, Nauman's column provokes the contradictory mix of emotions that marks the shift from Minimalism to Post-Minimalism.

1. Ann Goldstein, A Minimal Future: Art as Object 1955-1968, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, with essays by Diedrich Diederichsen, Jonathan Flatley, Carrie Lambert, Lacey R. Lippard, James Meyer and Anne Rorimer. "Minimal Futures?" was, in effect, a prequel to an earlier exhibition, "Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975," organized by Goldstein and Rorimer at MOCA in 1996. It should also be noted that Goldstein's decision to approach Minimalism by considering closely related kinds of art corresponds to James Meyer's argument that "Minimalism... is best understood... as a field of difference, as a strategic game with potential positions to be occupied."


Bruce Nauman: Lighted Performance Box, 1969, aluminum and 1,000 watt spotlight, 78 by 20 by 20 inches; in "Singular Forms." Photo David Heald.
important discussion of this topic in Meyer, Minimalism: Art and Polemics, p. 290, n. 144.


11. See Lawrence Alloway and James N. Wood, Max Bill, Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1974; Alloway's text, pp. 11-13, offers a brief but acute evaluation of Bill's relationship to Minimalism.

12. The complex web of artistic relationships among Germany, Switzerland, Brazil and Argentina in the 1940s, '50s and '60s is explored by Valerie L. Hillings in her catalogue essay, "Concrete Territory: Geometric Art, Group Formation, and Self-Definition," in Zeloviansky, Beyond Geometry, pp. 44-75.

13. For a period view of the importance of kinetic art, see Jack Burnham, Beyond Modern Sculpture, New York, Braziller, 1969.


17. The Minimal blankness of Rauschenberg's seven-panel White Painting, done during his student days at Black Mountain College, was in some ways misleading. Created as a kind of Dada object meant to capture the shadows of people moving in front of it, it was the inspiration for John Cage's famous composition, 4'33", in which a piano's ostentatious silence encouraged listeners to attend to the ambient noise of the concert hall. The gallery at the foot of the Guggenheim's ramp is evenly illuminated from a skylight, however, so passersby cast no shadows on Rauschenberg's painting. Without them, it was reduced to an insipid monochrome abstraction.


The three major Minimalism exhibitions of 2004 were preceded, in fall 2003, by a more modest survey, "Primary Matters: The Minimalist Sensibility, 1959 to the Present," at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which included 28 paintings, sculptures and installations from the museum's collection. In spring 2004, Hunter College presented "Moved," a small but thought-provoking survey of installation art, at its Times Square Gallery in New York. In the summer of '04, the Reina Sofia in Madrid presented "Monocròmos." The intersections between North American and South American art explored in "Beyond Geometry" were also visible in two other exhibitions, "Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [see A.I.A., Oct. '04, and "Latin American & Caribbean Art: MoMA at El Museo," at New York's Museo del Barrio. In 2003, an exhibition of early Judd works appeared in Europe and the U.S. [see A.I.A., Nov. '03]. The current year saw the openings of important retrospectives of Donald Judd [see review in this issue]. Dan Flavin and Robert Smithson. For the student of Minimalism, these were banner years. ["Monocròmos," Flavin and Smithson will be covered in forthcoming issues.]