Modernism in Retreat: Minimalist Aesthetics and Beyond

5

Clement Greenberg's Modernism was a source of antagonism for most of the artists discussed in the last three chapters. Their weapons of opposition were the bodily, the readymade, the mass-(re)produced, the 'kitsch', and the aesthetically hybrid. At the turn of the 1960s Modernism's rhetoric of aesthetic 'purity' had reached a pitch. However, it could only be comprehensively discredited if, as well as being set against the social realities it spurned, it was found wanting in its own abstract terms. Aesthetic dilemmas demanded solutions. This chapter will show how practices of abstraction mutated from the early 1960s onwards, gradually recovering vestiges of figuration and human content.

The non-relational: Reinhardt, Stella, Judd

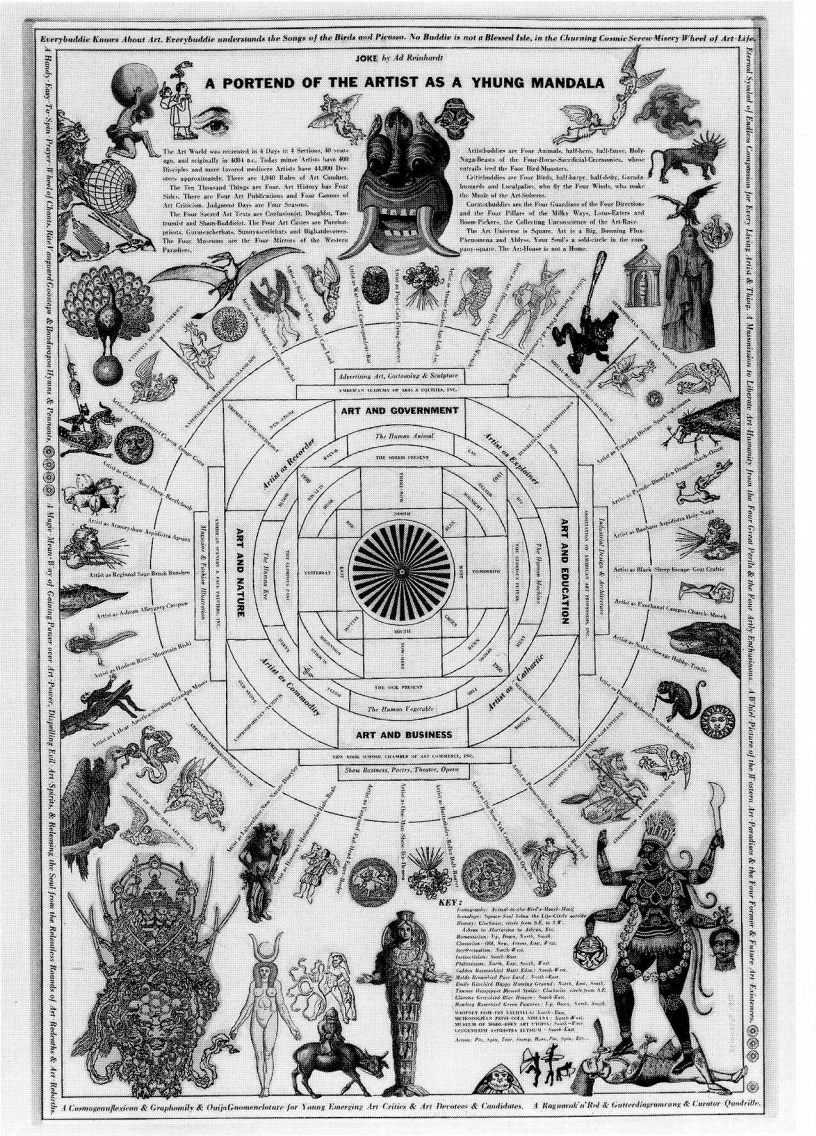
In America the output of two painters of the early 1960s, Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella, manifested telling ambiguities from a Modernist standpoint. Ad Reinhardt, the senior of the two, with a career stretching back to the late 1930s, carved out a particularly intractable position for himself. On the one hand, he possessed the hallmarks of a staunch Modernist. He deplored any confusion between art forms, fiercely advocated a philosophy of 'art as art' predicated on relentlessly negativistic itineraries of all the things art was not,[1] and in his 'black' paintings of 1955–67 practically banished compositional incident from a sequence of unyielding monochromes. On the other hand Reinhardt had no time for Modernism's avatars, the Abstract Expressionists. He regarded their paintings as impure marriages of abstraction and Surrealism and satirized their Jungian sympathies in the title and imagery of one of the polemical 'cartoons' he published in the art press in the 1950s [**64**]. This jibe notwithstanding, Reinhardt was deeply sympathetic towards various forms of mysticism. The sombre iconicity of the 'black paintings', from which Greek cross structures slowly emerge against faint bluish or reddish 'haloes', attests to this.

Detail of 73

64 Ad Reinhardt

A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala, 1955

Ad Reinhardt's satirical cartoons, which contrasted sharply with his practice as a painter, dated back to the 1930s and 1940s. His strong Communist sympathies during that period had informed a series of cartoons for left-wing journals. By the 1950s he was more concerned with exposing the politics of the art world. It is presented here in the form of a Tibetan mandala—a maze of buzz words and cant, shot through with capitalist decadence.



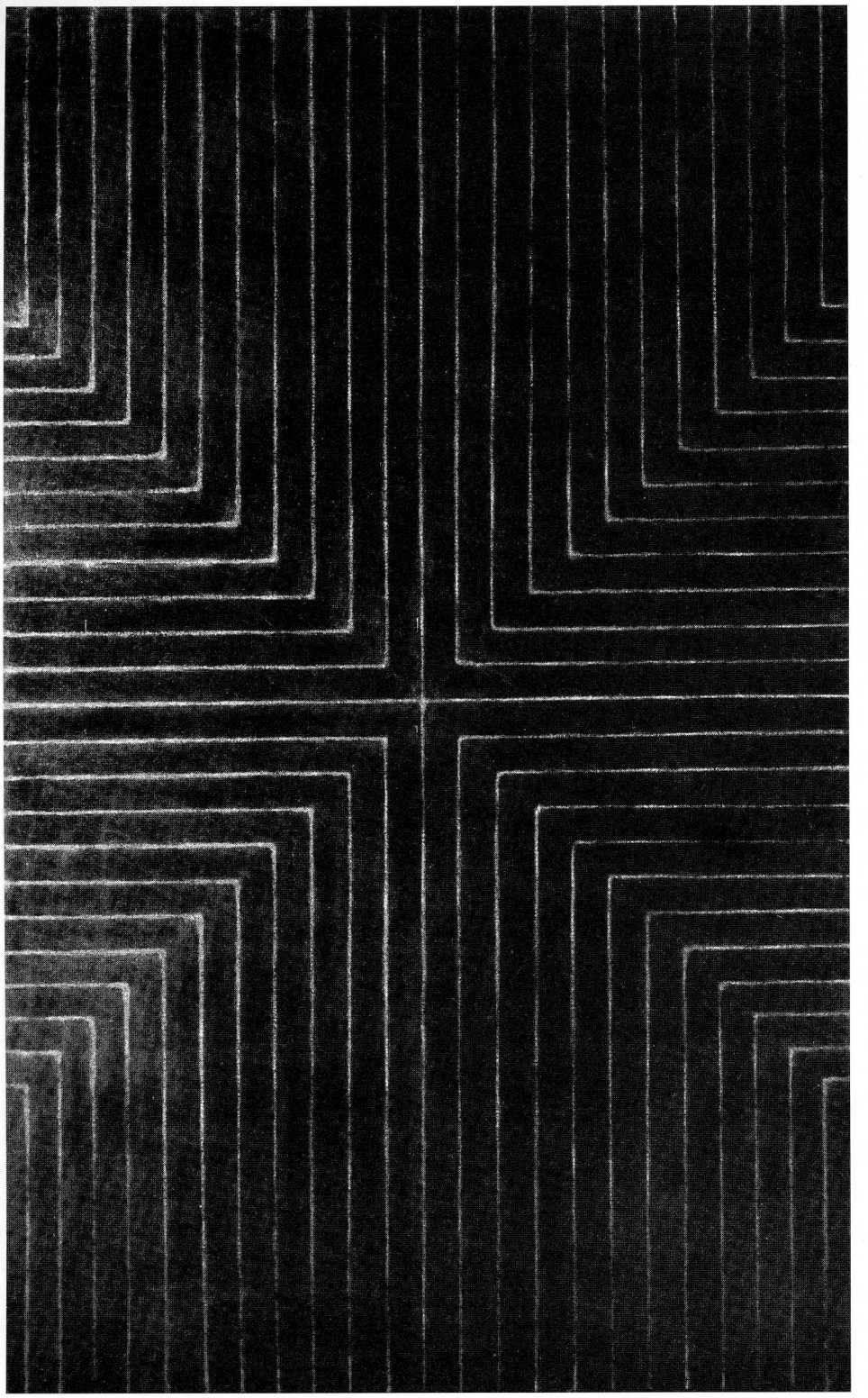
Reinhardt's art world purges were given impetus by the lukewarm reception he received from Clement Greenberg. In the early 1960s this Modernist critic was wary of the uninflected object-like quality of Reinhardt's 'black' canvases. Having previously espoused values of painterly 'all-overness' and 'flatness' (as discussed in Chapter 1), Greenberg was now retreating from their logical extremes, observing that 'a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one'.[2] In line with his advocacy of painters like Morris Louis, he increasingly stressed the optical incident within the pictorial field rather than its overall cohesion. Yet it was precisely the latter self-referring quality which younger artists in New

York, such as Don Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Frank Stella, prized in Reinhardt. Stella's own 'black paintings' of 1958–60, which set his career in motion, were almost calculated to confirm Greenberg in his critical reorientation.

Stella's works took the critic's earlier dogma of formal self-containment to a deadpan conclusion. Expunging any residues of Abstract Expressionist emotionalism and seizing on Johns's use of systematic pictorial rationales [**29**], Stella deduced the internal logic of paintings such as *'Die Fahne Hoch!'* [**65**] from their nature as objects. The unvarying 2-inch-wide bands of black that filled the canvases were thus derived from the width of their stretchers. The slivers of bare canvas that were left behind paradoxically functioned as 'drawing', echoing the framing edges of the supports and setting up centrifugal or centripetal 'ripples'. Such images seemed to obey structural necessity rather than aesthetic whim. But Stella, of course, made minimal decisions as to how to extract necessity from his formats. This flew in the face of the Modernist idea that painting imposes a fixed set of aesthetic limitations.

In subsequent sequences of work Stella dramatically moved from 'painting' in a Modernist sense towards 'objecthood' (to pre-empt Michael Fried's later terminology). In the aluminium-coated 'shaped canvases' of 1960 the paintings' reverberative internal patterns were dictated by notches cut into the corners or sides of the supports, or by holes puncturing the centres. Their aluminium surfaces encouraged the art historian Robert Rosenblum to characterize them as 'irrevocably shut metal doors',[3] an association underlining both their self-containment and the artist's stated desire to 'repel' attempts to 'enter them' visually.

In the face of such drastic metamorphoses, the Modernist critic Michael Fried, torn between loyalties to Greenberg and to Stella (he was a close friend of the latter), attempted to cast such works in Modernist terms. He claimed, for instance, that the reflected light from the aluminium canvases counterbalanced their tendency to function as objects by creating an optical shimmer.[4] He and other Modernist commentators such as William Rubin were spared further explanatory acrobatics when, having pursued his end-game with painting to the extent of producing polygonally shaped canvases in 1963, in which the redundant centres of the paintings were completely removed, Stella changed direction. His enormous *Protractor* paintings of 1967–8 now reintroduced complex internal relationships between arcing bands of colour. For a time at least he appeared to have entered the Modernist fold, alongside other 1960s exponents of 'hard-edge' abstract colour painting such as Ellsworth Kelly. However, in the 1970s his surprising turn to a kind of parodic or baroque gestural painting established him as terminally ambivalent.

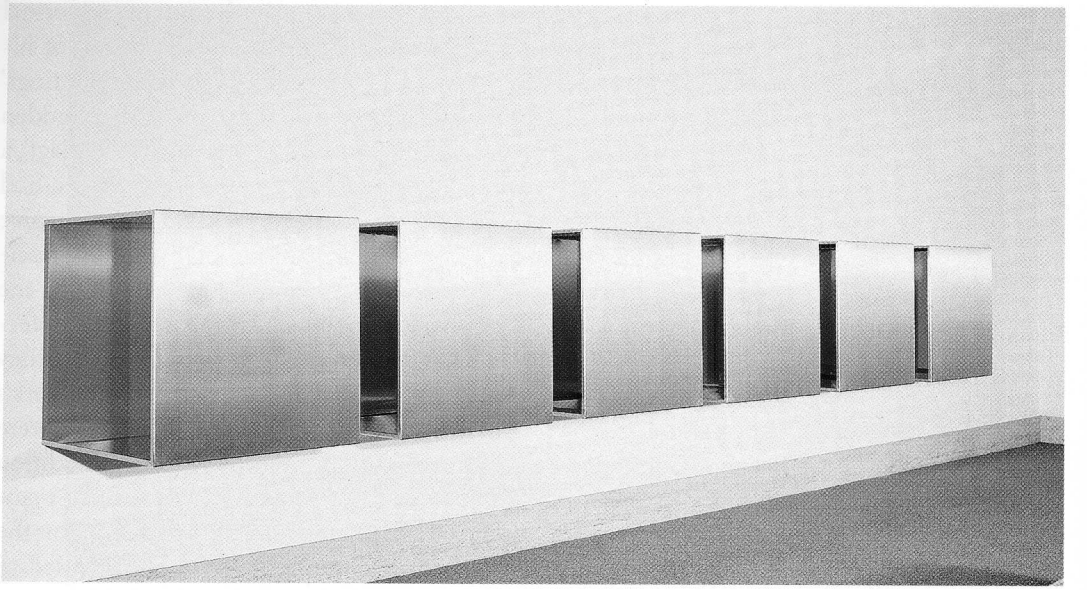


65 Frank Stella
'Die Fahne Hoch!', 1959

The resolution with which Stella squeezed both content and formal rhetoric out of his works temporarily diverted any discussion of his emotional investment in them. The titles of his early 'black paintings' have led, however, to considerable speculation concerning hidden agendas. '*Die Fahne Hoch!*', for instance, translates as 'Raise the Flag!', a phrase from a Nazi marching song which doubles as an ironic nod towards Jasper Johns [**28**], and, given Stella's imputation of aggressive motives to those pictures, it has been argued that they encode a fascination with fascistic forms of domination.[5] *En masse*, however, the titles catalogue so many connotations of 'blackness' (for instance references to jazz hangouts and a transvestite club in Harlem) that they probably simply reflected Stella's identification with New York's seamier side. He was at emotional 'rock bottom' when the works were produced, and may well have seen them as continuous with a tradition of 'black' paintings deriving from the gritty, *noir* ambience of 1940s film and photography [**16**]. In this, Stella was a precedent for the Warhol of the *Disasters* [**56**]. This comparison may be extended to another similarity between these apparently dissimilar figures—a conception of art output as akin to industrial production.

It is here that readings of Stella as preoccupied by metaphors of domination gain some purchase. Basically, it has been argued that, as the 1960s progressed, Stella's works, whether Modernist or anti-Modernist in orientation, came to acquire the impersonal clarity of corporate logos.[6] This argument may not be as reductive as it appears. Moves by American corporations from international to multinational status during this period may have insidiously informed the way ambitious artists, conscious of America's new-found hegemony in the Western art world, seized the advantages of having instantly identifiable 'brand identities' within an expanding art market. It is revealing perhaps that Leo Castelli, Stella's dealer, once characterized his shiny aluminium canvases as 'cash registers'.[7] Certainly by the late 1960s Stella, like Warhol, had embraced a 'managerial' ethos, employing assistants to cope with the demand for his wares and effectively splitting artistic creativity into 'executive' and 'production' modes.

Whether or not Stella is to be seen as a cipher for larger economic forces, it is interesting that when he, along with fellow artist Don Judd, theorized the move to a new impersonal aesthetic, in an important interview of 1966, the rhetoric of American cultural supremacy played its part.[8] It is necessary here to say something about Judd. Initially a painter, Judd had come to believe, in the wake of Stella's productions, that both painting and sculpture were inherently illusionistic and should be superseded by the creation of what he called 'specific objects' in literal space.[9] His production of this new artistic genre, which took the form of single or repeated geometrical objects, was part of a broader move towards 'Minimalism', to be discussed



66 Donald Judd
Untitled, 1968
Judd's industrially manufactured, modular pieces, developed from 1966 onwards, were stubbornly empirical investigations of specific materials and visual effects. He shunned mystification and openly declared the nature of his structures. The interiors of his boxes were normally exposed or could be viewed through coloured perspex. Colour was often inherent in the materials he selected, but he sometimes coated his metal pieces with metallic motorcycle paints so that colour appeared to be at one with the surface rather than 'applied'.

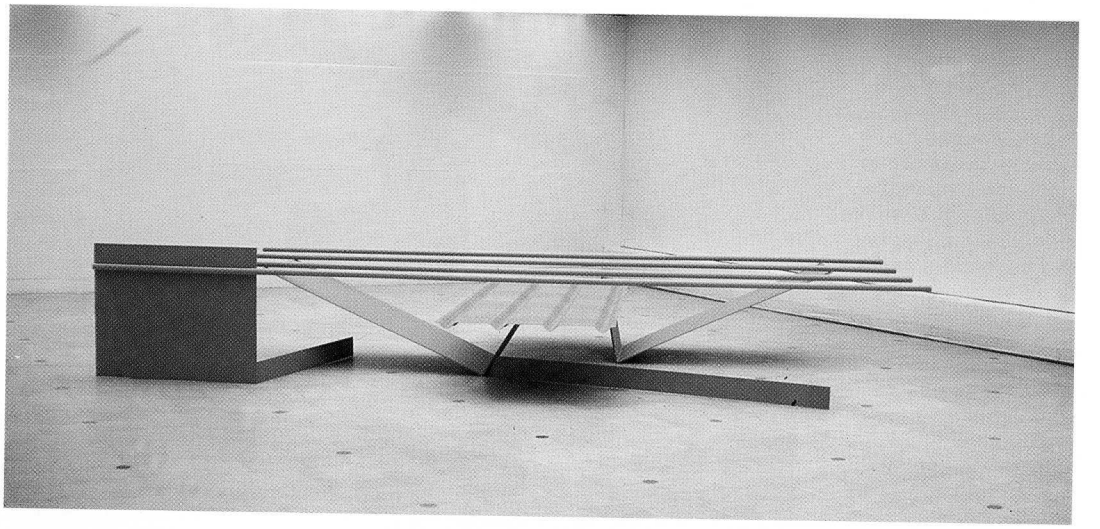
shortly. The objects, which were uninflected, 'hollow', and occasionally subdivided internally according to part-to-whole ratios, were fabricated by workmen at factories, according to his specifications, in materials ranging from cold-rolled steel to Plexiglass [**66**]. In articulating their position, Stella and Judd made much of the fact that their new works were 'non-relational'. This meant they were structurally self-evident and pragmatically ordered according to a principle of 'one thing after another', thereby shaking off the fussy 'relational' characteristics of much previous art.

What they took to be 'relational' was epitomized by the work of the British sculptor Anthony Caro, currently being promoted by Greenberg and Fried in a notable softening of their pro-Americanism. Caro had transferred his loyalties from Henry Moore to US Modernism in the late 1950s by absorbing the example of the American sculptor David Smith. In the 1940s and 1950s Smith had utilized the industrial process of welding to produce imposing steel or other metal structures, thereby establishing the practice of construction, pioneered by artists such as Picasso and the Russian Constructivists earlier in the century, as the pre-eminent postwar sculptural principle. Revitalizing British sculpture through the importation of Smith's techniques, Caro boldly dispensed with the American's assumption that sculpture should be oriented vertically from a base. Smith's links to an older Abstract Expressionist generation had predisposed him towards residues of figuration, even in his most apparently abstract works [**67**], but Caro made a radical shift to horizontally oriented abstract sculptures. Occupying large areas of ground, they were painted in the bright colours of American Post-Painterly Abstraction in order to counteract

67 David Smith
Lectern Sentinel, 1961
Smith's series of *Sentinel* sculptures, which were begun in 1956, were placed in the landscape surrounding his studio at Bolton Landing in upstate New York. Given their clear figurative associations they appeared to 'survey' or 'guard' the terrain. In this example, the overlapping and angling of the welded stainless-steel plates brilliantly hint at the classical motif of *contrapposto*, whereby the body is slightly 'twisted' through the employment of a resting and a supporting leg.

their weight and make their elements 'hover' above the ground. Fried in particular lauded Caro for achieving a purely non-referential Modernist sculptural 'syntax' in which part-to-part relationships were orchestrated to cohere, as the spectators circled the works, in moments of optical exultation [**68**].

It was this balancing of 'relational' parts that Stella and Judd disliked. Judd's own objects acknowledged construction as a technical paradigm, but completely rejected a 'composed' or 'arty' look. For



68 Anthony Caro
Prairie, 1967
The rods in Caro's scupture seem to float uncannily above the ground, appearing merely to touch the plates from which they are cantilevered. Caro enhanced this effect by painting them a lighter yellow than the structure beneath, whose corrugations, travelling in a different direction, nevertheless rhyme visually with the rods.

Stella and Judd 'relational art' was intrinsically Modernist, but it was also seen as tethered to European sensibility, which is where the aforementioned cultural chauvinism enters in. Thinking largely of European geometrical abstraction, Judd asserted in the 1966 interview with Stella and himself that European art was 'over with': the new American art was characterized by a direct and powerful presentation of 'whole things' whereas European art was 'rationalistic'. However ambivalent he was about Modernist values, he was flexing America's art-world muscle in the way that Greenberg and New York's MOMA had in the 1950s.

If the above appears to tilt the discussion in favour of Judd's pristine 'objects' embodying the 'technological sublime' (in other words an awed capitulation to the sheer authority of America's spreading technological and corporate might), it is worth investigating Stella and Judd's claim that 'non-relational' works of art were in some way a release from 'rationalism'—a principle that might, initially, appear to be synonymous with authoritative exposition and clarity. By looking now to the wider Minimalist milieu, a rather different picture emerges.

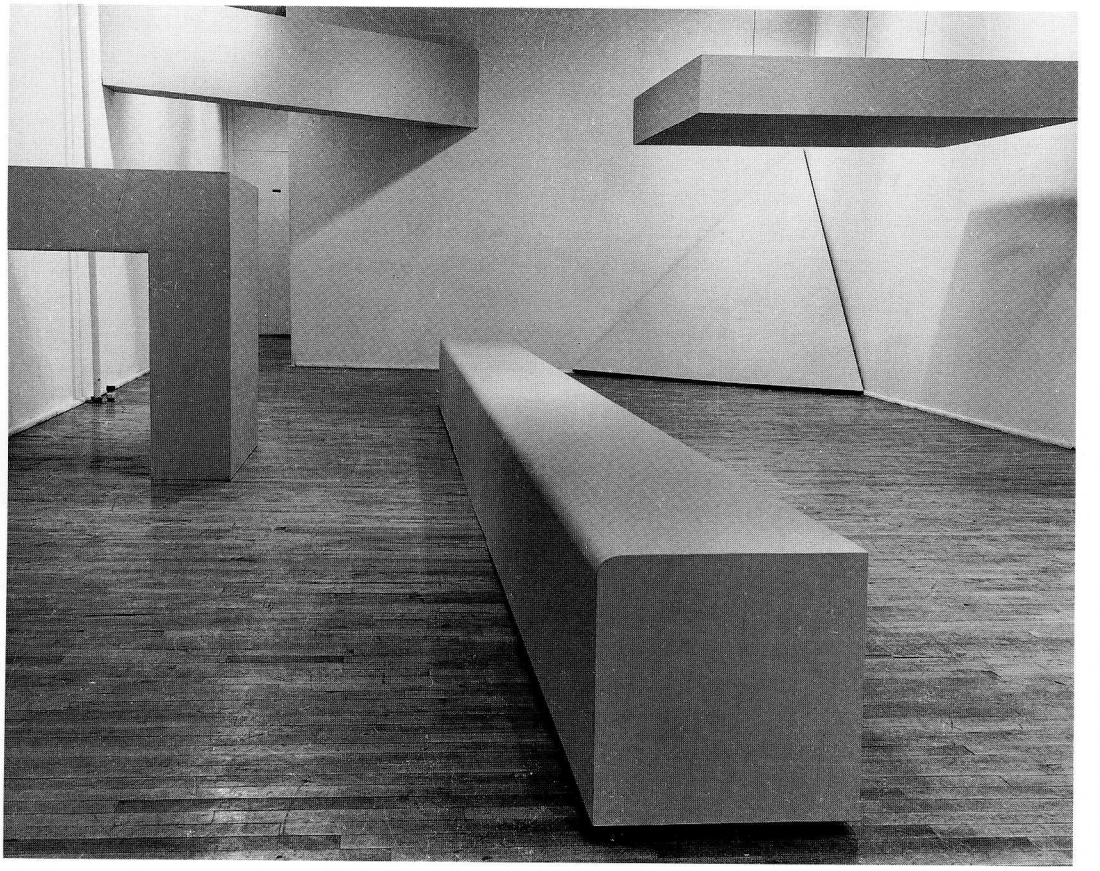
Minimalism and anti-rationalism

The 'Minimalist' tag was derived from the title of a 1965 essay on the withdrawal of manual effort from aesthetic output by the British philosopher Richard Wollheim.[10] Its connotations of reductive 'paring down', however, were rejected by all of the key figures who came to be identified with it after a spate of solo shows in 1963–4: Don Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Dan Flavin. Other labels such as 'Literalism' or 'Primary Structures', the latter the title of the key exhibition of these artists at New York's Jewish Museum in 1966, were no

more helpful. As Judd asserted, the reductionist interpretation of Minimalist art was predicated on what was thought to be missing from the objects when works such as his were kept uncomplicated precisely in order to isolate specific and positive qualities. Reduction alternatively implies a calculated attempt to reach an essential 'core'. In this respect the work of many Minimalists implicitly denied any 'rationalist' or 'idealist' accession to 'meaning'. Judd's ordering systems were anti-rationalist, he claimed, because the logic of 'one thing after another' obviated the need for aesthetic 'decisions'. In the case of Robert Morris, though, the principle of anti-idealism went deeper.

In the early 1960s Morris had been involved with the moves towards a simplified, task-oriented style of dance which his then wife, Simone Forti, and dancers such as Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer developed at New York's Judson Memorial Theatre. In its openness towards interdisciplinarity this tendency paralleled contemporaneous Merce Cunningham/Rauschenberg and Fluxus performances. In sculptures of the period Morris explored Duchampian preoccupations with the body and gendered identity [**27**], as noted earlier. These concerns naturally found their way into the fairly elaborate dance events he organized between 1962 and 1965 such as *Site* (1964, with Carolee Schneeman) and *Waterman Switch* (1965), but the convergence between sculpture and dance had been economically suggested in Morris's first performance, *Column*, at the Living Theatre in New York in 1961. The 'performer' in the piece was a grey-painted 8-foot plywood column which stood on an empty stage for three and a half minutes. Manipulated externally by strings, it then fell to the floor, where it remained for the same period before the performance ended. The piece conflated anthropomorphic allusions to male sexuality (as subsequently explored in *I-Box*) and current moves in sculpture from a (virile) verticality to a stress on horizontality [**67, 68**]. In 1964–5, Morris began to use such geometrical forms in the context of Minimalism, but his sense of their metaphorical possibilities clearly separated him from Judd.

This is not to say that Morris was unconcerned with the problem of maintaining the sense of the 'wholeness' of his geometrical forms. However, in his contemporaneous *Notes on Sculpture* he evinced an interest in how such 'whole objects' were actually perceived by spectators, playing off the concept of the 'good gestalt' (a term used by psychologists to designate the 'whole' or regular structures we are predisposed to search for in visual configurations) against the fact that our bodily based experience of objects, even the most regular ones, is inevitably partial or contingent. We may be able to conceptualize 'cubeness', but we can only experience actual cubes in time from certain angles and distances. We oscillate, as Morris put it, between the 'known constant and the experienced variable'.[11]



69 Robert Morris
Installation at the Green Gallery, New York, December 1964
Spectators were implicitly asked to test their height in relation to the arch-like 'table' at the left of this photograph or the form suspended at eye level at the right. Expectations concerning the format of the gallery were modified by the 'corner piece', a sculpural concept derived from Joseph Beuys, but adapted to a different end.

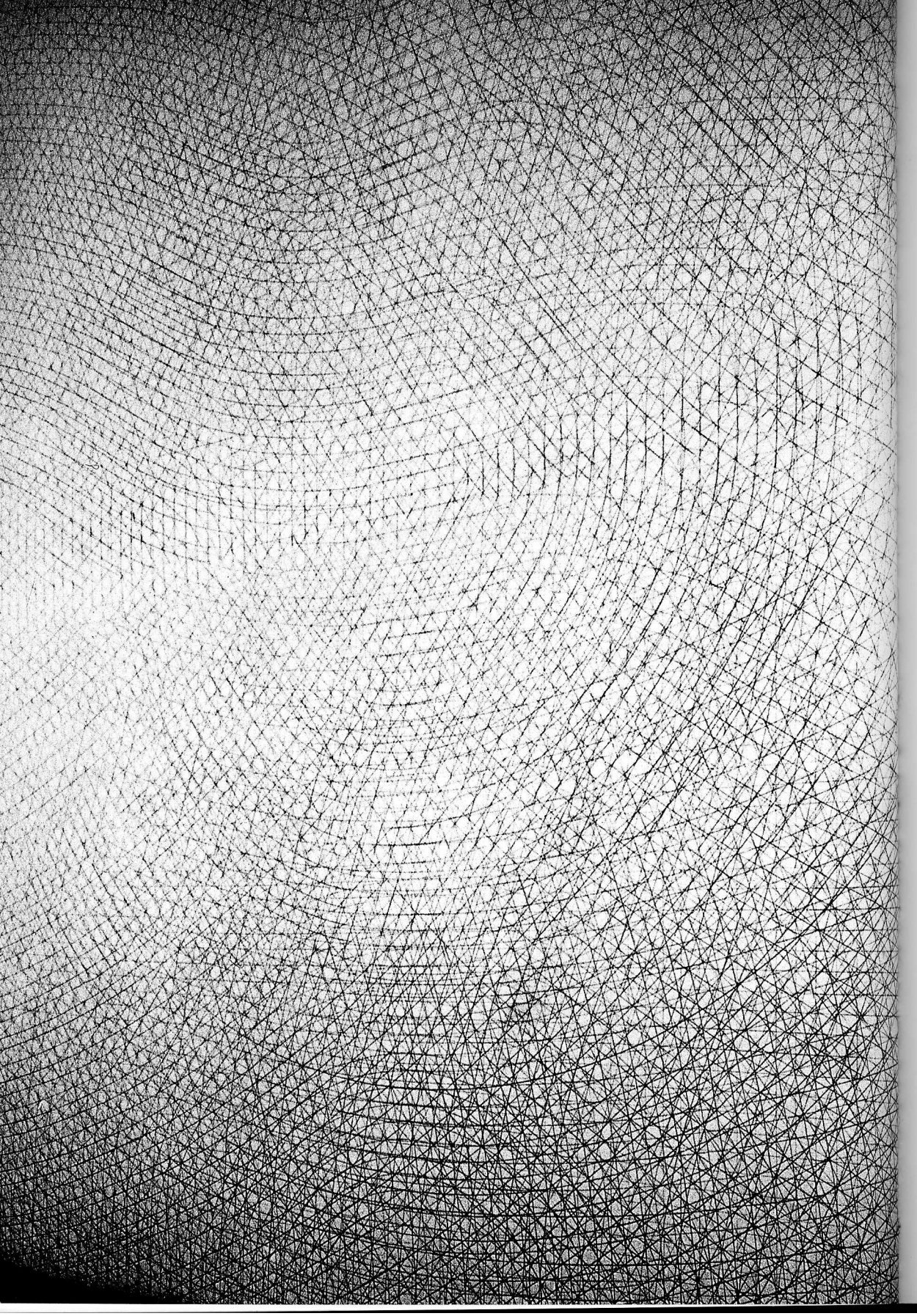
In real terms, this led Morris to the controlled perceptual conditions involved in works like *Untitled (Three L-Beams)* of 1965. These large, identical L-beams were placed in sitting, lying, and balancing postures, like three Platonic Graces. The spectator's experience of them as visually 'different' had to be reconciled with the fact that their natures were identical. Much has been made of Morris's interest at this time in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), in which the philosopher was at pains to strip the body's 'primordial' apprehensions of spatial, temporal, or sensory stimuli from the tyranny of predetermined axiomatic truths. Morris's Green Gallery exhibition of 1964–5 [**69**] might almost be described as a phenomenological gymnasium, its aesthetic 'apparatus' designed to 'tone up' its audience's eyes, bodies, and minds. What is clear is that Morris's work '[took] relationships out of the work and [made] them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision'.[12]

In moving from Judd's 'non-relational' interests to Morris's 'phenomenological' ones, a split within Minimalism has emerged between a desire to see art objects achieve ultimate self-sufficiency (thereby pushing the Modernist credo to its limits) and a desire to see

such objects defined by their ambient conditions.[13] The latter position, which Morris partly inherited from the Duchampian emphasis on the role of the spectator, constitutes a radical break with Modernist assumptions, undermining the autonomy previously claimed for works of art. Minimalism here becomes deeply relativistic, supportive of the view that 'art' can only acquire value or worth in relation to external factors, such as its social or institutional setting. Such a view sets distinct limits on the artist's ability to control meaning, recalling Barthes's theorization of the loss of authorial agency.

This issue of loss of agency can be differently exemplified in the art historian Rosalind Krauss's reading of the anti-rationalism of another artist associated with Minimalism, Sol LeWitt. Discussing his *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974), a modular structure composed of 122 wooden units demonstrating all the permutations produced by systematically removing the various sides of a cube, she shows how an apparent logicality flips into obsessive compulsion.[14] Although LeWitt's productions clearly responded to Minimalist preoccupations, such that this project echoes Morris's play on the 'known constant' discussed above, he was to present himself as one of the first practitioners of Conceptual Art in articles of 1967 and 1969 with statements such as 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art'.[15] This principle informs the 'wall drawings' that LeWitt embarked on from 1968 onwards. Revealing a Minimalist predilection for impersonality, they were designed for specific locations but were frequently carried out by draughtsmen on the basis of succinct instructions from LeWitt—for instance 'circles, grids, arcs from four corners and sides' [**70**]. Strict adhesion to such prescriptions, with no clear sense of how they would unravel *in situ*, led the interpreters to produce unexpectedly labyrinthine or eccentric visual structures. Again, the strange co-existence within Minimalism of authorial removal and aesthetic autonomy is touched upon.

LeWitt's abandonment of control, his deployment of pragmatic systems to undermine rationality, would appear to argue against the earlier points made about Minimalism's tacit complicity with America's power base. However, the loss of agency which he seems glad to submit to may be read as the symptomatic underside of that coin. In this sense, Minimalism emerges as the autistic child of booming industry and mass production, its fixations on strong *Gestalts* and repetitive systems bespeaking a pragmatism internalized and, in many cases, gone awry. Forcing Modernist aesthetics to breaking point, Minimalism vacillated between an awe for the totality of power and a sense of powerlessness. In the latter respect it was closer to America's disaffected countercultures of the mid-1960s than might be supposed.



70 Sol Lewitt

Circles, Grids, Arcs from Four Corners and Sides, 1973

In the early 1960s LeWitt had largely devoted himself to producing modular open cube structures made from wood. His 'wall drawings' represented a continuation of his interest in pushing systems to their limits, but also made a radical contribution to the history of drawing. Drawing has traditionally been thought a peculiarly private activity for artists, a way of trying out ideas, preparing for more 'finished' works in other media. LeWitt both removes himself from its production, providing it with a conceptual basis, and turns it into a public art. In a sense these works are variants on fresco paintings.

'Art and Objecthood': Fried and his detractors

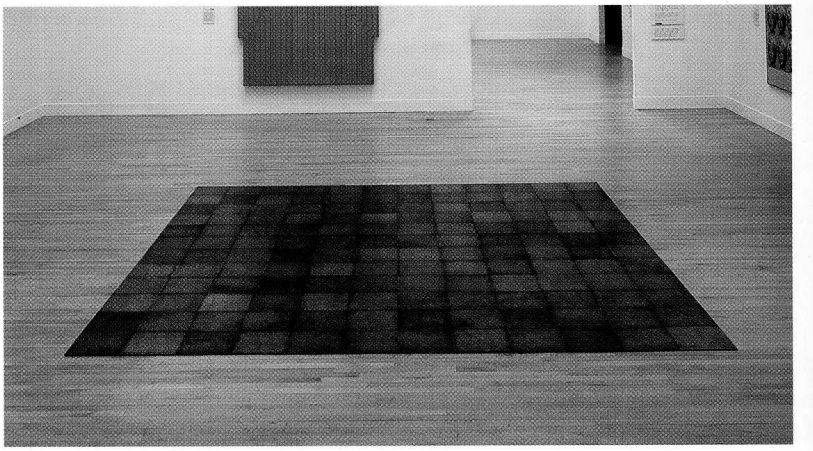
In June 1967 the critic Michael Fried published an essay of pivotal importance entitled 'Art and Objecthood', which staunchly defended the Modernist cause against Minimalism (he called it 'Literalism' in the essay).[16] Greenberg had already disparaged the Minimalist object two months earlier for being too gratuitously 'far-out' and intellectualized, no more readable as art than 'a door, a table, a sheet of paper'.[17] Essentially Fried expanded this view that Minimalist works did not distinguish themselves sufficiently from mere objects, arguing that the real test of a work of art was that it 'suspend its own objecthood'. Modernist art was now charged with the strenuous task of 'compelling conviction' pictorially, which meant overcoming the limitations of literal shape through the mystique of 'opticality'. (We saw earlier how he attempted to make this stick in the case of the recalcitrant Stella.)

Thinking mainly of Robert Morris [**69**], Fried asserted that Minimalism committed the cardinal sin, from a Modernist viewpoint, of borrowing another discipline's effects. In the case of Minimalism, theatre appropriately supplied the 'effects'. Minimalist objects were said to rely for their uncanny anthropomorphic sense of 'presence' precisely on being like presences waiting to be met (and 'completed' as artworks) by spectators entering the gallery space.Theatrical 'staging' and duration, Fried argued, were integral to their functioning, and in danger of usurping their *raison d'être* entirely. Whilst the 'presence' of such objects made spectators conscious of their own physicality, the superior Modernist works of Caro possessed an absorbing 'presentness', momentarily freeing spectators from self-awareness. One effect was profane, the other transcendent. Horrified that the turn to Minimalism might threaten the idealist values bound up with the latter, Fried famously declared that Modernist art and 'theatricality' were 'at war'.

They had been skirmishing for years, and Chapter 6 will demonstrate that 'theatricalities' of various orders won out in the 1970s. But Fried was correct in recognizing that a great deal stood to be lost. If factors such as the height or position of a spectator became entangled with the functioning of a work of art, how could secure, universally valid value judgements be made about its success or otherwise? Too many variables were in play. New criteria for legitimating art's societal status would follow and the cultivated humanist art criticism, predicated on the possession of a 'good eye' that Fried practised, would be in jeopardy. Clearly there was an ideological basis to Fried's fears. This point can be further elaborated by considering the Minimalist Carl Andre.

Andre's sculptural aesthetic was heavily indebted to the early twentieth-century Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, particularly his *Endless Column* (1937), in which modular zigzag elements were

71 Carl Andre
Magnesium Square, 1969



stacked vertically, implying infinite extension both upwards and downwards. Andre similarly employed standardized units in sculptures from the early 1960s onwards, utilizing prefabricated elements such as sheets of metal or bricks and arranging them, as did his friend Frank Stella, in self-evident, numerically determined stuctures. In *Lever* of 1966, which consisted of a line of 139 abutted fire-bricks, he claimed to have brought Brancusi's column down to earth: 'Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work, Priapus is down on the floor.'[18] This enactment of the 'fall' of sculpture logically led him to consider the terrain it covered. His *Floor Pieces* [**71**] were thus compressed pedestals from which spectators, who were encouraged to walk on them, could look beyond art. In 'Art and Objecthood' Fried discussed an anecdote recounted by the sculptor Tony Smith in which, driving along the New Jersey Turnpike, the artist had sensed a kind of elation at the endlessness of the experience. Smith's yearning for an experiential state that could not be 'framed' not only epitomized the lure of 'theatricality' for Fried but betokened the art object's complete dissolution. And, although he did not say as much, if the object disappeared, so would its role as item of exchange-value.

This leads on to the politics embedded in the physical aspects of Andre's *Floor Pieces*. The artist asserted that part of his intention was to sensitize his spectators to gravity. The properties of the materials he used—lead, copper, aluminium, and so on—would thus be transmitted through his audience's feet. This bias towards physically based sensations extended to a materialist conception of art itself. He clamed that his work was 'atheistic, materialistic and communistic', the last because its non-hierarchical structures, based on bringing 'particles' into alliance rather than corralling parts into a whole via processes such as welding, were somehow 'accessible to all men'.[19] It is ironic that Andre's works later aroused widespread hostility. In 1976 the revelation that the Tate Gallery in London had bought part of Andre's brick work

72 Agnes Martin
Flower in the Wind, 1963
In her consistent use of grids Agnes Martin participated in a tradition in twentieth-century art stretching from the Cubists and Mondrian to her Minimalist contemporaries. The grid was a non-hierarchical and non-referential structure. It asserted the flatness of the picture plane, echoing its framing limits while implying an indefinite structural extension of the picture beyond its limits. For Martin this had metaphysical connotations, whereas for the Minimalists its associations were essentially literal and pragmatic.

Equivalents I–VIII, as orchestrated by Britain's popular press, led to philistine attacks on the spending policies of Britain's public galleries from general public and art establishment alike.[20] But the Marxist/materialist ideology informing Andre's aesthetics separated him, and many of his artist associates, from Fried's conservative humanism, however surely his works later became items of exchange-value. The politicization of the late 1960s avant-garde will be discussed in the next chapter, but Andre's role in the formation of the Art Workers' Coalition in 1969, which subsequently protested against the art establishment's tacit assent to war in Vietnam, should be noted in passing.

Materialist ideologies by no means pervaded all of the art associated with Minimalism. The American painter Agnes Martin, who became