

art in modern culture:
an anthology of critical texts

edited by francis frascina
and jonathan harris

N
6490
.A722
1992



IconEditions
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Anna C. Chave
**Minimalism and the Rhetoric
of Power**

Source: Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 5, January 1990, pp. 44-63. This text has been edited and footnotes renumbered accordingly. Twelve plates have been omitted.

[...] What concerns me about Minimalist art is what Teresa de Lauretis describes as 'the relations of power involved in enunciation and reception', relations 'which sustain the hierarchies of communication; ... the ideological construction of authorship and mastery; or more plainly, who speaks to whom, why and for whom.'¹ I want, further, to historicize those relations – to examine the rhetoric inscribed in Minimalism, and the discursive context of the movement, in relation to the socio-political climate of the time during which it emerged. Richard Serra remembers that in the 1960s, 'It was your job as an artist to redefine society by the values you were introducing, rather than the other way around.'² But did Minimalist art in any way propose, or effect, a revaluation of values? And how are we to understand its cool displays of power in relation to a society that was experiencing a violent ambivalence toward authority, a society where many were looking for the means of transforming power relations?

By manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes, Judd [Plate 43] and the other Minimalist artists availed themselves of the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology. Though the specific qualities of their objects vary – from the corporate furniture-like elegance of Judd's polished floor box, to the harsh, steel mesh of Robert Morris's cage-like construction of 1967, to the industrial banality of Carl Andre's *Zinc-Zinc Plain* of 1969 [Plate 44] – the authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used, as well as in the scale and often the weight of their objects, has been crucial to Minimalism's associative values from the outset.³ In one of the first Minimalist group shows, *Shape and Structure*, at Tibor de Nagy in 1965, Andre submitted a timber piece so massive it almost caused the gallery's floor to collapse and had to be removed. The unapologetic artist described his ambitions for that work in forceful and nakedly territorial terms: 'I wanted very much to seize and hold the space of that gallery – not simply fill it, but seize and hold that space.'⁴ More recently, Richard Serra's mammoth, curving, steel walls have required even the floors of the Castelli Gallery's industrial loft space to be shored up – which did not prevent harrowing damage to both life and property.⁵

