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**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.

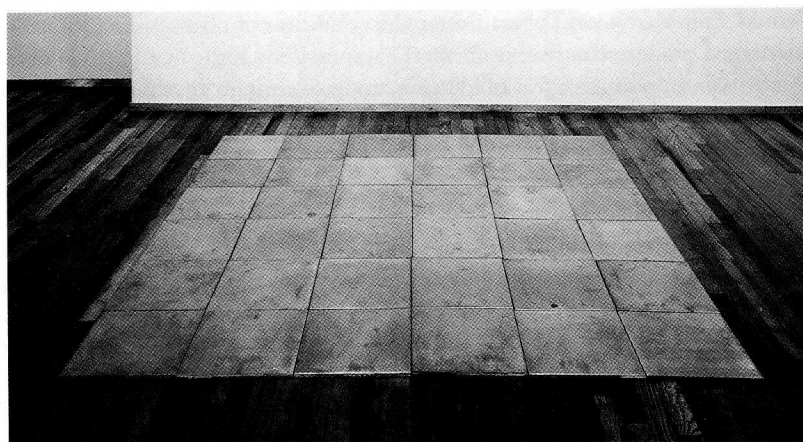
[...] What concerns me about Minimalist art is what Teresa de Lauretis describes as 'the relations of power involved in enunciation and reception', relations 'which sustain the hierarchies of communication; ... the ideological construction of authorship and mastery; or more plainly, who speaks to whom, why and for whom.'<sup>1</sup> 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.'<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.'<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>



43 Don Judd, *Untitled*, 1968.  
Brass, 55.9 × 122 × 91.4 cm.  
Collection, The Museum of  
Modern Art, New York. Gift  
of Philip Johnson 687.80. © 1992  
Don Judd/ARS, New York.

44 Carl Andre, *Zinc-Zinc Plain*,  
1969. 182.9 × 182.9 cm (36 zinc  
plates 30.48 × 30.48 cm).  
Photograph by courtesy of Paula  
Cooper Gallery, New York.  
© Carl Andre/DACS, London/  
VAGA, New York 1993.

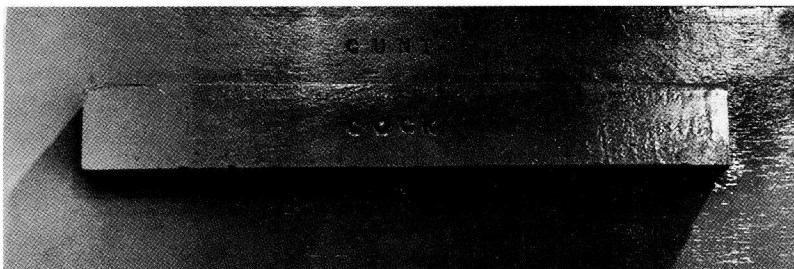


The Minimalists' domineering, sometimes brutal rhetoric was breached in this country in the 1960s, a decade of brutal displays of power by both the American military in Vietnam, and the police at home in the streets and on university campuses across the country. Corporate power burgeoned in the U.S. in the 1960s too, with the rise of the 'multinationals', due in part to the flourishing of the military-industrial complex. The exceptionally visible violence of the state's military and disciplinary establishments in this period met with a concerted response, of course. Vested power became embattled on every front with the eruption of the civil rights alongside the feminist and gay rights movements. In keeping with the time-honoured alignments of the avant-garde, the Minimalists were self-identified, but not especially clear-thinking, leftists. 'My art will reflect not necessarily conscious politics but the unanalysed politics of my life. Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position, I think, essentially Marxist,' said Andre, contradictorily, in 1970.<sup>6</sup> [...]

Now, as in the 1960s, the dominant accounts of Minimalism do not portray it as an instrument of social change but, on the contrary, as art that somehow generated and occupied a special sphere, aloof from politics and commerce and above personal feeling. The language typically used to describe Minimalism employs a rhetoric of purity, primacy, and immediacy in focusing on the artists' means and on the objects' relations to the constitutive terms of their media. 'The demand has been for an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art ... minus symbolism, minus messages and minus personal exhibitionism,' wrote Eugene Goossen in 1966;<sup>7</sup> with Minimalism, 'the very means of art have been isolated and exposed,' he stated two years later.<sup>8</sup> In the standard narratives, Minimalism forms the terse, but veracious last word in a narrowly framed argument about what modern art is or should be. As it happens, the person most responsible for framing that argument, Clement Greenberg, finally disliked seeing his logic carried to its extremes: 'Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today,' he complained in 1967, 'including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper ... it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment. That, precisely, is the trouble. Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else.'<sup>9</sup> But it was an account of the history of modern art that Greenberg had inscribed as the true history that enabled these objects, which verged on being non-art, to be lionized instead as art of the first importance. Andre's metal plates and Morris's cage could only be regarded as works of art in the context of a discourse in which they stood as compelling proof of the unfolding of a certain historical inevitability. Lay spectators only recognize such objects as works of art (when or if they do so) because they are located in the legitimating contexts of the gallery and museum, installed by curators and dealers in thrall (as the artists themselves were) to a particular account of history.

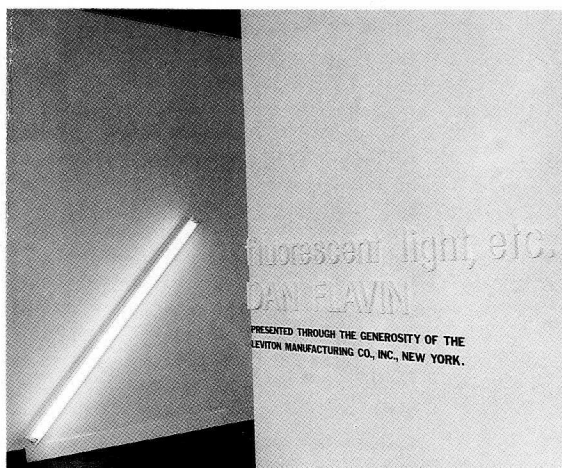
Most of the artists and critics concerned would have agreed with Goossen that with Minimalism, 'the spectator is not given symbols, but facts';<sup>10</sup> that it offers no quarter to 'the romantic mentality, which fails to appreciate experience for its own intrinsic value and is forever trying to elevate it by complications and associations'.<sup>11</sup> The present account is concerned precisely with how such patently non-narrative art is 'complicated' by 'associa-

45 Robert Morris, *Untitled (Cock/Cunt)*, 1963. Painted wood, Leo Castelli Gallery. ©1992 Robert Morris/ARS, New York.





46 Dan Flavin, *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)*, 1963. Cool-white fluorescent light, 243.8 × 9.52 cm. Leo Castelli Gallery. ©1992 Dan Flavin/ARS, New York.



tions', however, and is bent on describing those associations. Morris's *Cock / Cunt* sculpture of 1963 [Plate 45], with its schematic image of sexual difference and coitus, demonstrates plainly that highly simplified abstract configurations may indeed be coded. A more characteristic example, however – one that is not literally, but metaphorically, 'inscribed' – is Dan Flavin's seminal and canonical work (I choose my adjectives advisedly), *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)* [Plate 46], his first work done entirely in fluorescent light. The type of power involved here is, in the first place, actual electrical power (with the requisite cords and connections hidden so that the power's contingency remains inapparent), but the rigid glass tube is also plainly phallic. This is, literally, a hot rod, and Flavin coyly referred to the specific angle he poised the fixture at as 'the diagonal of personal ecstasy,'<sup>12</sup> alluding to the characteristic angle of an erect penis on a standing man. [...]

In Flavin's mind, his *Diagonal* was less a reaffirmation of the possibility for spiritual experience in contemporary society, than 'a modern technological fetish'<sup>13</sup> – a fetish being, in Freudian terms, a talisman against castration and impotence, a symbolic surrogate for the female body's absent penis. From this perspective, Flavin's dependence on technological artifacts for his work may evince the sense of impotence visited on the once sovereign, universal (read: male) subject by the ascendancy of technology. 'Disenfranchised by an independently evolving technology, the subject raises its disenfranchisement to the level of consciousness, one might almost say to the level of a programme for artistic production', as Theodor Adorno observed.<sup>14</sup> Flavin's *Diagonal* not only looks technological and commercial – like Minimalism generally – it is an industrial product and, as such, it speaks of the extensive power exercised by the commodity in a society where virtually everything is for sale – where New York Telephone can advertise 'love', 'friendship', and 'comfort' for 'as little as ten cents a call', for instance. Further, in its identity as object or commodity, Flavin's work may arouse our ambivalence toward

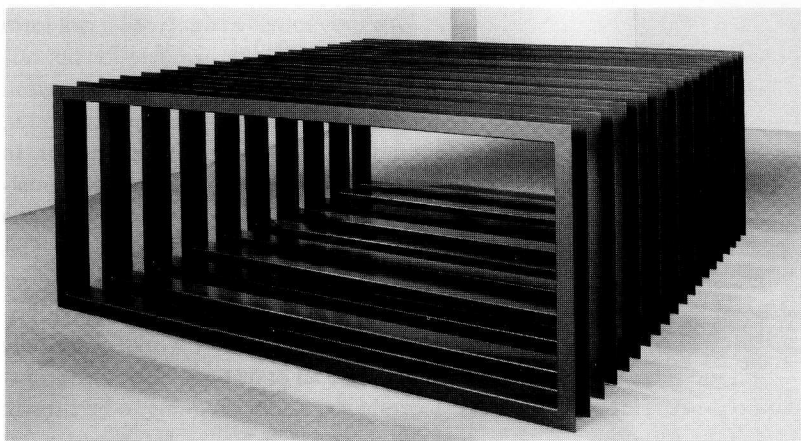
those ever-proliferating commodities around us for which we have a hunger that is bound to be insatiable, as they will never fully gratify us.

Standard products, or commercially available materials, can also be seen to bear secondary meanings in Andre's famous *Lever* of 1966, done for the important *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum in 1966. 'Artworks at their best spring from physical, erotic propositions', Andre stated. And with its 137 fire bricks set side by side in a row 34½ feet long, *Lever* manifests his determination to put 'Brancusi's *Endless Column* on the ground instead of in the sky. Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work, Priapus is down on the floor. The engaged position is to run along the earth.'<sup>15</sup> In terms of the artist's view of it, then, *Lever* is closer to Morris's *Cock/Cunt* than to Flavin's *Diagonal*, as it offers a schematic image of coitus with the floor serving as the (unarticulated) female element. Significantly too, of course, a 'lever' is a long, rigid tool used to pry or lift, while *lever* means to rise, raise, or lift in French. [...]

Like much of Morris's and Judd's work of the early and mid-1960s, Kenneth Noland's pictures often involved simple, repeated, geometric forms, his favoured schemas being those military emblems, the chevron and the target, realized on an outsized scale, often with bold, bright colours [Plate 29]. But Noland's reliance on comparatively weak and natural materials (cloth and wood), not to mention his art's accustomed placement on the peripheries of space, made some problems for him within the Minimalist ambit. 'Noland is obviously one of the best painters anywhere', wrote Judd in 1963 in his guise as critic and monitor of the Minimalist ethos, but his

paintings are somewhat less strong than the several kinds of three-dimensional work. Painting has to be as powerful as any kind of art; it can't claim a special identity, an existence for its own sake as a medium. If it does it will end up like lithography and etching. Painting now is not quite sufficient, although only in terms of plain power. It lacks the specificity and power of actual materials, actual colour and actual space.<sup>16</sup>

Judd continued to insist on the paramount importance of the 'plain power' of art in 'Specific Objects', the essay he published in 1965 that is often taken as a kind of keynote essay for the Minimalist movement.<sup>17</sup> Minimalism began to coalesce as a vision in 1964 and 1965 when the first group shows bringing together the artists now regarded as the Minimalists took place.<sup>18</sup> Historically, 1965 is also the year the first regular American combat troops entered Vietnam; the year the United States started massive bombings of North Vietnam; the year Watts exploded in riots; and the year Malcolm X was assassinated. De Maria's *Death Wall* of 1965, a small stainless-steel plinth marked by a notch-like opening with the word DEATH engraved over it, makes an exceedingly discreet, but evidently directed nod toward the violence of the time. Here, however, as with Minimalism generally, the art's political moment remains implicit largely in its acts of negation; it negated, that is, almost everything the public associated with or expected from works of art, including a sense of moral or spiritual uplift. Some female critics, especially, pointed (though not in a censorious way) to the violence implicit in the



47 Don Judd, *Untitled*, 1966. Painted cold-rolled steel, ten rectangles. Overall 121.92 × 304.8 × 304.8 cm. Each rectangle 15.51 × 304.8 × 121.92 cm. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman. ©1992 Don Judd/ARS, New York.

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Minimalists' categorical refusal of the humanist mission of art: 'a negative art of denial and renunciation' and a 'rejective art', Barbara Rose and Lucy Lippard, respectively, dubbed it in 1965, while Annette Michelson suggested in 1967 that negation was the 'notion, philosophical in character, ... animating [this] contemporary aesthetic'.<sup>19</sup>

The Minimalists effectually perpetrated violence through their work – violence against the conventions of art and against the viewer – rather than using their visual language to articulate a more pointed critique of particular kinds or instances of violence. Judd insisted in 1970 that his work had not had

anything to do with the society, the institutions and grand theories. It was one person's work and interests; its main political conclusion, negative but basic, was that it, myself, anyone shouldn't serve any of these things ... Art may change things a little, but not much; I suspect one reason for the popularity of American art is that the museums and collectors didn't understand it enough to realize that it was against much in the society.<sup>20</sup>

But Judd's work was not, as he would have it, aloof from society. And given the geometric uniformity of his production, its slick surfaces, its commercial fabrication (often in multiples), and its stable, classic design, those prosperous collectors and institutions who were drawn to it could hardly be called obtuse if they perceived it not as 'against much in the society', but as continuous with their own ideals [Plate 47]. Judd's work can easily be seen as reproducing some of the values most indelibly associated with the modern technocracy, in other words, even as it negated many of the qualities the public most fondly associated with the fine arts.

Though some of the Minimalists were alluding, by 1970, to a political moment implicit in their work, it was not at all plain from the way they rep-

resented their enterprise in the 1960s that they initially conceived it as a form of political resistance in keeping with the avant-garde mandate for oppositional artistic practices. Some critics now point to the Minimalists' interest in Russian Constructivism as a sign of their simmering political consciousness, but that interest revealed itself sporadically and not in politicized terms. In 1966, on the other hand, Brian O'Doherty was congratulating the Minimalists for confronting 'what has become the illusion of avant-gardism', and developing 'a sort of intellectual connoisseurship of non-commitment'. This artist-critic went on to claim that the 'anti-avant-garde' object makers were successfully establishing a new academy. Comparing the ambit of contemporary art to that of show jumping, he continued: the latest work 'sits blandly within the gates, announcing that it is not ahead of its time (therefore arousing no shock) and that the future is simply *now* ... This is going to be a tough academy to displace.'<sup>21</sup> [...]

Whereas Pop Art initially caused a collective shudder of distaste within the intelligentsia while being rapidly embraced by the public at large, Minimalism (in the same period) generally garnered toleration, at the least, from the cognoscenti, and either deep scepticism or unmitigated loathing from the public at large. That very loathing could be construed as a sign of this art at work, however, for what disturbs viewers most about Minimalist art may be what disturbs them about their own lives and times, as the face it projects is the society's blankest, steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce; the unyielding face of the father: a face that is usually far more attractively masked.

In 'Specific Objects', Judd adduced what he plainly regarded as a positive vision: that the art of the future 'could be mass-produced, and possibilities otherwise unavailable, such as stamping, could be used. Dan Flavin, who uses fluorescent lights, has appropriated the results of industrial production.'<sup>22</sup> In the final event, however, neither Flavin nor Judd would sacrifice the cachet or the profits that mass-producing their work would likely have entailed. Artists like Flavin and Andre, who worked with commonly available products, took care to work in editions, limiting quantities so as to assure market value and, in Flavin's case, issuing certificates of authenticity upon the sale of their work. If Flavin appropriated commercial lighting fixtures and Andre used common building materials, it was not, in the end, with a view to standing the economy, or the valuations of the market, on its ear. Collectors were compelled to spend thousands of dollars to have 120 sand-lime bricks purchased by Andre – to make *Equivalent VII*, for instance – rather than tens of dollars to buy the bricks for themselves. Though the artists depersonalized their modes of production to the furthest extent, they would not surrender the financial and other prerogatives of authorship, including those of establishing authenticity.

The rhetoric Judd mustered in 'Specific Objects' to promote the new (non-)art pointed to its attainment of 'plain power' through the deployment of 'strong' and 'aggressive' materials. At a time when the call was going out for a reformulation of the configurations of power, however, Judd's use of

48 Albert Speer, Arcade of Nuremberg  
Parade Ground. *Die Deutsche Baukunst*  
1943.



the term bore no inkling of its incipient volatility. For works of art to be powerful and aggressive was, from the Minimalists' standpoint, an unproblematic good, almost as it was once self-evident that art should be 'beautiful'. For an artist, 'power isn't the only consideration,' Judd grudgingly allowed, 'though the difference between it and expression can't be too great either.'<sup>23</sup> This equating of expression with power, rather than with feeling or communication, may or may not strike a reader as strange. Some kinds of art are routinely described as powerfully (read: intensely) expressive or emotional, but Judd's work is not of that sort: if his objects were persons (and I mean this strictly in a fanciful way) they would more likely be described as the proverbial 'strong, silent type'. In art-historical parlance, however, it has long been common approbatory language, even the highest level of praise, to describe works of art in terms of the exercise of power: as strong, forceful, authoritative, compelling, challenging, or commanding; and the masculinist note becomes even more explicit with the use of terms like masterful, heroic, penetrating, and rigorous [Plate 48]. That what is rigorous and strong is valued while what is soft or flexible is comic or pathetic emerges again and again in the Minimalists' discourse, as it does in the everyday language of scholars. (Terms that might, but do not as readily, serve as high praise for art include, for instance: pregnant, nourishing, pleasurable.) The language used to esteem a work of art has come to coincide with the language used to describe a

human figure of authority, in other words, whether or not the speaker holds that figure in esteem. As the male body is understood to be the strong body – with strength being measured not by tests of endurance, but by criteria of force, where it specially excels – so the dominant culture prizes strength and power to the extent that they have become the definitive or constitutive descriptive terms of value in every sphere: we are preoccupied not only with physical strength and military strength but with fiscal, cultural, emotional, and intellectual strength, as if actual force were the best index or barometer of success in any of those spheres.

Foucault has written at length about the power/knowledge paradigms that underwrite the master discourses, the 'True Discourses' of the successive regimes of modern history, and has pointed also to the 'will to power/knowledge' through which 'man' has historically been shaped and transformed. In Foucault's scheme, however (as de Lauretis has incisively observed), 'nothing exceeds the totalizing power of discourse, [and] nothing escapes from the discourse of power.'<sup>24</sup> Foucault admits no possibility of a radical dismantling of systems of power and undertakes no theorizing or imagining of a society or world without domination. Balbus points perceptively to 'the blindness of a man [Foucault] who so takes for granted the persistence of patriarchy that he is unable even to see it. His gender-neutral assumption of a will to power (over others) that informs True Discourses and the technologies with which they are allied, transforms what has in fact been a disproportionately *male* into a generically human orientation, and obliterates in the process the distinctively female power' – my own word would have been capacity – 'of nurturance in the context of which masculine power is formed and against which it reacts.'<sup>25</sup> A persuasive case can be made, after all, that the patriarchal overvaluation of power and control – at the expense of mutuality, toleration, or nurturance – can be held to account for almost all that is politically reprehensible and morally lamentable in the world. The case can be made as well that what is most badly needed are, at least for a start, visions of something different, something else.

The Minimalists' valorization of power can readily be seen as a reinscribing of the True Discourses, the power discourses, found in art history as in the society at large. Received art-historical wisdom about what makes works of art 'powerful' is a quality of unity, with effects of dissonance or difference successfully effaced or overmastered such that an object's or image's composite parts are manoeuvred into a singular, coherent totality. Unity is associated with identity and a successful work of art is understood to require a whole identity no less than an integrated person does. Crudely speaking, the task that an artist is conventionally said to have undertaken is one of balancing the multifarious elements of a composition until they are harmonized and unified. The canny Minimalists started at the usual end of that task, however, by using configurations that were unified or balanced to begin with, such as squares and cubes, rather than engaging in the process of composing part by part. Thinking about what the society values most in art, Judd observed that, finally, no matter what you look at, 'The thing as a whole, its quality as a



whole, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful. They are not diluted by ... variations of a form, mild contrasts and connecting parts and areas.'<sup>26</sup> In the best of the new art, Judd concluded (using Stella as his example), 'The shapes, the unity, projection, order and colour are specific, aggressive and powerful.'<sup>27</sup> [...]

Like Judd's boxes, Morris's cage-like construction of 1967 does not intrude aggressively on the viewers' space due to its moderate scale and its transparency. Unlike Judd's boxes, however, Morris's construction, with its steel materials reminiscent of chain-link fencing, evokes not corporate but carceral images, of discipline and punishment, that intrude aggressively on the viewers' sensibilities.<sup>28</sup> A fenced-in quadrangle surrounded by a fenced-in corridor evokes an animal pen and run, both without exits. Made during a year of African American uprisings in Detroit and elsewhere, and the year of the siege of the Pentagon – a time when masses of ordinarily law-abiding citizens became subject to an exceptionally pervasive and overt meting out of discipline and punishment – Morris's sculpture succinctly images containment or repression. If it does not refer in any more pointed or pointedly critical way to the events of the day, by representing power in such an abrasive, terse, and unapologetic way, the work none the less has a chilling effect: this is authority represented as authority does not usually like to represent itself; authority as authoritarian.

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To judge by Morris's writings, his success at realizing such authoritative and oppressive images owed more to his infatuation with power than to his interest in finding strategies to counter the abuses of power rife and visible at the time. In terms fitting a military strategist, Morris wrote in his 'Notes on Sculpture' of seeking 'unitary' or 'strong gestalt[s]' that would 'fail to present lines of fracture' and that would offer 'the maximum resistance to being confronted as objects with separate parts'.<sup>29</sup> Separate parts could become entangled in internal relationships that would render the objects vulnerable; because they lead to weak gestalts, 'intimacy producing relations have been gotten rid of in the new sculpture.' An elimination of detail is required in the new sculpture, further, because detail would 'pull it toward intimacy'; and the large scale of the work is important as 'one of the necessary conditions of avoiding intimacy'. There is plainly a psycho-sexual dimension to Morris's trenchant objections to relationships and intimacy, to his insistence on distancing the viewer, as well as to his fixation on keeping his objects discrete and intact.<sup>30</sup> In his pathbreaking study of male fantasies, for that (last) matter, Klaus Theweleit has described how the population of 'soldier males' whose writings he analysed

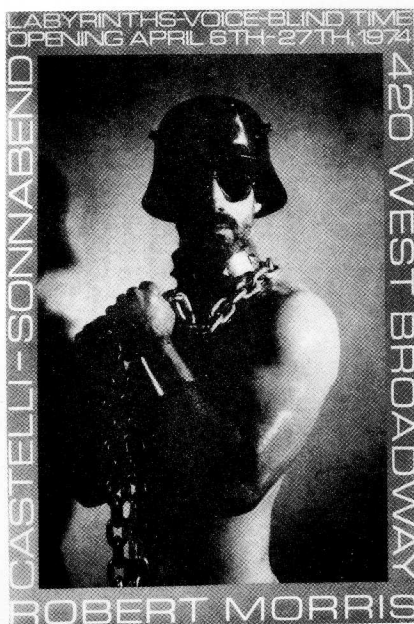
freeze up, become icicles in the fact [*sic*] of erotic femininity. We saw that it isn't enough simply to view this as a defence against the threat of castration; by reacting in that way, in fact, the man holds himself together as an entity, a body with fixed boundaries. Contact with erotic women would make him cease to exist in that form. Now, when we ask how that man keeps the threat of the Red flood of revolution away from his body, we find the same movement of stiffening, of closing himself off to form a 'discrete entity'.<sup>31</sup>



Morris declared in 1966 that 'The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision.'<sup>32</sup> He referred not to a relationship between viewer and work, that is, but only to a relation between the work and the viewers' 'field of vision' – as if the viewers' sight were separable from their minds, bodies, or feelings. The relation between art and spectator that interested Morris became clearer over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s as he made manifest an attitude toward the (embodied) viewer that was ambivalent at best, belligerent and malevolent at worst. The public, at times, returned the artist's animosity: his exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in 1971 had to be closed after five days, allegedly to protect the public, but also to protect the work which the public was battering. Some of that work invited viewer participation – in simple tests of agility, for instance – but with work that engages the public, as the artist discovered, 'sometimes it's horrible. Sometimes you just can't get people to do what you want.' The following year Morris retaliated, as it were, against a different audience with a work called *Hearing*, a gallery installation that consisted of a copper chair, a zinc table, and a lead bed (still executed in a Minimalist idiom). The chair contained water heated almost to the boiling point, and the bed and table were connected with thirty-six volts of electricity, while loudspeakers broadcast a (mock) interrogation lasting for three-and-a-half hours.<sup>33</sup> Later still, to tout another show of his work at the Castelli Gallery, Morris exposed his bare-chested body clad in sado-masochistic paraphernalia [Plate 49], thereby equating the force of art with corporeal force, where what prevails or dominates is generally the greatest violence.<sup>34</sup> [...]

The paradigmatic relation between work and spectator in Serra's art is that between bully and victim, as his work tends to treat the viewer's welfare with contempt. This work not only looks dangerous, it *is* dangerous: the 'prop' pieces in museums are often roped off or alarmed and sometimes, especially in the process of installation and deinstallation, they fall and injure or even (on one occasion) kill. Serra has long toyed with the brink between what is simply risky and what is outright lethal, as in his *Skullcracker Series: Stacked Steel Slabs* of 1969, which consisted of perilously imbalanced, 20-to-40-foot tall stacks of dense metal plates. Rosalind Krauss insists that 'It matters very little that the scale of this work ... is vastly over life size', but Serra's ambitious expansion of the once-moderate scale of the Minimalist object was, together with his fascination with balance and imbalance, central to his work's concern with jeopardy, and crucial to its menacing effect.<sup>35</sup> Judging by his own account, what impelled Serra to make even bigger works in ever more public spaces was never an interest in the problems of making art for audiences not fluent, let alone conversant, in the difficult languages of modernist art, but rather a consuming personal ambition, a will to power. 'If you are conceiving a piece for a public place,' he conceded (while avoiding the first-person pronoun), '... one has to consider the traffic flow, but not necessarily worry about the indigenous community, and get caught up in the politics of the site.'<sup>36</sup> Serra's assurance that he could remain aloof from politics proved

49 Robert Morris, Poster for Castelli/Sonnabend Gallery exhibition, April 6-27, 1974. Offset on paper, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery. ©1992 Robert Morris/ARS, New York.

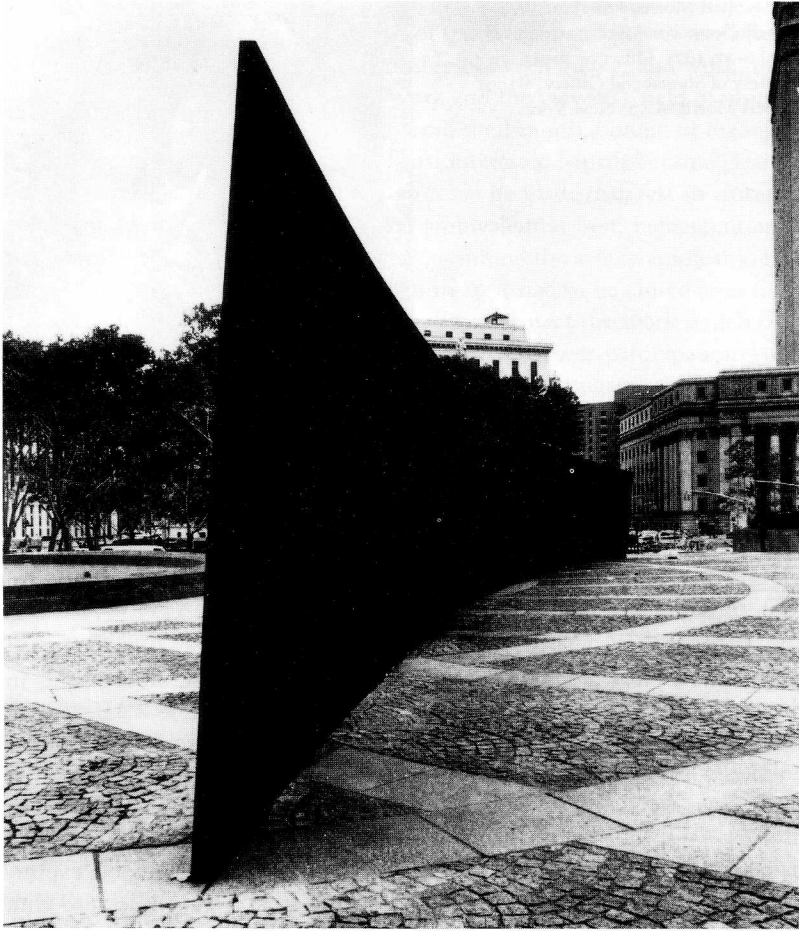


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fallacious, of course, as the public returned his cool feelings, most notably in the case of the *Tilted Arc* of 1981 [Plate 50].

It has been argued about the *Arc* that its oppressiveness could serve in a politically productive way to alert the public to its sense of oppression. Though an argument can be made for Serra similar to the ones I have made here for Judd, Morris and Stella – that the work succeeds insofar as it visualizes, in a suitably chilling way, a nakedly dehumanized and alienating expression of power – it is more often the case with Serra (as sometimes also with Morris) that his work doesn't simply exemplify aggression or domination, but acts it out. In its site on Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan, Serra's mammoth, perilously tilted steel arc formed a divisive barrier too tall (12 feet) to see over, and a protracted trip (120 feet) to walk around. In the severity of its material, the austerity of its form, and in its gargantuan size, it served almost as a grotesque amplification of Minimalism's power rhetoric. Something about the public reaction to that rhetoric can be deduced from the graffiti and the urine that liberally covered the work almost from the first, as well as from the petitions demanding its removal (a demand met [in 1989]).

A predictable defence of Serra's work was mounted by critics, curators, dealers, collectors, and some fellow artists. At the General Services Administration hearings over the petitions to have the work removed, the dealer Holly Solomon made what she evidently regarded as an inarguable case in its favour: 'I can only tell you, gentlemen, that this is business, and to take down the piece is bad business ... the bottom line is that this has financial value, and you really have to understand that you have a responsibility to the financial community. You cannot destroy property.' But the principal arguments



50 Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981. Cor-ten steel, 365.76 × 3657.6 × 76.2 cm. Photo: Dith Prahm, Susan Swidler and Anne Chauvet by courtesy of the Pace Gallery. Installed Federal Plaza, New York, destroyed by U.S. government 15 March 1989.

mustered on Serra's behalf were old ones concerning the nature and function of the avant-garde. Thus, the Museum of Modern Art's chief curator of painting and sculpture, William Rubin, taught a hoary art-history lesson. 'About one hundred years ago the Impressionists and post-Impressionists ... artists whose works are today prized universally, were being reviled as ridiculous by the public and the established press. At about the same time, the Eiffel Tower was constructed, only to be greeted by much the same ridicule ... Truly challenging works of art require a period of time before their artistic language can be understood by the broader public.'<sup>37</sup>

What Rubin and Serra's other supporters declined to ask is whether the sculptor really is, in the most meaningful sense of the term, an avant-garde artist. Being avant-garde implies being ahead of, outside, or against the

dominant culture; proffering a vision that implicitly stands (at least when it is conceived) as a critique of entrenched forms and structures. 'Avant-garde research is functionally ... or ontologically ... located outside the system,' as Lyotard put it, 'and by definition, its function is to deconstruct everything that belongs to order, to show that all this "order" conceals something else, that it represses.'<sup>38</sup> But Serra's work is securely embedded within the system: when the brouhaha over the *Arc* was at its height, he was enjoying a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (in the catalogue of which, by a special exception, he was allowed to have a critic of his own choosing, Douglas Crimp, make a case for him).<sup>39</sup> The panel of luminaries who were empowered to award Serra the commission in the first place plainly found his vision congenial to their own. And his defence of the work rested precisely on this basis, that far from being an outsider, he was an eminent member of the establishment who, through some horrifying twist of fate, had become subject to harassment by the unwashed and uncouth who do not even recognize, let alone respect, authority when they see it.

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Because his work was commissioned according to the regulations of a government agency, Serra reasoned that 'The selection of this sculpture was, therefore, made by, and on behalf of the public.' Stella expanded on this theme in his own remarks at the hearing: 'The government and the artist have acted as the body of society attempting to meet civilized, one might almost say civilizing goals ... To destroy the work of art and simultaneously incur greater public expense in that effort would disturb the status quo for no gain ... Finally, no public dispute should force the gratuitous destruction of any benign, civilizing effort.'<sup>40</sup> These arguments locate Serra not with the vanguard but with the standing army or 'status quo', and as such represent a more acute view than Rubin's, though the rhetoric they depend on is no less hackneyed. More thoughtful, sensible, and eloquent testimony at the hearing came instead from some of the uncouth:

My name is Danny Katz and I work in this building as a clerk. My friend Vito told me this morning that I am a philistine. Despite that I am getting up to speak ... I don't think this issue should be elevated into a dispute between the forces of ignorance and art, or art versus government. I really blame government less because it has long ago outgrown its human dimension. But from the artists I expected a lot more. I didn't expect to hear them rely on the tired and dangerous reasoning that the government has made a deal, so let the rabble live with the steel because it's a deal. That kind of mentality leads to wars. We had a deal with Vietnam. I didn't expect to hear the arrogant position that art justifies interference with the simple joys of human activity in a plaza. It's not a great plaza by international standards, but it is a small refuge and place of revival for people who ride to work in steel containers, work in sealed rooms and breathe recirculated air all day. Is the purpose of art in public places to seal off a route of escape, to stress the absence of joy and hope? I can't believe this was the artistic intention, yet to my sadness this for me has become the dominant effect of the work, and it's all the fault of its position and location. I can accept anything in art, but I can't accept physical assault and complete destruction of pathetic human activity. No work of art created with a contempt for ordinary humanity and without respect for the common element of human experience can be great. It will always lack a dimension.<sup>41</sup>

The terms Katz associated with Serra's project include arrogance and contempt, assault and destruction; he saw the Minimalist idiom, in other words, as continuous with the master discourse of our imperious and violent technocracy. [...]

It proves less of a strain to perceive Minimalist art as 'against much in the society' (as the artists themselves would generally have it), then, when we compare it with art that harbours no such ambitions. But can Minimalism readily be seen as having that oppositional moment we demand of vanguard or modernist art? The most defensible answer to this question is surely 'no', but a contrary answer can still be contrived given the, at times, disquieting effect of the most uningratiating Minimalist production – that bothersomeness that impels some viewers even to kick it. To construct the inobvious answer takes a recourse to the modernist theory of Adorno, however. 'One cannot say in general whether somebody who excises all expression is a mouthpiece of reification. He may also be a spokesman for a genuine non-linguistic, expressionless expression and denounce reification. Authentic art is familiar with expressionless expression, a kind of crying without tears,' wrote Adorno.<sup>42</sup> If no general judgement of this kind can be made, I have proposed here that some local or specific judgements might be; that in some of the Minimalists' most contained and expressionless works we might infer a denunciatory statement made in, and not against, the viewer's best interests. Adorno suggested that 'The greatness of works of art lies solely in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals.'<sup>43</sup> Whether by the artists' conscious design or not, the best of Minimalist art does that well enough through its lapidary reformulations of some especially telling phrases of the master discourse. Adorno championed modernist art not only for its negative capability, however, but also for its utopian moment, its vision of something other or better than the present regime. Here we encounter Minimalism's departure: its refusal to picture something else; a refusal which finally returns the viewer – at best a more disillusioned viewer – to more of the same.

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#### Notes

- 1 Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, 1984, p. 179.
- 2 Harriet Senie, 'The Right Stuff', *Art News*, March 1984, p. 55.
- 3 Hal Foster alone has ventured in print (however tentatively): 'Is it too much to suggest that "art for art's sake" returns here in its authoritative (authoritarian?) guise, a guise which reveals that, far from separate from power and religion (as Enlightenment philosophy would have it) bourgeois art is a displaced will to power ... and ultimately is a religion?' 'The Crux of Minimalism', in Howard Singerman, ed., *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945-1986*, New York: Abbeville Press, for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, c. 1986, p. 174.
- 4 Phyllis Tuchman, 'An Interview with Carl Andre', *Artforum*, June 1970, p. 61. Insofar as space or voids are conventionally coded as feminine, a symbolic form of sexual domination is at issue here too.
- 5 See Don Terry, 'A 16-Ton Sculpture Falls, Injuring Two', *New York Times*, 27 October 1988, B6; and Ruth Landa, 'Sculpture Crushes Two: Worker Loses Leg as 16-Ton Piece Falls', [New York] *Daily News*, 27 October 1988, 1, 3. [...]

6 'Carl Andre: Artworker', interview with Jeanne Siegel, *Studio International*, vol. 180, no. 927, November 1970 p. 178. Andre, and, to a lesser extent, Morris, were active in the Art Workers Coalition, an anarchic body formed in 1969 whose principal achievement was helping to organize the New York Art Strike against War, Racism and Repression, which closed numerous galleries and museums on 22 May 1970 (a sit-in on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum, which did not close, drew about five hundred participants). The A.W.C. drew a distinction between the politicizing of artists, which it urged, and the politicizing of art, which it did not.

It bears noting that the prime motivator of political action in the student population, the draft, did not threaten any of the men discussed here, as most of them had spent years in the military – in some cases by choice – prior to pursuing careers as artists. Kenneth Noland, born in 1924, served from 1942 to 1946 as a glider pilot and cryptographer in the air force, mainly in the United States but also in Egypt and Turkey; he subsequently studied art at Black Mountain College and in Paris. Judd, born in 1928, served in the army in Korea in an engineer's unit, 1945–7 (before the outbreak of war there); subsequently he studied at the Art Students League and at Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1953 with a B.S. in Philosophy and where he pursued graduate studies in Art History, from 1958 to 1960. Sol LeWitt, born in 1928, earned a B.E.A. from Syracuse University in 1949 and then served in the U.S. Army in Japan and Korea, in 1951–2. Morris, born in 1931, served time in Korea as an engineer toward the end of the Korean war; he attended numerous universities and art schools, including the California School of Fine Arts and Reed College, and did graduate work at Hunter College in New York in Art History. Dan Flavin, born in 1933, found himself, in 1955, by his own account, 'loitering in Korea with an army of occupation as an Air Weather Service Observer'; he subsequently attended Columbia University. Andre, born 1935, studied at Phillips Andover Academy, 1951–3, and served in the army in North Carolina in 1955–6. Walter De Maria, born in 1935, earned a B.A. in History and an M.A. in Sculpture at the University of California at Berkeley, and was not in the military. Frank Stella, born in 1936, expected to be drafted on graduating from Princeton, but was exempted because of a childhood injury to his hand. Serra, born in 1939, also did not see military service.

7 Eugene Goossen, 'Distillation', 1966 (a text accompanying an exhibition held at the Tibor de Nagy and Stable galleries in September 1966), reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York, 1968, p. 169.

8 Eugene Goossen, *The Art of the Real: U.S.A. 1948-1969* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968, p. 11; this show represented the debut of Minimalism at the Museum of Modern Art, though it did not feature Minimalism exclusively.

9 Clement Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture', 1967, reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, p. 183. In 'The Crux', Foster discusses Minimalism aptly as representing at once an ultimate realization of, and a break with, the Greenbergian Modernist model.

10 Goossen, *Art of the Real*, p. 11.

11 Eugene Goossen, 'Eight Young Artists', 1964 (an essay accompanying an exhibition of the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, N.Y. in October 1964), reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, p. 167.

12 Such was the title given to the drawing for the work in Brydon Smith, *Dan Flavin: Fluorescent Light*, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969, p. 166; and Flavin reiterated the phrase when showing a slide of the work at a lecture at Harvard University in 1986.

13 Flavin, '... "in daylight or cool white": An Autobiographical Sketch', *Artforum*, December 1965, p. 24.

14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, London, 1984, p. 35.

15 Siegel, 'Andre: Artworker', p. 178; and David Bourdon, *Carl Andre: Sculpture 1959-1977*, New York: Jaap Reitman, 1978, p. 27. A key work Andre conceived in 1960, but could not afford to execute until 1966, was *Herm*, consisting of a single rectangular timber standing on end. The title refers to ancient Greek road markers, simple, rectangular, stone pillars often marked by an erect penis and surmounted by a bust of Hermes. In 1963, Andre made a wooden sculpture called *Cock* in evident homage to Brancusi (though 'cock' does not have the explicit slang connotation in French that it has in English).

16 Reprinted in Judd: *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax, 1975, p. 93.

17 While its rhetoric most plainly described Judd's own vision, this essay did not deal exclu-



sively with the Minimalists, but included others such as Rauschenberg, Lucas Samaras, and Claes Oldenburg, who were using non-fine-arts materials or objects in their work.

18 Samuel Wagstaff, Jr.'s *Black, White and Grey*, an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in January–February 1964, included Morris, Tony Smith, Flavin, Agnes Martin and Anne Truitt, for example, among other artists who would not become associated with Minimalism. Flavin organized an exhibition at the Kaymar Gallery in New York in March 1964 that included himself, Judd, LeWitt, Stella, Bannard, Robert Ryman, and Jo Baer, among others. Goossen organized *Eight Young Artists* at the Hudson River Museum in October 1964, including Andre and Bannard. The *Shape and Structure* show at Tibor de Nagy in 1965 included Judd, Morris and Andre, among others. Michael Fried's *Three American Painters*, with Stella, Noland, and Olitski, took place at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard in 1965. And Kynaston McShine *Primary Structures* exhibition occurred at the Jewish Museum in 1966.

19 Rose, 'ABC Art', reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, p. 296; Lucy R. Lippard, 'New York Letter: Rejective Art', 1965, reprinted in Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, New York, 1971, pp. 141–53; Annette Michelson, '10 x 10 ...', *Artforum*, Jan. 1967, pp. 30–1.

20 'The Artist and Politics: A Symposium', *Artforum*, Sept. 1970, p. 37.

21 O'Doherty, 'Minus Plato', reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, pp. 252, 254.

22 Judd, 'Specific Objects', *Arts Yearbook*, 8, 1965, reprinted in *Judd: Complete Writings*, p. 187.

23 Judd, 'Specific Objects', p. 181.

24 de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 87.

25 Isaac Balbus, 'Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse', in *Feminism as Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 120.

26 Judd, 'Specific Objects', p. 187.

27 Judd, 'Specific Objects', p. 184.

28 In 1978, Morris would do a series of ink on paper drawings, called 'In the Realm of the Carceral'; see Stephen F. Eisenman, 'The Space of the Self: Robert Morris "In the Realm of the Carceral"', *Arts*, September 1980, pp. 104–9.

29 Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture: Part One', reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, pp. 226, 228.

30 Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture: Part Two', reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, pp. 232–3. Naomi Schor suggests that details have historically been coded feminine and viewed accordingly with suspicion, if not contempt: *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York, 1987. The psycho-sexual aspect to Morris's project became clearer in a performance piece of 1964 called 'Site' in which the artist moved standard 4 x 8 feet construction materials (painted plywood panels?) around a stage while maintaining a studied indifference to the nude body of a woman (Carolee Schneeman) posed as the courtesan Olympia. When a critic suggested that the work 'implied that as the nude woman was to Manet, so the grey construction material was to him', the artist replied with a story about a woman being sexually aggressive toward him and so, as it seems, threatening the integrity of his work process: 'Morris's comment was that he had been approached several times by a dancer who wanted to work with him, unbuttoning her blouse as she spoke. His solution was *Site*', William S. Wilson, 'Hard Questions and Soft Answers', *Art News*, November 1969, p. 26.

31 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 224. The specific population Theweleit studied is the German Freikorps, 'the volunteer armies that fought, and to a large extent, triumphed over, the revolutionary German working class in the years immediately after World War I', p. ix.

32 Morris, 'Notes: Part Two', p. 232.

33 Jonathan Fineberg, 'Robert Morris Looking Back: An Interview', *Arts*, September 1975, pp. 111–13.

34 Morris's violence emerged most explicitly in some of the non-Minimalist work that forms the greater part of his production: he described a 'process piece' he conceived in the 1960s as follows, for example: 'I had them shoot a shotgun blast into the wall [of the gallery], and the pattern of the shot was photographed. That was a travelling show. At the next place the photograph was put up and the gun fired, and the result was photographed and enlarged. Each museum got a photograph of the shot photograph, and they shot that one so that you got a series of photographs of photographs that had been shot. Each photograph had to be bigger. I



wanted it to get bigger and bigger', Goossen, 'The Artist Speaks', p. 105.

35 Rosalind Krauss, *Richard Serra: Sculpture*, ed. Laura Rosenstock, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986, p. 24.

36 Interview with Liza Baer, 30 March 1976, in 'Richard Serra with Clara Weyergraf, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980*, Yonkers N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1980, p. 73.

37 Transcript: 'The Storm in the Plaza', excerpts from the General Services Administration hearing on the *Tilted Arc*, *Harper's*, July 1985, pp. 30, 32.

38 Jean-François Lyotard, 'On Theory: An Interview', in *Driftworks*, ed. Roger McKeon, New York, 1984, p. 29.

39 William Rubin: 'Preface', to Krauss, *Serra*, pp. 9-10. Serra announced sententiously at the hearing that the *Tilted Arc* would, *de facto*, be destroyed if it were moved as he does not make portable sculpture; but he had erected similar pieces on public sites on a temporary basis and he had no plans to dispose of the numerous works in his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art once it was over.

40 'Transcript', pp. 28, 32.

41 'Transcript', p. 33. Katz went on to give Serra and the work the benefit of the doubt: 'I don't believe the contempt is in the work. The work is strong enough to stand alone in a better place. I would suggest to Mr. Serra that he take advantage of this opportunity to walk away from this fiasco and demand that the work be moved to a place where it will better reveal its beauty.'

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42 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 171.

43 Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', *Telos*, 20, Summer 1974, p. 58.