

## National Art Education Association

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Minimal Art

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Art Education*, Vol. 21, No. 9 (Dec., 1968), pp. 7-12

Published by: [National Art Education Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3191203>

Accessed: 22/05/2012 02:16

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BY GREGORY BATTCKOCK. A significant trend in modern art has been a closer interaction between art and criticism, between the artist as doer and the critic as interpreter. An investigation of this trend shows that the concerns of Minimal Art are both inevitable and consistent. Minimal Art is not a negation of the art of the past or a nihilistic gesture. Indeed, it must be understood that by *not* doing something, one can instead make a fully affirmative gesture, that the Minimal artist is engaged in an appraisal of past and present, and that he frequently finds present aesthetic and sociological behavior both hypocritical and empty.

One could object that this attitude is merely a rationalization of an art form involved with nothing, but this is not the case. Minimal style is extremely complex. The artist has to create new notions of scale, space, containment, shape, and object. He must reconstruct the relationship between art as object and between object and man. Negative space, architectural enclosure, nature, and the mechanical are all concerns of the Minimal artist, and as such become some of the characteristics that unify the movement. Necessarily, the definition of "movement" in art has changed somewhat. The Abstract Expressionist "movement" was organized differently and proceeded differently. The artists were geographically closer together. They communicated with each other in a more personal way. The art magazines and critics played a smaller role. Today, the artist is more immediately involved in daily concerns. Vietnam, technological development, sociology, and



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philosophy are all subjects of immediate importance.

There is little doubt that Robert Morris is the leading Minimal sculptor. His totally nonemotional, nonexpressive work will leave some viewers cold. They will not find it easy to become enthusiastic about his subtle positioning of bland and empty units and the calculated scale of his larger forms—even though positioning and scale are dictated by the deepest humanistic considerations. Morris has written concerning scale and placement: "The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object." Morris points out the obvious, which has become so obscure. With truly amazing clarity he notes: "The smaller the object the closer one approaches it, and therefore, it has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer." He goes on to observe: "However, it is just this distance between object and subject that creates a more extended situation, for physical participation becomes necessary."

On the other hand, there are those who may be disgusted with the painterly excesses of post Abstract Expressionist artists and the chic emptiness of some Minimalists, and they may find in the work of Morris some of the most provocative, intelligent, and practical offerings within the abstract three-dimensional medium that can be seen today.

One artist, who has been painting for a longer time than any of the Minimalists, but who is now considered a Minimalist, is Joseph Albers. With Albers we have an artist who has painted almost exactly the same thing over and over for more than a decade. The easily composed pictures consist of squares on a square surface. While it was inevitable that the Greek sculptor, in his initial efforts to develop a three-dimensional language, worked with the basic human form, it also seems inevitable that Albers, a modern artist with different responsibilities, works with the square in his efforts to develop the identity of form. For Albers, as well as for many Minimalist artists, color is form. The primary identifiable characteristic of form is, according to Albers, color. What about the edge of a form? Is not the shape of the form—its edge—the primary fact of a form? One suspects that Albers would not agree. The edge of a form is inevitable and has come to be recognized as a dimension. What about color as a dimension? Look at it this way. If we are given two forms that are distinguishable from each other by the shape of their edges but are exactly of the same color, would we not say they are alike? On the other hand, if we are offered two forms of exactly the same shape but of different colors, would they not be considered different?

One characteristic of all art from the past is its visual obsolescence. For example, we view late Gothic painting as a series of visual problems that the artist attempted to realize in terms of scale, space, and proportion. And this fact does not necessarily contradict André Malraux's observation that the Gothic artist attempted to "humanize the divine." These works of the Gothic period were made and looked at by people who had never seen an orderly flat visual presentation offered according to sophisticated perspective and scale. The early works by the "op" artists in the 1960's already appear shallow, as we have since then experienced a growth in the development of formal patterns of visual communication. So, therefore, will the color offerings of Albers appear inadequate after their subtle lessons are learned. Nevertheless, as paintings, their historical legitimacy has been assured. Albers' influence on the younger Minimal artist has been effective.

Another major sculptor of the new Minimal school is Sol Lewitt. At his recent exhibition at the Dawn Gallery in New York City, his sculptures inspired one visitor to write in the gallery guest book: "You must be kidding—I hope." Well, of

course, Lewitt isn't kidding, but what he is doing is threatening and provoking. To many it will be easier to hope that the artist is simply putting them on, rather than to accept his shattering observations and conclusions about forms in space today. The artist who is greeted with the familiar "Are you putting us on?" may be more likely the artist who is actually doing something of interest.

Many have criticized Minimal Art because they find it to be a "dehumanized" style. It is not difficult to understand why. We get what we want and frequently need—namely, thankfully, dehumanized art.

I think one of the best examples of dehumanized art to be found within the Western tradition is the Greek "kouros", the typical categorization of archaic Greek sculpture. Should art become humanized, it would cease to be art. The archaic Greek statue is the picture of dehumanization—the figure is offered entirely without identity. Facial expression is completely controlled. Posture is stylized; the result is repetition. The figure appears naked, as even then, clothing spoke of individuality, preference, class, profession, and social outlook.

Lewitt's mathematically conceived sculptures are entirely classical in outlook, in dehumanization, and in strict adherence to definite geometrical rules. They do not cater to personality, politeness, temperament, sensuality, and sentiment. They reject the theatrical, and set up a new relationship with the observer. They, too, appear naked.

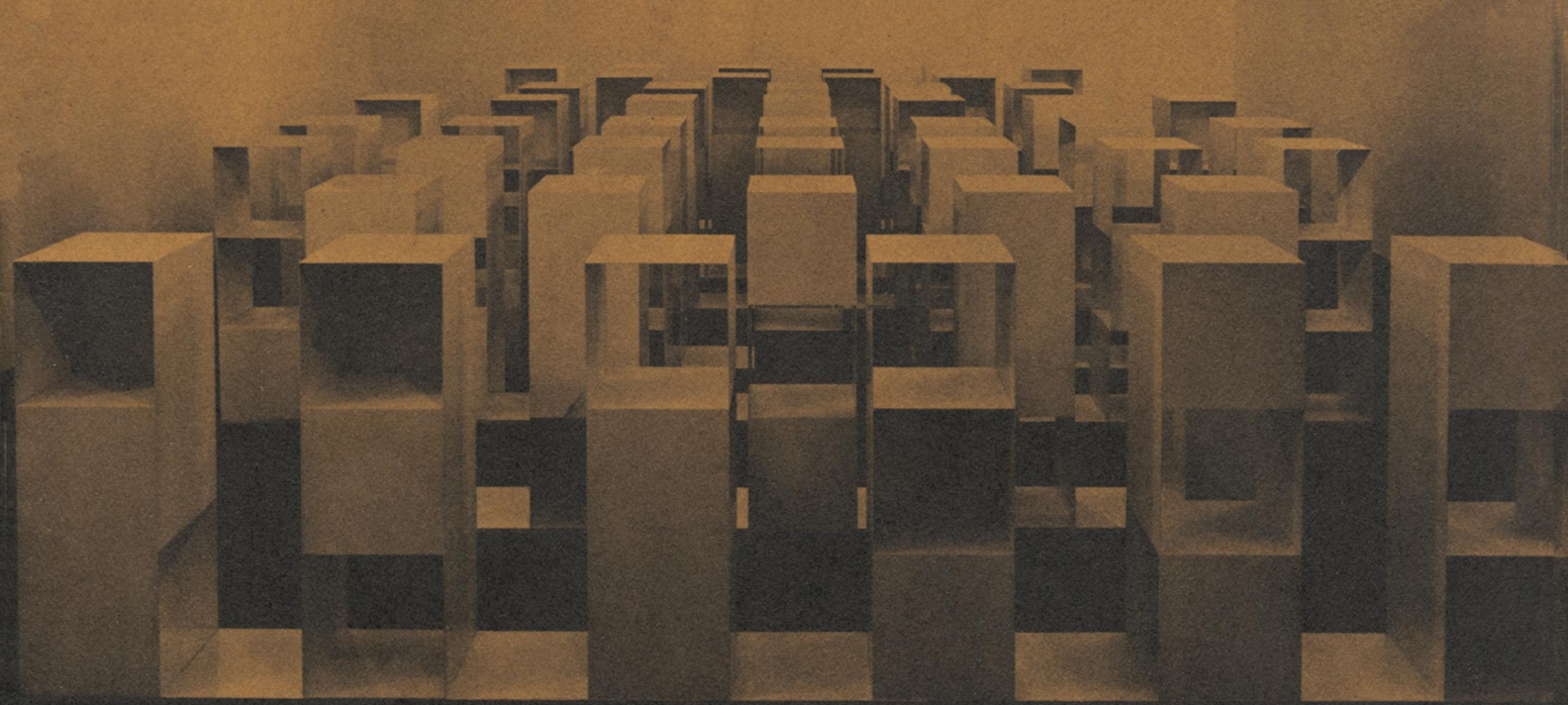
What Lewitt's works do is to enclose space. At the same time, they are enclosed by space. Like the archaic "kouros" they can be placed against a wall or set in open space. They are frontal and three-dimensional, flat and deep, volumeless and characterized by volume. They are severely economical. They respect the preciousness of modern space, and they are self-conscious in their spatial displacement. They are colorless and expressionless.

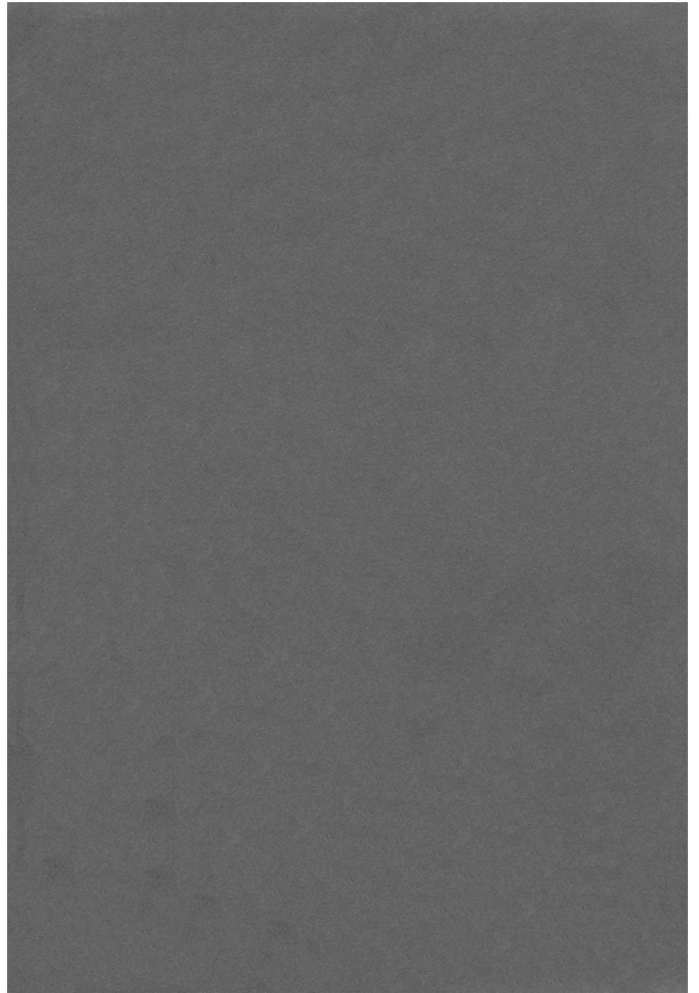
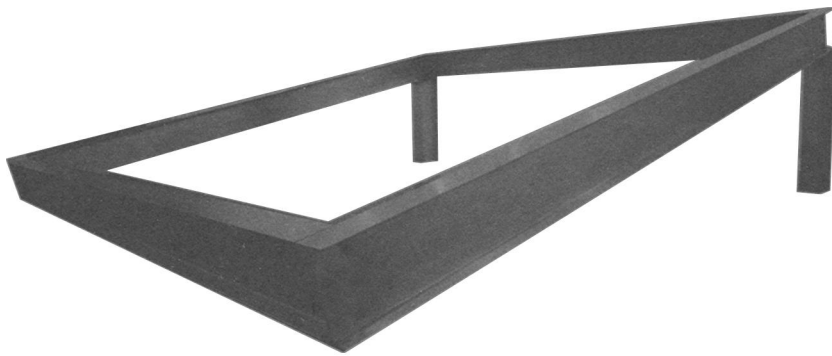
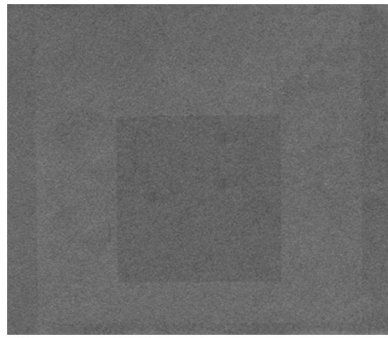
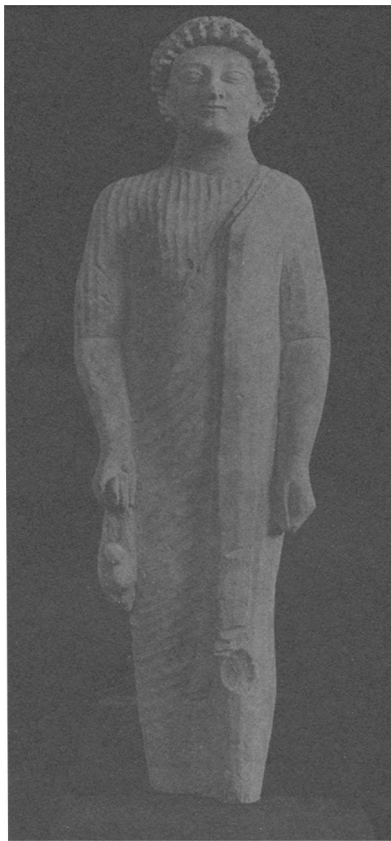
There is paradox to be found in the paintings by Brice Marden. He approaches his art as something more than painting pictures—yet absolutely nothing more than painting pictures. His recent pictures are all about the same size, and when seen in the gallery they appear isolated, as they are spaced rather far apart. The feeling of isolation is emphasized by the fact that there is, of course, nothing else in the gallery other than the paintings. In addition, there are no images painted on the surfaces of the paintings.

Marden's Minimalist paintings are not completely devoid of pictorial content. Most of the images, which are found in the forms of smears, finger prints, and drips, are contained on the sides of the stretcher. The solid ground of color comes to an end at the bottom of each painting, just a fraction of an inch from the edge of the canvas. Thus, the color edge coincides neatly (with a sloppy smear) with the real edge.

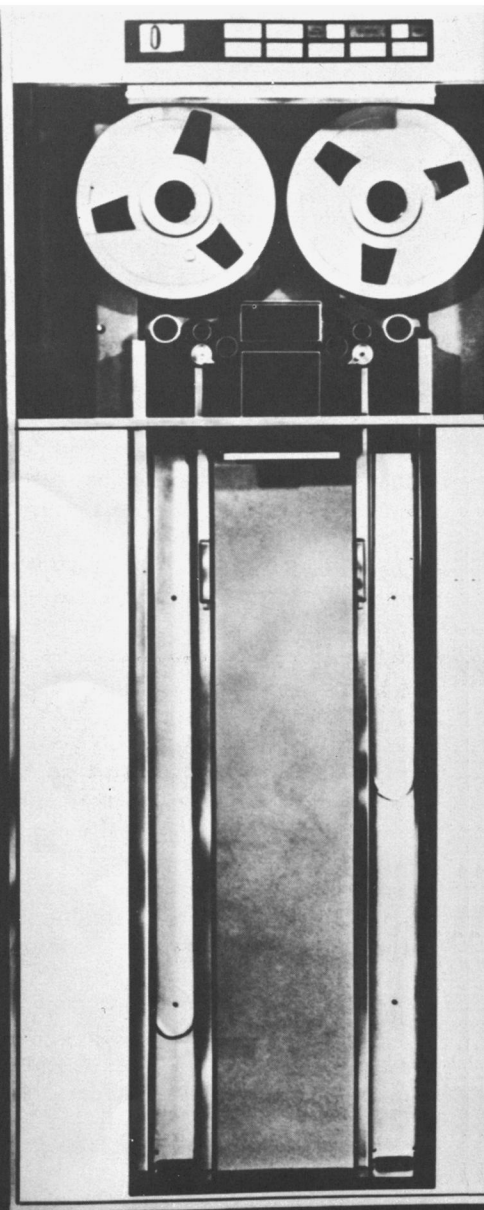
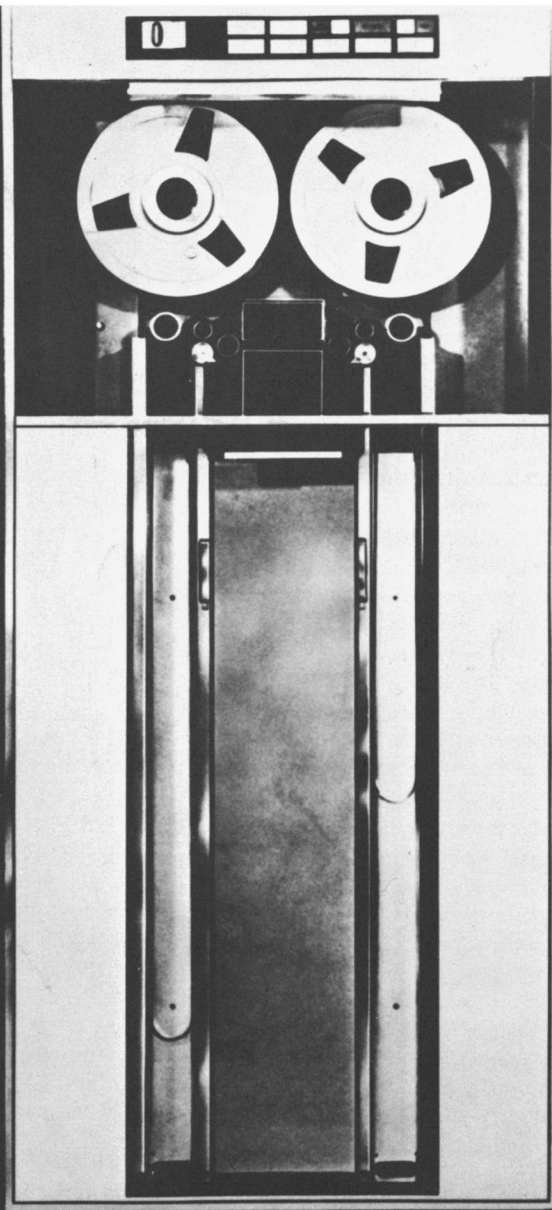
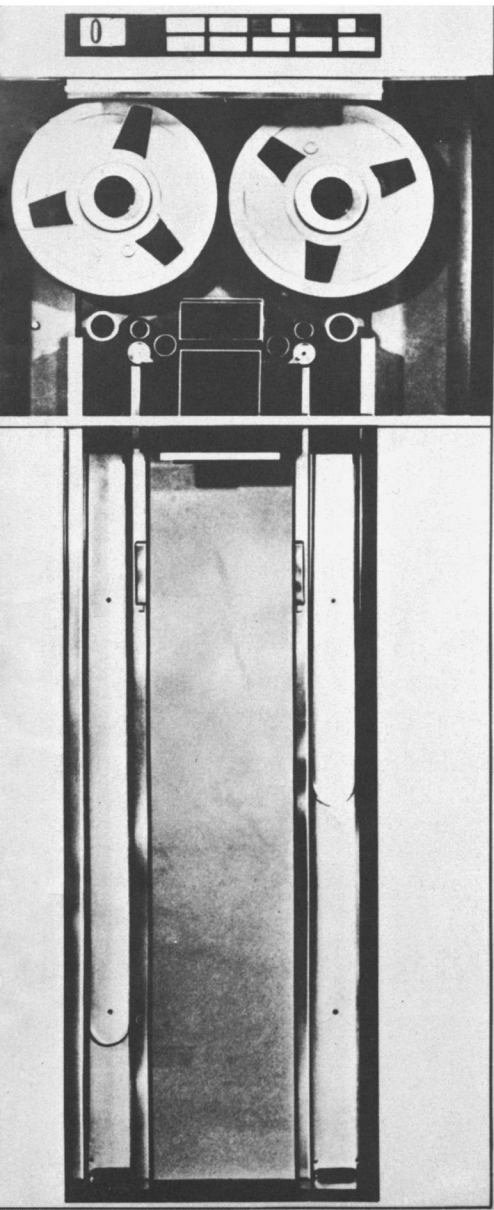
This artist's paintings are satisfying as intellectual provocations and direct art ideas. They concern several things: first of all, art, particularly painting. The smears and marks of the sides of the stretchers are a way of emphasizing the isolation of art today from the immediate environment and the popular value structure. Yet the artist has not abrogated his responsibility. Like everything painted by the serious artist today, his paintings are about the war in Vietnam and the ghastly consequences of that travesty. The color slabs are morbidly attractive, as they could be the colors of necrophilia—earthen hues, deep, warm, cool, dark, absorbent, and damp in a natural yet perverse way. (The way perversions are natural).

The logic of this type of painting insists that the only thing a painter can do today is to leave his surface completely empty of images, shapes, forms, etc. He has come to an understanding about his craft—that it is only flatness; and that reality,





**Page 9: Sol Lewitt, installation shot, February 1968, reproduction courtesy Dwan Gallery, New York City. This page, top left: Votary, Cypriot, 500-400 B.C., limestone, 24", reproduction courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City (the Cesnola Collection, purchase by subscription, 1874-76). Top right: "Homage to the Square: On Late Sky," Josef Albers, 1962, oil on board, reproduction courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York City. Left above, Robert Morris, untitled, 1968, aluminum I beams, 54" x 180" x 180", reproduction courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City. Right above: "For Otis Redding," 1967, oil and wax on canvas, 69" x 45", reproduction courtesy Bykert Gallery, New York City. Facing page: "Computers," Aaron Kuriloff, 108" x 81", reproduction courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York City.**



figuration, and illusion are, at this time, foolishness.

By offering what appears to be an empty picture, a picture of nothing, the painter today is illustrating precisely what many other people are doing, in other media and via other means: that is, coming to terms with the present and the culture—in a way that cannot be duplicated or cancelled out by another medium, be it sculpture, electricity, or criticism.

The purpose and content of Minimal Art may be clearer than the art of its major predecessor, Abstract Expressionism. However, artists of both schools demonstrate considerable authority and confidence. With a confidence that has rarely been seen since de Kooning and Kline, Minimal artists acknowledge both the viewer and the space of the gallery. They grasp aggressively at all available space and in so doing point in every direction. They force the audience to an awareness of existence that goes beyond the presence of any particular art object. The audience is persuaded to walk about the newly defined and delineated space, and the path is determined by the art. In so doing, the artists allow no room for confusion or misrepresentation. A row of panels on a wall owe the possibility of their existence in the selected form to the presence of the wall, just as the pattern of our own existence is determined largely by environmental factors. The Minimal artist no longer questions—he challenges and observes.

An investigation into the tradition and background of the Minimal artists should emphasize two points: first, the enormous influence of Marcel Duchamp, and second, a complete awareness of the development of Western art by the artists. They take care to provide just the right *surface*—a *surface* without craft (indeed, without art); in this way rejecting those impulses that claim glory in manual work and nobility in craftsmanship. However, none of the works is entirely without art, though appearing so at first. In the PHOTO-FACTUALS of Aaron Kuriloff, for instance, the control of the artist over the art object can be seen in several ways, including the heightened light-dark contrasts, photo touchups here and there, almost compulsive framing of images within edges, and the removal, in several cases, of brand names from the faces of the object-images. Clearly, these works demand a sharp social awareness for their appreciation. Kuriloff's gesture in removing brand names requires an understanding of the nature of new concepts in industrial design and packaging technology, such as the incorporation of a brand name into the design scheme of a product in much the same way as a handle or dial. Of course, there are those who find this manipulation by the artist unnecessary and sentimental. The question is, does it contribute to the overall cerebral stimulation, or does it tend to lessen it? In these ways the artist provides a pertinent and immediate provocation against art as reproduction and imitation, art as craft, art as object, and artist as originator.

The main reason in calling these artists "Minimal" is that they seek out the basic problems attendant to the medium and shear them of historical and traditional encumbrances, many of which have successfully obstructed intelligent and meaningful development of two- and three-dimensional form within the contemporary cultural, sociological, and metaphysical environments. For example, Robert Morris has dared to ask the obvious, such as: "Could a work exist that has only one property? Obviously, not, since nothing exists that has only one property." The answer to the question, while self-evident, is revealing.

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