



The Development and Consummation of Minimalism: a “Subtractive Aesthetics”

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Abstract: In the modern era, which has witnessed both the democratization and super-abundance of information, complicated structural forms have fallen out of fashion in many quarters: indeed, they have often been deemed redundant. After the emergence of Modernism, many subscribed to the view that “the useless need not exist”. In consequence, a movement designated “Minimalism” enjoyed an increasing vogue. Minimalism itself might be termed “the art of the less”. As a philosophical model, value, and even lifestyle, it expanded to fields such as art, architecture, design and furnishing. First, this paper will explore the genesis, background and content of this artistic perspective. Next, the author will consider the movement in a broad scope, examining its evolution from the 1960s. In this context, the paper will largely discuss Minimalism from the three perspectives of painting, sculpture and architectural design. Finally, a conclusion will evaluate the main challenges associated with Minimalism, while also considering its future aesthetic development.

Keywords: Minimalism, painting, sculpture, architecture, Zen

1. Introduction

Minimalism, effectively emerged after World War II, and it can also be called “Minimal Art”. It might be defined as an “aesthetics of subtraction”. As a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, it goes to extremes, displaying the original object or form in front of the viewer, with the intention of dispelling the author’s oppression of the viewer’s consciousness, as mediated through the work. In the process, it minimizes the work as a text or symbolic form. The sense of “violence” when a Minimalist work is presented opens up the imaginative space of the work itself in terms of artistic concepts. The viewer may then participate, autonomously, in the formulation of the piece. The viewer’s ultimate identity is transformed into that of an author of the work without extraneous or spurious restrictions.

In terms of the visual aspects of Minimalist art, the movement advocates that a given work is not the author’s personal mode of self-expression. Rather, it deploys simple and ordinary quadrilaterals or cubes to obviate the possibility of conveying consciousness through specific images. It employs repetition and patterns of “equal distribution”, drawing upon simple materials as frequently as possible. Indeed, Minimalism avoids processing, using the original textures of surfaces and interiors to attract the viewer’s attention.[1] The critic Robert Hughes, for example, believed that, as compared with Abstract Expressionism or “traditional art”, Minimalism evinces no figures, parts, relationships, movement, metaphors or secrets.[2] Its artistic characteristics were those of concision, clarity, rapidity and sharpness. Standardized geometric shapes and unadorned surfaces present an impressive, industrial beauty. More specifically, people value the form of the artwork rather than details such as colour and shape. Nonetheless, the pure form is made broader and richer with the help of materials, reflections, and other elements. In sum, Minimalism strives to attain a unique form of beauty via an emphasis on innovation.

2. Minimalism and “meaningless” painting

Frank Stella, arguably the most important early exponent of Minimalist art, was himself inspired by the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt. Stella famously stated, with regard to his own paintings, that, “What you see is what you see”. [3] His geometric paintings can be seen as objects that have no representation other than themselves. There are no secrets or hidden meanings in these paintings, merely shapes and colours. Around 1960, he also experimented with unusually shaped canvases, i.e., ones not traditionally rectangular or square, but usually in the form of an L, U or T. These later developed into more elaborate forms, such as a series of irregular polygons.

Having considered the work of Frank Stella, then turning the attention to another influential Minimalist painter, Jo Baer. In 1960, the latter rejected Abstract Expressionism because of its hard-edged, non-objective qualities. She then introduced a very different form, in which the image was cut away, and the central area of the canvas was completely white. More specifically, Baer favoured a “dense” white, surrounded by bands of colour that seemed to flicker and move. This optical

feature emphasized her preoccupation with “the concept of light”. In many Baer works produced between 1964 and 1966, in particular, the periphery and edges of her canvases are marked by two square or rectangular bands of colour.[4] The outer bezel is black; inside it, however, one finds a thinner band of a different colour, such as red.

When one examines the work of Stella and Baer, nonetheless, one perceives that Minimalist art invites examination by the viewer without evincing content in the traditional sense. Minimalism possesses a certain cold, unknowable quality. Such work is not invariably appealing, but nor does it try to be. In the words of Sol LeWitt, “It is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting”. Minimalist painting represents a rational, ruthless, calm and objective aesthetic, in stark contrast with the noisy contemporary world.

3. Minimalists and their uncompromising sculptures

With the passage of time, certain Minimalist artists felt that the medium of painting was an inadequate vehicle for their ambitions, and these individuals often turned to sculpture as an alternative. Notably, Minimalistic sculpture has provided us with the elegant modern aesthetics of the Bauhaus, and much of the content of Soviet Constructivism.[4] It emphasizes a space formed by direct interaction between the viewer and the artwork. In order to purify this interaction, Minimalist sculpture rejects all other interfering factors, such as the artist’s own emotional expression, subjectivity, and even the artist him/herself.[3] This genre, in other words, possesses its own order and rules.

The artist Donald Judd, for example, held that artworks should remove all irrelevant details. Consequently, all his pieces are untitled, and the only information provided is the date of production. This provides the viewer with a purely aesthetic and material perspective through which to appreciate the work, and there is no hidden meaning.[5] The viewer is liberated, obliged merely to feel and experience. He or she will be immersed in experiencing the spatial objects formed by the essential elements of material, colour, shape, detail and light.

The manner in which Minimalism deploys space has distinct echoes of another movement, Soviet Constructivism. In this context, we should note the oeuvre of the Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, in particular, his piece “Equivalent VIII”. Here, the artist arranged 120 bricks in a rectangular shape, with no discernible meaning. What Andre expresses, however, is the perception of the space formed by the material and the viewer at one moment. More precisely, the composition of the elements forms a space, within an artwork that expresses “presentness”. [3] While previous art forms required symbols and metaphors, this is not the case with Minimalism. It has no meanings or symbols other than the work itself. There is no inward meaning, and significance lies in the space occupied by the piece, and in its interaction with the viewer.

4. Minimalism and Zen in Architectural Design

The term Minimalism is also used to describe a form of architectural design, in which objects are reduced to their essential elements. Minimalist architects and designers focus on the connection between two perfect planes, elegant lighting, and the voids created by the removal of three-dimensional shapes.[4] In the modern era, a desire for simplicity generated a vogue for Minimalist architecture; it is characterized by monochromatic elements, cold light, large spaces, and few decorative features. In some respects, indeed, Minimalism has much in common with the Eastern philosophy of Zen. The two are frequently intertwined, as evinced by their shared emphasis on simplicity.

The “Church of Light” embodies Tadao Ando’s philosophical synthesis of nature and architecture. Light can define and create a new sense of space, much like a concrete structure. For Ando, the coexistence of differences allows the church to be stripped of all decorations, leaving a pure, simple space. Visitors’ consciousness, meanwhile, both spiritual and secular, is enervated by the intersection of light and matter. The use of Minimalist materials, such as concrete, supersedes traditional Christian decoration and aesthetics. Except for the cross facing eastward, the church is wrapped in a concrete shell, and the resulting darkness provides a more evocative place to reflect on faith. Indeed, Ando’s cross, while allowing daylight to penetrate, dematerializes the interior concrete walls, transforming them into a kind of luminous box. In this project, Ando’s control of light and concrete has a surreal effect, lessening the impact of materials on the senses while deploying light to extend and amplify one’s sense of space.

Minimalism as such was a response to conditions in the West in a specific period. Nonetheless, one finds many of its core concerns in traditional cultures. Notably, Japan’s Zen Buddhist tradition entails explorations of spiritual freedom and the essence of life. It focuses on nature and objects “in themselves”, advocating a balanced relationship between human beings and the physical world. Minimalism is also reflected in the extremely restrained design techniques of twentieth-century German architects and their modern descendants. Within Minimalism, the simplicity of the architectural design is intended to simplify the construction process, but it also explores the beauty that emerges from the removal of all unnecessary pretence. Likewise, Zen aspires to the perfection of simplicity and authenticity. It also privileges quiet forms of human behaviour, such

as eating and sleeping. As a philosophy, it can be both complex and disarmingly simple.

5. Conclusion: Minimalism and the Future of Visibility

In contemporary society, the Minimalism aesthetic satisfies the desire of some individuals to pursue inner peace, elide information redundancy, and prioritize simplicity and purity. Minimalism is not only an important challenge to traditional aesthetic concepts; it also reflects social changes and an innate human impulse to pursue unaffected, profound beauty. Critical reflexivity, as one of several contemporary ideological trends, has also promoted celebration and exploration of the Minimalist style. Future artists will face the challenge of maintaining “purity” and simplicity while continuing to innovate, and while striving to satisfy increasingly heterogeneous aesthetic demands. In any case, the Minimalist aesthetic style will survive. It will also, no doubt, continue to evolve, finding new avenues and modes of expression within art, design, and multiple areas of human creativity.

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