

An Investigation into the Genesis and Features of Minimalistic Art: Focused on Robert Morris

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Abstract

Minimalism as an artistic movement epitomizes a modern approach that endeavors to distill paintings and sculptures to their fundamental components, often embracing the tenets of geometric abstraction. In the context of minimal art which emanates from the principles of minimalism, the ethos revolves around exercising restraint and embracing simplicity. Within this milieu, Robert Morris emerges as a prominent and influential figure and he is widely acknowledged for his invaluable theoretical contributions to the movement. The paper aims to study on the historical backdrop surrounding the emergence of minimalism and situates it within the broader framework of contemporary art theory. For this, the paper examines the distinctive characteristics of minimalism specifically its emphasis on objectness, spatiality and repeatability as exemplified through the artistic oeuvre of Robert Morris.

Keyword : Minimalism, abstraction, minimal art, Robert Morris.

1. Introduction

During the pinnacle of the prominence of pop art and post-painterly abstraction in the mid-1960s, a cohort of artists embraced a distinctive artistic style characterized by the composition of geometric forms. This particular artistic approach intentionally defied the conventional notion of art that centered around self-expression and instead prioritized elements such as rigidity, impersonality extreme simplicity and mechanical precision. These artists deliberately employed explicit colors and employed basic and uncomplicated forms to construct two-dimensional spatial arrangements. The resultant paintings possessed an inherent self-contained quality devoid of any extrinsic meaning, thereby creating an opportune environment for the emergence of minimal art.

As a contemporary artistic pursuit, Minimalism aspires to distill the essence of painting and sculpture to their core constituents. Within the realm of minimalism, only those elements that are essential to geometric abstraction find acceptance. Minimal art that stems from the minimalist ideology can be comprehended as art that exhibits restraint and simplicity. Robert Morris, a pivotal figure in the trajectory of minimalism, exerted a profound influence on its theoretical underpinnings. Through his

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writings published from 1966 onwards [1], Morris presented a diverse array of perspectives concerning the understanding of minimalism. Overall, Robert Morris's work in sculpture, dance, environmental art and theoretical writing has contributed to the transition from modernity to postmodernity by challenging traditional boundaries and focusing on issues such as materiality, anti-illusionism and the relationship between the body and the environment [2][3]. Robert Morris as an important figure in the development of Minimalism and his contributions to the field have been studied in shaping the Minimalism movement [4].

The purpose of this paper is to delve into the historical context that gave rise to the advent of minimalism within the broader scope of contemporary art theory. Furthermore, it endeavors to examine the distinct attributes of objectness, spatiality and repeatability that epitomize minimalism and elucidates these characteristics through a comprehensive analysis of artworks created by Robert Morris.

2. Concept of minimalism art and background of its formation

2.1 Definition and concept of minimalism art

Minimalist art emerges as a significant historical moment during the post-war period. It is characterized by critical thought and diverse creative practices that extend beyond a singular art style. Contemporary usage of the term 'minimalism' has expanded its scope and it transcends a mere art trend [5]. Minimalist art embodies principles of simplicity, reduction, purity of form, logical structure and ideological interpretation. It has been referred to as ABC art, Primary Structure, or Literalist Art. Richard Wolheim, an early proponent of minimal art, defined it as art that exhibits both reduced content and form [6]. The recognition of minimalism as a movement gained traction through the contributions of Robert Morris and Donald Judd and culminated in the influential exhibition *Primary Structures* that were held at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966. Curated by Kynaston McShine, the exhibition featured over forty British and American sculptors including Carl Andre, Anthony Caro, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin, Robert Grosvenor, Ellsworth Kelly, Sol Lewitt, Tim Scott, Tony Smith, Robert Smithson, Anne Truitt and William Tucker. They were categorized alongside Judd and Morris.

During this period, various attempts were made to name the movement with *Primary Structures* emphasizing the radical simplification of forms. The exhibition *The Art of the Real* organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1968 further accentuated the inherent characteristics of sculptures by removing pedestals that allowed the artworks to interact with the actual space in which viewers moved.

However, the term Minimalism gradually gained widespread usage around 1968, eclipsing previous designations [7]. Initially, the term Minimalism was employed by American painter John Graham in his work *System and Dialects of Art* in 1937 and referred to the minimization of artistic media. Its association with American art in the 1960s solidified after Richard Wolheim published an article titled *Minimal Art* in the magazine *Art* in 1965.

Wolheim's focus was on the art of the 1960s, emphasizing deliberate reduction of artistic content in artworks and labeling this style as minimal. He examined the resistance that viewers experienced when encountering artworks intentionally minimizing art content such as Marcel Duchamp's Ready-mades [8] and the paintings of Ad Reinhardt [9]. According to Wolheim, minimalist artists engaged in discussions with minimal effort. Barbara Rose who coined the term 'ABC art' drew historical context from Duchamp's emphasis on the minimal nature of artwork. She highlighted that this style vehemently opposed the romantic and autobiographical tendencies of abstract expressionism and instead it embraced a void, neutral and mechanized non-individuality. The influence of Kasimir Malevich who advocated for minimal content also shaped Rose's understanding [10].

Judd in his publication *Specific Objects* featured in the *Art Yearbook* in 1965, articulated how minimalist art bridged the gap between painting and sculpture and blurred the boundaries that had traditionally delineated the two forms.

2.2 Background of formation of minimalism art

In the aftermath of World War I and World War II, a shift occurred in the realms of philosophy and humanities with existentialism capturing significant attention. Concurrently, the art world experienced the ascendancy of abstract expressionism which emerged as the dominant artistic movement during the 1950s. Notably, the work of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) exemplified the pinnacle of abstract expressionism. Pollock's artistic approach was driven by the notion of boundless spiritual energy and spontaneous action and epitomized the essence of this movement [11]. In contrast to the civilization critique and ironic nature of pop art, minimalism emerged as a response to reject the prevalent tendencies of excessive self-expressionism within abstract expressionism. Reflecting distinctive American qualities such as dryness, rationality and materiality, minimalism sought a purer form of artistic expression.

Sociopolitical factors such as the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War influenced the artistic landscape. The devastation of war and the subsequent desire for stability and order contributed to a reevaluation of artistic expression. Minimalism arose as a response to the turmoil and anxieties of the

post-war period, rejecting the excesses and emotional intensity associated with abstract expressionism. It reflected a shift towards rationality, simplicity and clarity in response to the complexities of the contemporary world.

Culturally, minimalism emerged in the context of the broader artistic and intellectual movements of the time. It was influenced by the rise of consumer culture, the advancements in industrial production and the impact of technology. The mass production of goods and the proliferation of standardized objects informed minimalist artists' interest in repetition, uniformity and the exploration of everyday materials. Minimalism embraced a sense of detachment from the personal and the subjective, aligning with the zeitgeist of the era, which valued objectivity and the depersonalization of artistic expression.

3. Artistic Characteristics of Minimalist Art - Focusing on Robert Morris

Within the realm of minimalism, three fundamental elements - the artwork, the viewer and the surrounding space - engage in a close interplay to result in a departure from the notion of the artwork possessing an autonomous and complete meaning. Instead, the meaning of minimalist artworks relies heavily on the subjective experiences and interactions of the viewers. These artworks function as constituent elements within a specific context or situation, demanding active participation and response from the viewers. Viewers are prompted to engage with minimalist artworks through perceptual experiences that involve bodily movement such as circumambulating the artwork or traversing confined spaces. Merleau-Ponty's perspective aligns with this notion that posited that the meaning of objects in the world emerges from their relational context with the subject rather than existing in isolation.

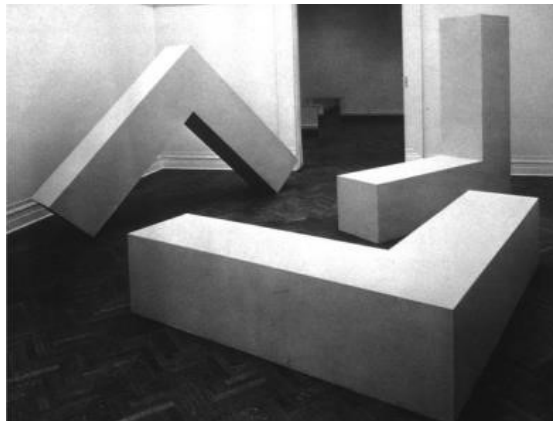
In his seminal essay *Note on Sculpture: Part 1*, penned in 1966, Robert Morris deliberated on how minimalism shifts the focus away from direct internal relationships within the artwork. Instead, it accentuates the significance of space, light and the viewers' visual field. Morris elucidated that as viewers interact with an object while attentively observing the dynamic interplay of light and space from diverse perspectives, they come to apprehend the formation and transformation of these relationships.

3.1 Singleness

Central to the concept of minimalism is the notion of 'minimality of mediation,' which critically examines the incomplete nature of abstract art in the context of modernism. Drawing inspiration from the concept of material properties that pertains to the fundamental physical states and forms of materials, minimalism finds its basis. Consequently, minimalist artists present materials in their unadorned state and

showcased large iron or wooden pieces that openly manifest their inherent material properties. This can be observed in artworks such as a monochromatic canvas or an exposed iron surface [11]. Minimalist artists perceive artworks as three-dimensional objects rather than merely paintings. Robert Morris, for instance, rejects transcendence, spiritual value and heroic scale and agonizes decision-making in his work of *Three L-Beam* as shown in [Fig. 1]. By relinquishing predetermined ideas or intentions, Morris situates the motive or essence of artwork production within the objects themselves. There exists no deliberate conceptualization behind the external form or gestalt, as Morris asserts “we do not pursue the gestalt of gestalt” [12].

When encountering minimalist artworks, viewers may not find explicit reasons that prompt profound exploration of the external appearance. This is because, as Morris elucidates, the artwork disentangles relationships from its form and incorporates them into the visual field of space, light and the viewer. This engenders a novel model of meaning formation where everything within the artwork resides on a surface that continuously shifts with the interplay of light and the viewer’s perspective. Morris further expounds that even the most evident and objective characteristics are not fixed entities but can undergo transformation as viewers alter their position relative to the artwork [13].



[Fig. 1] *Tree L-Beams*, 1965-1966

3.2 Spatiality

Minimalism challenges the conventional approach wherein artworks, particularly sculptures, exist as distinct entities detached from their surroundings that aims to attain a sense of transcendence. Instead, minimalism brings the artwork directly into the indoor space to occupy a place alongside other objects.

This engenders a connection between the viewer and the artwork and obliterates the boundaries that separate them. The characteristics of minimalism include expanding the viewer's gaze beyond the artwork itself to establish a unique relationship with the surrounding space and to extend sculpture into environmental art. They create a distinct atmosphere within indoor spaces as well as employ repetition to transform artworks into immersive environments. This expansion beyond the confines of the artwork enables the artist's conception to permeate the surrounding space.

Robert Morris exemplifies this concept by periodically reconfiguring the arrangement of L-shaped beams as depicted in [Fig. 1] during the installation phase. Each colossal L-shaped beam assumes a distinct position: one lies horizontally on the ground, another stands upright and the last forms an arch with both ends. Due to variations in gravity and light emission that influence our perception of thickness and weight, these three forms cannot be regarded as identical. The influence of the actual space surrounding the artwork imparts individualized meaning to each form, underscoring the significance of this approach [15].



[Fig. 2] Mirrored Cubes, 1965

Another example of spatiality in minimalism, as exemplified by Robert Morris' artworks, is his installation *Mirrored Cubes* as shown in [Fig. 2]. In this piece, Morris arranges multiple identical mirrored cubes within a defined space. The artwork challenges the traditional notion of sculpture as a static object by incorporating the viewer and the surrounding space as active elements in the spatial experience. It invites viewers to explore their own presence within the artwork and engage with the expanded spatial dimensions created by the reflective surfaces.

3.3 Repeatability

Minimalist artists purposefully embraced the use of repetition that employs elements devoid of expressive qualities and adopting a strategy that eschews compositional correlations in favor of a neutral structure. This deliberate approach allows for characteristics that lack inward-directed expression or a predetermined logical center to manifest. Analogous to the non-hierarchical relationships found in mass-produced goods where all items possess the same size and shape, minimal artists employ repetition to avoid compositional correlations. Through the repetition of elements in sculpture compositions, they discovered the emergence of new meaning. The utilization of ready-made articles from mass production became apparent and marked by equal relationships devoid of hierarchical discrimination. Thus, repetition serves as a correlated compositional approach in minimalist art [14].

The artworks created by Robert Morris exemplify this notion of repeatability as illustrated in the artwork *Three L-Beams*. In this piece, L-shaped beams, akin to ready-made objects produced under equal conditions, are placed within the space not in regular intervals but in a manner that can be perceived differently or equally by viewers. Through the use of repeatability, Morris aims to transcend symbolism and metaphor and provides an alternative means of escape from a singular focus. Following basic enumeration, the orderly placement of shapes or units imbues this repetition with new meaning.



[Fig. 3] *Untitled (Corner Beam)*, 1964/2016

Through the deliberate repetition of the corner beams, Morris's *Untitled (Corner Beam)* sculptures as shown in [Fig. 3] exemplify the repeatability characteristic of minimalism. The artwork challenges notions of uniqueness or individual expression by emphasizing the equal presence and significance of

each element within the series. It invites viewers to appreciate the inherent beauty and impact of repetitive forms to encourage a contemplative engagement with the artwork's repeated structures.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the historical context and artistic characteristics of minimalism art, with a particular focus on the works of Robert Morris. Minimalist art emerged as a significant artistic movement that challenged the boundaries between painting and sculpture. Traditional sculpture had long held multifaceted meanings and encompassed memorialization, ceremonial markers and depictions of figures and symbolic narratives such as burial symbolism. These sculptures not only served symbolic purposes but also functioned as boundary markers within their respective locations. However, the advent of modernism in sculpture was catalyzed by profound events such as World War I, World War II, and the Holocaust and it questioned the ability to assign or reproduce a singular meaning that established the 'autonomy' of the sculpture itself. This negation of the established order and the amalgamation of previously excluded elements brought about a transformative shift in sculpture and elevated it to a vital medium of communication within the realm of minimalism art.

While minimalism has made significant contributions to the art world, it is essential to critically evaluate its limitations and critiques. These include concerns about emotional and intellectual engagement, issues of accessibility and exclusivity, neglect of socio-political contexts, potential formulaic tendencies and commercial influences. By acknowledging these critiques, the dialogue surrounding minimalism can foster a deeper understanding of its impact and push for further artistic exploration and development. This paper anticipates that the main figures based on the analysis of Robert Morris's artworks will serve as a basis for further exploration and research in various fields.

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