

Daimler Art Collection

Minimalism and After II

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

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Renate Wiehager

Foreword

The notion of Minimal Art, like so many terms in recent art history, grew up by chance around a group of young New York artists in about 1965. In his essay 'Minimal Art' the art philosopher Richard Wollheim tried to identify the 'minimum art content' of some objects as a general phenomenon in 20th century American art. At the same time, synonymous formulations started to take shape in American art history and exhibition practice, trying to define this relatively obscure phenomenon in literary terms: ABC ART, Primary Structures, Rejective Art, Cool Art or Reductive Art. Five artists' names were at the center of attention—Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris—, and they imposed a 'look' on the early exhibitions: geometrically serial sculptures and wall objects that assert their sheer size and concrete material quality powerfully in the face of the surrounding space. The historic concept of Minimal Art refers to these artists. It was introduced to Europe by the show of the same name in The Hague in 1968. At first, consistent approaches to painting were seen as less important, as the picture seemed discredited as the object and focus of a centuries-old view of art. But then the new term Minimalism was coined for the second half of the 1960s, and this included a broader range of artistic media.

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Our series of ‘Minimalism and After’ exhibitions, which started in 2002, begins with this extended spectrum—including sculpture, wall reliefs, painting and drawing. We explicitly do not restrict ourselves to the early artists mentioned above, which are anyway well represented in international collections. Instead of this we are looking at the seeds of Minimalism before the movement was really under way, and then at effects that relate to no particular time, and the later manifestations. Who were the teachers and instigators around 1960? Where did artists make key contributions in the background, often overlooked by the art market? What encounters took place that have been forgotten today, and what historical parallels were there? What was the response in Europe? How is Minimalism addressed in contemporary international art discussions?

Our new acquisitions by artists from three generations start in time terms with two outsiders from art events, John McLaughlin (1898–1976, USA) and Hermann Glöckner (1889–1987, D), who nevertheless produced high quality work individually. Jules Langser coined the phrase Hard Edge in 1959 in a study of McLaughlin’s reductionist painting, which concentrated on black, white and very few colors. Hard Edge criteria like the geometrical shape of the color fields and color sequences, formal economy and perfection in terms of paint application, and finally the pictures’ emphatic object quality and visual presence prepared the way for Minimalism. While McLaughlin was working on ‘absolutely abstract’ and non-referential painting-as-painting in Los Angeles, Hermann Glöckner, who was just under eighty, was developing his *Faltung* (Folds) in Dresden, in complete isolation from the GDR art of the day. These works are surprisingly close to Robert Smithson’s folded wall reliefs dating from 1963–65. Both these approaches, which developed without any knowledge of each other, were later echoed in Katja Strunz’s (b. 1970, D) wall reliefs. The Polish artist Henryk Stazewski’s (1884–1998, PL) ideas were also shaped without contact from the world of Western art. His white tableau reliefs dating from the 1960s and later pictures are interpreted in our context as a European and Constructivist variety of minimalist pictorial art.

David Novros, an important early minimalist painter, was an admirer of McLaughlin. And series of stripe pictures started in 1959 by Gene Davis (1920–1985, USA)—who has remained just as unknown as Novros in Europe—could represent a reaction to McLaughlin, as well as showing the influence of Barnett Newman. Hanne Darboven (born in 1941 like Novros)

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arrived in New York in 1966 and established the basic constants of her work in her encounters with Minimal Art, especially with Sol LeWitt. Her serial sequences of numbers and geometrical figures, along with the Frankfurt artist Charlotte Posenenske's (1930–1985, D) sculptures, are among the most important European contributions to Minimalism.

Following one of the Daimler Art Collection's continuing focal points, the selection of new acquisitions tries to reflect discussion in contemporary art. Wolfgang Berkowski (b. 1960, D), Stephen Bram (b. 1961, AUS), Benoit Golley (b. 1974, F), Esther Hiepler (b. 1966, D), and Michael Zahn (b. 1963, USA) all developed quite independent groups of works in the 1990s linking up with various aspects of Minimalism and formulating and fleshing them out further; typically, they work with a reduced formal vocabulary, emphasize the picture's object, material and visual qualities, and restrict themselves to simple basic structures.

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Speech at the opening of the ‘Minimalism and After II’ exhibition,
Daimler Contemporary, 13 February 2003

Ladies and Gentlemen

We have got used to the fact that the history of 20th century art provides us with fixed concepts, and we then assign phenomena to them retrospectively. These are often related only at first glance. On closer examination they turn out to result from ways of thinking that are motivated quite differently. So the classifications available for post-war Europe supply a sequence of styles from Constructivism to Pop, but no independent slot for Minimalism. However, more detailed research shows that there is an intellectual line running from early Modern abstract European art via the forerunners of American Minimal Art in the 1950s to European Minimalism. The Daimler Art Collection is devoting a series of exhibitions to this phenomenon. The series started in 2002, and will continue for a few years. It is based on the notion that, starting in the 1930s and culminating in the 1960s, artists worked on reduced three-dimensional pictorial forms in various European cities that anticipated a great deal of the art that impinges on our consciousness as Minimalism in America round about 1965.

As early as 1980, Germano Celant came up with a thesis that was very revealing in this context. Celant was curator of the Guggenheim Museum in New York for many years. He sees Minimalism’s and Concept Art’s radical reassessment of the concept of the work of art as grounded in pictures by the European Logic Color Painters, the 1950s color field painters. Almost in the same breath, he mentions the names of Josef Albers, Max Bill and Richard Paul Lohse in Europe, Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Ryman in America. Celant uses this to relativize the often repeated statement that Minimal Art was a purely American phenomenon. Instead of this, he works on the basis of a continuous transition of the

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constructive ordering of images to minimalistic three-dimensional images—a thesis that only recently was also partially discussed in publications on Minimalism in art. Certainly Robert Morris, one of the founders of Minimal Art, wrote even in the late 1960s that Minimal Art had taken up the tradition of Constructivism in the spirit of Tatlin, Rodchenko, the early Naum Gabo or the De Stijl artist Vantongerloo.

To return to Celant again: he mentions the following as artistic guidelines for the above-mentioned early color field painters who had been taken up and radicalized by the younger generation in the 1960s: emphasizing reason and intentionality, deriving a logical pictorial concept from Russian Constructivism and Dutch Neoplasticism, propagating rational mechanics for painting and addressing the function of art and of its procedural resources.

Ad Reinhardt next to Max Bill—Germano Celant's surprising identification of intellectual contemporaneity corresponds in our exhibition with the juxtaposition of, for example, early exponents of a constructively anchored Minimalism like Henryk Stazewski or Hermann Glöckner with their American counterparts Gene Davis and John McLaughlin. McLaughlin was born in 1898. He did not start to paint until 1946, when he was already in his fifties, after a career in the army and a long time spent in Asia. From today's point of view he is one of the most important abstract-minimalist painters on the American West Coast, although he is still practically unknown in Europe. McLaughlin saw his images, inspired by Far Eastern philosophy and attitudes of mind, as media for contemplative awareness. Gene Davis followed him in a certain sense in this, and in reduction to the theme of stripes. Davis founded the Washington Color School in the 1950s, with Kenneth Noland and others. He devoted himself to stripes since 1959 and for decades, ultimately being so rigorous and consistent as to paint kilometers of paths in public places with stripes. David Novros was a pupil of McLaughlin. He translated the division of the image into horizontal and vertical areas into three-dimensional form. For Novros, as for Minimalism in general, the close relationship between space and architecture was essential, for which reason he realized large wall paintings as early as the 1960s. The first friendly patron was, interestingly enough, Donald Judd, for whom Novros developed a mural in his Soho studio.

From here it is possible to link up with two younger artists in our exhibition. Michael Zahn, a painter living in New York, works on panel pictures and large-scale wall paintings that combine the visual aesthetic of the computer with the pioneering formulations of 20th century

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abstract art. The Düsseldorf artist Katharina Grosse started in the mid 1990s to expose painterly language-gestures that actually seemed quite intimate in large spaces. Both are pursuing, with new accents and a contemporary idiom, something founded in the Minimalism of the 1960s.

The question of the original basis on which Minimalism developed has hitherto been treated marginally, and this is no less applicable to the political horizons of this art. Here the formal and aesthetic decisions of Minimalism grew to quite an important extent out of the protest movements of the 1960s in Europe and America, and articulate these in very substantially ways. This applies particularly to Oliver Mosset, Daniel Buren and Ian Burn. A statement like this may seem surprising at first to people walking through our exhibition here in Haus Huth. What are stripes, L-shaped angles, folds and monochrome surfaces supposed to have to do with politics?

We have to remember first that composition was the basic art principle the Minimal artists were trying to overcome. But composition was inseparably connected with the search for order, logic and beauty, it could not be detached from the values of old Europe: hierarchy, rationalism, individualism. In clinging on to composition, young artists always saw the rationalistic and hierarchical aspects of European society as well. But the reality was: the collapse of values, accelerated insights and developments in science and technology, the undermining and denunciation of language—this reality was opposed to the traditional social order. Minimalism is committed to the idea of an anti-hierarchical, anti-compositional whole, it is interested in the vision of a new totality. And this vision is held up to society, uncompromisingly and entirely with aggressive undertones, to make it aware of the serious deficiencies and fundamental discrepancies within its self-image.

Few artists in Germany have lived out these Minimalist political roots and motivations so determinedly and tried to master them artistically to as great an extent as the Frankfurt artist Charlotte Posenenske, who died in 1985. Her serial wall objects and architecture-related sculptures were a determined effort to give the insights and demands of politicized youth a form that was both austere and poetic. She saw herself confronted with the failure of her vision in the late 1960s, and switched from art to sociology. Charlotte Posenenske, seen from today's perspective, is the most important representative of German Minimalism, along with Hanne Darboven. We are able to introduce Darboven here with two draughtsmen and

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mathematical sheets, created in the first year of her stay in New York in 1966. This brings two artists back into a neighborly dialogue that had happened once before only once, in Konrad Fischer's gallery in Düsseldorf in 1968.

Ladies and gentlemen, our exhibition may look homogeneous at first glance—but there are many perspectives and questions that can help to read links and understand the works's dialogue with each other. You might perhaps like to pursue the theme of folding from Hermann Glöckner via Posenenske to Katja Strunz. Or to look at the quite different use of the stripes theme from McLaughlin via Gene Davis and Daniel Buren to Michael Zahn, an impressive dialogue over three generations, including quite independently developed ideas on the function of art and overcoming traditional pictorial formats. Or you could compare the demonstrative exposition of a surface aesthetic that is apparently alien to art, from the automobile paint used by Ian Burn and Posenenske via the banal everyday materials in the work of Armleder, Buren and Strunz to the moving screen-images of Gerwald Rockenschaub and Esther Hiepler. Perhaps the dialogues and juxtapositions staged by our exhibition will make some art-historical pigeon holes look a bit less tidy and encourage people to see things differently: this would mean a loss of orientation, but a definite gain in terms of the viewer's attention and freedom to make decisions.

(from the publication: 'Minimalism and After II', Stuttgart/Berlin 2010, pp. 2-5. You can purchase this book online.)

**Daimler Contemporary
Haus Huth Alte Potsdamer Str. 5 10785 Berlin
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