

# Daimler Art Collection

Minimalism and After III

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

September 3 – November 28, 2004

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Foreword

The 'Minimalism and After' exhibition series was conceived in autumn 2000, as Minimalism is one of the key areas in the Daimler Art Collection's long-term purchasing strategy. We now see that we anticipated the most important 2004 exhibition trend. Several major museum shows, from Los Angeles to Houston, New York and London—outstanding were 'A Minimal Future' and 'beyond geometry' in Los Angeles—are currently devoted to Minimalism and Geometrical Abstraction as an important phenomenon in Europe and the USA around 1960. Many of the names we come across here have already featured in the Daimler Art Collection's exhibitions in Berlin, Karlsruhe, Detroit and Pretoria. Three approaches in our exhibition series that some people have questioned from time to time are confirmed by the current major exhibitions. Firstly, the fact that we are placing Minimalism and Geometrical Abstraction as independent artistic phenomena alongside classical Minimal Art. As well as this, European and American developments are no longer considered strictly separately. Our 'Minimalism and After' exhibition series is based on the idea that a transatlantic history of the effect made by abstract-geometrical, reduced image-/object-forms has to be rediscovered. This history starts with the 'emigration' of the Bauhaus and Constructivism in the 1930s, and the way they were received in the USA. It continues in the 1950s through the dialogue between American forms anticipating Minimalism and the Zero and New Tendencies developments in Europe. The culmination comes in 1960, with a minimalist image concept taking shape parallel on

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both sides of the Atlantic. And finally the programmatic inclusion of contemporary art is especially important for our 'Minimalism and After' series. This has been attempted comparably only by the 'Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated)' show at the New York Guggenheim. The contemporary return to the above-mentioned history of effect, and the recalling of many artists who have wrongly been forgotten today, is relevant from our point of view, in that a continuous discussion of the aesthetic, political and formal foundations of Minimalism as a driving force behind contemporary art can be heard today. It should be mentioned in passing here that the most interesting designers and architects have also developed a highly sophisticated formal language going back to premises ranging from Mies van der Rohe to Donald Judd.

'Minimalism and After III' concentrates on a dialogue between American and German artists. A total of 27 artistic positions are presented in our present exhibition, with about 60 works from five decades. American positions bordering on Neoconstructivism and forms anticipating Minimalism in succession to the Bauhaus, Mondrian and Suprematism are represented here by two West Coast painters, Karl Benjamin and Frederick Hammersley. Both were featured in the pioneering 1959 show organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 'Four Abstract Classicists'—with John McLaughlin, whom we showed in 2003. Looking back, two *Quilts* (dating from 1895 and 1935 respectively) made by the Amish People are to be seen as vestiges of early tendencies towards abstract image programs in the USA. Alexander Liberman, Ilya Bolotowsky, Al Held, Oli Sihvonen and Jo Baer, one of the few outstanding women in this circle, were important exponents of New York Minimalism in the 1950s and 60s. Similar European developments dating from the same time can be seen in our exhibition with works by Poul Gernes, Hartmut Böhm, Erwin Heerich, Christian Roeckenschuss and Lothar Quinte. Andreas Brandt's simple stripe picture, Absalon's singular wall object and video work, Thomas Locher's conceptual picture object and Hartmut Böhm's and Helmut Federle's minimalist drawing sequences dating from the 1990s mark the transition from the 1960s to current international trends.

The works by young German and American artists selected for this exhibition reflect the Constructivism/ Geometrical Abstraction/Minimalism encroachment of the early works. The constructive-geometrical position is represented here above all by the Americans Douglas Melini and John Tremblay; with Jens Wolf and Beat Zoderer on the European side. The

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minimalist picture object's tradition being pursued contemporarily in works by the German artists Gerold Miller and Anselm Reyle, and in the gleaming finish of New Yorker Vincent Szarek's objects. Finally, here, Ascan Pinckernelle's architectural drawings mediate between Erwin Heerich's architectural designs, rooted in the 1960s, and the minimal structures of an artist like Michelle Grabner. Tadaaki Kuwayama and Yuji Takeoka provide examples of reductionist pictorial concepts of Japanese provenance.

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Speech at the opening of the 'Minimalism and After III' exhibition,  
Daimler Contemporary, September 2, 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen,

»I'm totally uninterested in European art and I think it's over with", Donald Judd announced in 1965. And Frank Stella, like Judd one of the pioneers of classical Minimal Art, speaking in a 1964 joint interview with Bruce Glaser, did not disassociate himself from geometrical abstraction, but did insist on distancing himself from its precursors: "In spite of the fact that they used those ideas, those basic schemes, it still doesn't have anything to do with my painting—sort of post-Max Bill school—a kind of curiosity—very dreary." (Quoted from: Bruce Glaser, Questions to Stella and Judd, 1964, in: Gregory Battcock, Minimal Art, Los Angeles 1968, p. 149.) A number of later interpreters followed Judd and Stella in insisting on a sharp distinction between American art and the lines of European tradition, also suggesting that with classical Minimal Art they had established a purely American art movement. But early theoretical writings by artist like Judd, Andre, LeWitt or Morris speak a quite different language. They are completely committed to paying tribute to classical Modern European and Russian artists: they suggest that the key to all the foundations of Minimal or Cool Art was the artistic dialogue with Mondrian and Malevich, Pevsner and Gabo, Albers (whom Dan Graham sees as a forerunner of Sol LeWitt) and, again and again, Brancusi (who was the subject of Robert Morris's dissertation). The American Minimalists identify European artists like Yves Klein, Enrico Castellani, Vasarely and Vantongerloo as kindred spirits (Stella had a picture by him even in the early 1960s). To put an attractive 'keystone' in place, let me mention that Donald Judd opened a new exhibition gallery on his Chinati Foundation site with a one-man show devoted to Richard Paul Lohse in 1988, the first, as he proudly pointed out, in North America (in: Donald Judd, Architektur, Münster 1989, p. 90). Judd subsequently showed drawings by Jan Schoonhoven in the same venue.

In a comprehensive study on the Panza di Biumo Collection, one of the early European Minimal and Concept Art collections, Germano Celant came up with a thesis that is very revealing in the context of our 'Minimalism and After' exhibition. Celant, who was curator of

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the Guggenheim Museum in New York for many years, sees the pictures created by the 1950s European 'Logic Color Painters' as the basis for the radical reevaluation of the concept of the work of art in Minimalism and Concept Art. In saying this, he relativizes the often repeated statement that Minimal Art is a purely American phenomenon. The 'Logic Color Painters' insisted on emphasizing reason and intentionality, deriving a logical pictorial concept from Russian Constructivism and Dutch Neoplasticism, propagating rational mechanics for painting and examining the function of art. Celant pointed out that these requirements and all the 'Logic Color Painters' procedural devices had been taken up and radicalized by the 1960s generation of artists. As examples, Celant mentions artists including Reinhardt, Newman, Albers, Kelly, Bill and Lohse (Germano Celant in exhibition cat.: *Das Bild einer Geschichte 1956/1976*, Düsseldorf 1980, p. 37). Ad Reinhardt in the same breath as Max Bill—in our exhibition, this surprising identification of intellectual and spiritual affinity is expressed by placing early exponents of constructively anchored Minimalism like Roeckenschuss or Heerich close to their American counterparts Jo Baer, Liberman or Bolotowsky.

Something else can be mentioned in retrospect to counter the assertion that there was a radical break with European tradition and suggest that there was a continuing intellectual and spiritual dialogue between Europe and America: the great names of the European immigrants at American colleges, who taught a young generation of artists in the 1940/50s to handle avant-garde abstract vocabulary confidently. To sum up the familiar facts briefly here: Albers came to America in 1933, taught at the legendary Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he shaped young art in the USA until 1949. He was followed in the 1930s by Fritz Glarner, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and Piet Mondrian. Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe followed in the 1940s, and became—like Ozenfant, Archipenko or Hans Hofmann elsewhere—pioneering teachers in Chicago and Cambridge.

A third aspect of the artistic dialogue between Europe and America in the field of reduced geometrical pictorial forms appears in the exhibition history of the first half of the 1960s, in other words the years before Minimal Art was canonized in Europe from New York with the exhibition of the same name in 1968 in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and with 'Kompas 3' in Eindhoven, and reduced to the names of American artists. In the early 1960s, the effortless juxtaposition of European and American varieties of Constructivism, Hard Edge,

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Minimalism, Post Painterly Abstraction, Op Art and Zero started in the early 1960s in galleries like Sonnabend in Paris, Hans-Jürgen Müller in Stuttgart or Schmela in Düsseldorf. The following selected exhibitions are part of a parallel institutional series: 'Signale' in Basel in 1965 (Kelly alongside Pfahler, Noland alongside Mattmüller), 'Inner and Outer Space' in the Moderna Museet Stockholm in 1965 (Albers and Castellani alongside Judd, Morris and Stella; Mack, Manzoni and Piene alongside Francis, Noland and Newman), 'Kunst-Licht-Kunst' in the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 'Formen der Farbe' [shapes of colors] in Amsterdam, Stuttgart and Bern in 1966 (Lenk and Lohse alongside Liberman and Louis; Quinte and Vasarely alongside Noland and Stella) or 'Serielle Formationen', curated by Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr in Frankfurt in 1967 (Andre, Flavin and Judd alongside Henderikse, de Vries and Luther; LeWitt, Agnes Martin and Warhol alongside Kolar, Riley, Schoonhoven and Uecker).

Our exhibition is intended to convey a small excerpt from this dialogue between Europe and America, which started in the 1940s and was continued in a modified form. It covered new forms of reduction, of the minimalization of artistic resources, transitions from the picture to the object, from the object into space. The prelude in terms of time to a dialogue initiated in this experimental way in the third part of our 'Minimalism and After' series is given by a group of images in the main gallery. For more than ten years, Alexander Liberman, who achieved fame over his long years as art director of Vogue magazine, worked on a series of pictures using circles. Our acquisition dates from 1959, and is already at the end of this meticulously developed picture sequence, which is paralleled in Liberman's work by abstract sculptures for public spaces, painted in gleaming red.

If it is true that in Liberman's case we can detect an echo of the elemental forms of Russian Suprematism, in the pictures by Benjamin, Hammersley and Bolotowsky that are hanging nearby we are struck by the continuing effect of the principles of De Stijl and Josef Albers. Other new directions are set by the pictures by Jo Baer and Al Held on the same wall. Jo Baer extends Minimal Art's monochrome pictorial body by adding an ornamentally curving line that defines the image as a three-dimensional body. Al Held links the idea of the monochrome, empty pictorial field with elements of early Pop Art, in that it is possible to make out an abbreviated numeral in the picture's symbolic propositions. An interesting feature when comparing the above-named pictures with contemporary works by Quinte and Gernes are the different approaches to bringing out the objective quality of the image: the image is reduced

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to its logical, two-dimensional quality in an anti-illusionistic way, and it can be seen as a detail from a more comprehensive three-dimensional pictorial idea.

The exponents of American reductionist painting shown here share the fact of being at the beginning of or part of the development of something that was to emerge a little later as a specifically American version of Minimalism. The Californian artists Benjamin and Hammersley appeared in the 1959 Los Angeles exhibition 'Four Abstract Classicists', along with John McLaughlin, whom we showed last July. This groundbreaking exhibition set the parameters for the next generation of artists on the American west coast, including names like David Novros, Paul Mogensen, John McCracken, Craig Kauffman, Robert Irwin, Judy Chicago or Larry Bell, who are already seen as representing the heyday of Minimalism. Al Held was shown in the pioneering 'Geometric Abstraction in America' exhibition in 1962 in New York's Whitney Museum, and was one of the few painters to keep appearing in the context of Minimal Art. Finally, Jo Baer, with Anne Truitt and Patricia Johanson in New York or Hanne Darboven and Charlotte Posenenske in Germany are among the very few women to feature in Minimalism.

On the opposite wall of the main gallery here we have brought together works by the German artists Hartmut Böhm, Erwin Heerich, Lothar Quinte and Christian Roeckenschuss. Each of them made a crucial individual contribution to developing a reduced, serially conceived pictorial object in Germany. The earliest work in this group is Lothar Quinte's 1968 *Faltbild* [Folding Image]. The small group of folding images is a singular phenomenon in Quinte's oeuvre, which is characterized by monochrome effects and color progressions. In our German-American dialogue it seems legitimate to read Quinte's colorfully and subtly nuanced space-picture as a response to Jo Baer's elegant picture-sculpture.

The works of Hartmut Böhm and Erwin Heerich are closer to classical Minimalism with its strict cubic formal variations and explicit spatial references. Böhm arrives at his wall pieces via logical and mathematical constructions, while Heerich runs through his geometrical formal inventory from the point of view of morphologies similar to nature, finally achieving his large *Begehbare Skulpturen* [Promenade Sculptures] via the steps of drawing, sketch and model. Like the work of Böhm and Heerich, Roeckenschuss's concept of the strip picture, developed over almost four decades, is rooted in the open pictorial concepts of the 1960s. There have

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been many exhibitions this year, between Los Angeles and London on minimalism and geometry as phenomena of the post-war avant-garde, but only the New York Guggenheim risked the step of pursuing this line of tradition further into the present. But what have become the three parts of our 'Minimalism and After' series intended—and still intend—to show how diversely Minimalism has been received in contemporary art. For this reason, this exhibition again starts with a dialogue of this kind between historic and current positions, using Oli Sihvonen's expansive 1968 picture, Poul Gernes' pop-style colored circles from the same year and Gerold Miller's monumental black *total object*, which dates from 2004. The themes addressed in Alexander Liberman's elegant, black-white-red dotted picture dating from 1959 returns in this recurs in this constellation as positively explosive mixture of the pictorial object's minimal form, colored opulence and physical presence.

From the wild color circles of an artist like Gernes, which were conceived purely for decorative purposes, and Miller's surfaces, gleaming with paint, it is an obvious step to works by Absalon, Vincent Szarek and the Amish People, which hang next to each other on the other side of the route through the show. The so-called *Quilts* were a permitted decorative item for the otherwise completely unadorned rooms of the Amish People's houses in the American state of Pennsylvania. These woven tapestries, sometimes the joint work of several women, relate to natural forms and patterns and were recently acknowledged by the New York Whitney Museum as a specifically American route to abstract pictorial forms. We have made them part of this show because many American artists still see these modifications of applied abstraction as an important source of inspiration.

A leap into the present: the young New York sculptor Vincent Szarek accepted a commission from us in 2003 to take an artistic look at the SLR, the Mercedes-Benz luxury sports car. These two wall objects here in the exhibition were the result, along with studies and sketches. Szarek worked on parts of the design by computer, and then produced these 'tuned' elements as prototypes for a series car, on a production line he had developed himself. The resulting cover icons of car design are reminiscent of the paint-shiny sculptures of Californian Minimalists like Craig Kaufmann and John McCracken in the 1960s.

The sculptures by the Israeli-French artist Absalon, who died as a young man, also operate in the border area between minimal form and functional use. His *cell homes* were conceived as temporary places where the artist could stay, and his intention was to set them up in large

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public squares. Our wall object provides a purist and symbolic idea of this 'living in moving boxes', while the video shows the artist in a performance-style situation as part of his own sculpture.

'Back to the roots of Minimalism' might seem to be the motto for the sequences of drawings in our graphics gallery, after such excursions into the realms of design, architecture and decoration. We were able to acquire a sequence of drawn collages dating from 1990 by Erwin Heerich, which illustrate the morphological element of his austere constructions. Heerich's minimal variations on two-dimensional area, solid and space lead to concrete architecture, of the kind he created for an island called Hombroich near Neuss, but the young Berlin artist Ascan Pinckernelle works on existing architecture. He uses photographs and sketches to observe it at different times of day, and translates the result of his studies into meticulous ink-drawings. Helmut Federle's serial drawings form a bridge between Heerich and Pinckernelle; actually they are diary-style line meditations that the artist has been working on for about ten years.

Cover versions of constructivist-minimal classics—that could perhaps be the title for the works in the rear section of our exhibition. This obviously fits Jens Wolf's free treatments of Josef Albers *squares*, and applies more obliquely to Anselm Reyle's wall panels and lamp, which find the classical vocabulary of Minimal Art in GDR design. New York artist John Tremblay's horizontal chain of red-outlined oval shapes combines the idea of the serial organic 'growth' of a pictorial form with a reference to Richard Artschwager's early *b/ps*. The pictorial languages of Constructivism return adapted and with contemporary sound in the pictures of the Swiss artist Beat Zoderer and Douglas Melini of New York.

How did Joseph Kosuth put it so beautifully? He said that a past artist's work is brought back to life if an aspect of his work becomes useful to a young artist. Our exhibition also tells the story of these dialogues across time and space.

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(from the publication: 'Minimalism and After III', Stuttgart/Berlin 2004, pp. 2-5. You can purchase this book online.)

**Daimler Contemporary**  
**Haus Huth Alte Potsdamer Str. 5 10785 Berlin**  
**daily 11 am - 6 pm**

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