

# Daimler Art Collection

Minimalism and After IV

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

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Foreword

The fourth sequel in our series of 'Minimalism and After' exhibitions, started in 2001, revolves around two geographical focuses and a joint thematic one. The first geographic focus showcases positions of reduced, geometric-abstract painting in Britain in the 1960s as well as further developments of these forerunners' approaches in young British art in the 1990s. A second geographic focus is American Minimalism—additions to works acquired by the Daimler Art Collection and shown in 'Minimalism and After' between 2001 and 2004, and again complemented by present-day positions in the USA, i.e. artists who take up, and work on, the definitions and attitudes of the post-war classics. A joint thematic focus is provided by paintings, sculptures, drawings and videos which deal with the relationship between the minimalist object concept and man-made space—as a conceptual research, as an artificial, modular space design or as a tangible architectural model.

Some 30 new acquisitions from 24 artists are introduced, among them key works of abstract-minimalist precursors like Michael Heizer (USA), Jeremy Moon (GB), Michael Kidner (GB) or Marcia Hafif (USA), and young artists like Jim Lambie (GB), Ian Davenport (GB) and Tom Sachs (USA). The ongoing thematic concentration in 'Minimalism and After IV' on issues of architecture and space has brought together sculptures, among others by Julian Opie (GB)

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and Mathias Goeritz (D), photographs by Dan Graham (USA), Santiago Sierra (E) and Attila Csörgö (H).

Geometric Abstraction, prototypical minimalist pictorial concepts or examples of Hard Edge Painting, Post Painterly Abstraction or Systemic Painting have been represented in Britain since around 1950 and, in part, in outstanding quality, but have largely been ignored in art history reception until a few years ago. The milestones of this largely unknown chapter of British art history are listed briefly enough: 1933–foundation of ‘Unit One’ as a spearhead of modernistic art concepts; 1937–foundation of the ‘Circle’ journal which introduces the creative and social ideas of Constructivism; finally a ‘new departure’ in 1960 with the foundation of a group of artists named ‘Situationists’ and, parallel to this, the association of architects and artists in ‘Construction England 1950–1960’. Incisive encounters of these artists with American Abstract Expressionism and Hard Edge Painting—especially with Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko—were staged at the London Tate Gallery in 1956 and 1959.

This is the background of the seven British artists from three generations represented in our exhibition. Michael Kidner, Jeremy Moon and Robyn Denny rank among the early protagonists, with representative works from the 1960s. This period and the present time are bridged by Julian Opie and his minimalist architectural sculpture *On average present day humans are one inch shorter than they were 8000 years B.C.* which combines the cubic column as the iconic form of urban architecture with the vocabulary of Minimal Art and the surface aesthetics of contemporary computer animations. Refracted in many ways, this also applies to Jim Lambie and his series of Doors sculptures, while Ian Davenport takes up the traditions of the monochromatic, three-dimensional pictorial object.

The American contingent among the new acquisitions to the Daimler Art Collection includes Kenneth Noland, one of the founders of Post Painterly Abstraction, Michael Heizer, an early protagonist of Land Art, and Dan Graham, doyen of Concept Art. To the extent to which these art movements worked on the reality of an imaginary, specifically space-related concept using the medium of pictures in general, they are the most important precursors of classic American Minimal Art, together with the European traditions—from Suprematism via Brancusi and Bauhaus through to the strip paintings by Richard Paul Lohse of 1948/49. This combination of European construction and American minimalizing has been radicalized with extraordinary stringency in the works of American artists Max Cole und Marcia Hafif since

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around 1970. In the 1980s, artists like Peter Halley and Haim Steinbach took up the theme anew, followed in turn by younger positions in our exhibition, among them Greg Bogin, Sarah Morris and Tom Sachs.

If one is to name a German precursor of American Minimal Art, Mathias Goeritz comes to mind immediately. Goeritz had been living in Mexico since 1949 and from 1953 created two of the most important minimalist sculptures for public space, the house 'El Eco', 1953, and the anti-functional, multi-colored 'Satellitentürme' [Satellite Towers] which are up to 57 meters high (1957). Against variations of these monumental architectural sculptures, we set the architectural models by Erwin Heerich once again. This complex is arranged so as to engage in an intriguing dialogue with the performance photographs by Santiago Sierra who 'stages' the vocabulary of Minimalism with workers, as well as the charming folding-house designs of the young Hungarian artist Attila Csörgö.

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Speech at the opening of the 'Minimalism and After IV' exhibition,

Daimler Contemporary, July 28, 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen,

How far back in architectural history should one, or would one have to go to come up against the most primordial examples of a radically reduced language of forms for man-made space? Back to the black cube of the Kaaba in Mecca, the first house of worship built, according to legend, by Ibrahim? Back to Stonehenge in Wiltshire, England, which dates back to the late Stone Age (19<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century BC), or to the tomb of King Djoser in Sakkara, Egypt, a step pyramid built around 2000 BC and ranking among the oldest stone edifices with minimalist geometric relieves? Back to the columns of the Parthenon or the temple of Athena from the sixth century BC? Back to the first century BC and the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán? Or do the minimalist architectural languages of our time go back to the 12th century monasteries of the Cistercian order like Le Thoronet near Toulon or Waverley near Surrey in England? And then there are of course the breathtaking reductions of architecture as the essence of space, area and volume in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier via Luis Barragán and Sigurd Lewerentz, Louis Kahn and Richard Neutra through to Tadao Ando and Minoru Yamasaki, the architect of the destructed Twin Towers in New York.

Right from the start, classic Minimal Art as an American phenomenon around 1965 had a genuine relationship with architecture, as emblematic space sign in much the same way as real space. The former category includes the early works of Tony Smith, Carl Andre and Robert Morris, who take possession of the gallery as an empty volume in an emblematic way

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with their geometric/cubic space elements. Morris, for instance, expressly designed his 'columns', 'steles', 'boxes' and 'portals' in 1961 as work based on the essential architecture of King Djoser's tomb in Egypt. The link between Minimalism and real man-made space found expression most significantly in Donald Judd's conversion of a cast-iron house in Spring Street in Soho, New York, which he began in 1968. Judd's 'thinking in spaces' was consistently continued from 1971 in his occupation with the Chinatti Foundation in Marfa, Texas, as an overall work of art embracing nature, space, architecture and sculpture.

This defines the scope for the works assembled here in the main room of the 'Minimalism and After IV' exhibition, all of them with concrete architectural references and created by Julian Opie, Mathias Goeritz, Erwin Heerich, Dan Graham, Santiago Sierra and Attila Csörgö. Julian Opie, born in London in 1958, made a name for himself as one of the Young British Artists in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, Opie developed sculptures, pictures, graphic art and computer works on the subject of architecture and based on the aestheticism of conventional computer games. A key work from this phase is the minimalist architectural sculpture with the cryptic title *On average present day humans are one inch shorter than they were 8000 years BC*, 1991. In this work, Opie combines the color concepts of De Stijl architects in the 1920s with the urban raster plan of Manhattan and the minimalist cubes of Robert Morris. The title takes the viewer's imagination away from the here and now of a computer-generated space concept back into the Mesolithic, the middle period of the Stone Age, with its roughly hewn dwellings and tools. Archaism and radical contemporariness also merge in the multi-media oeuvre of Mathias Goeritz, born in Danzig in 1915. Goeritz had moved to Mexico in 1949 where he realized, from 1953 and together with architect Luis Barragán, two of the most important minimalist large-scale sculptures for public space – first the 'El Eco' house (1953) designed as a synthesis of the arts, and then in 1957 the anti-functional, colored 'Satellite Towers'. In terms of their formal language, the latter have to be seen as falling back upon Neolithic stone monuments or the obelisks of Karnak (1290 BC) while at the same time transposing the autonomy of Brancusi's 'Endless Column' into a sphere of urban functionality. Between 1960 and 1990, Goeritz—an artist, architect and protagonist of concrete poetry, a university lecturer and organizer of exhibitions, symposiums, etc.—was recognized as the pioneering renewer of a decidedly socially focused art in Mexico. The seven-part steel sculpture *Las Puertas a la Nada* shown in our exhibition was submitted by Goeritz for the 'La Défense' competition in Paris in 1971.

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The transition from formally arguing Minimalism to a strictly conceptual approach is represented in the newly acquired photographs of American Dan Graham. In 1966, Graham published a photographic essay in *Arts Magazine*, exposing the uniformity of architecture in American suburbs as the objectification of a general leveling and standardization which forces into line not only aesthetic perception but also people's awareness. From Graham's photographic perspective, standardized buildings transform into serially reduced, cubic volumes, and it was in this sense that Benjamin H.D. Buchloh pointed out in 1977 that Graham's Homes for America evidently "reflect the formal and stylistic principles of minimalist sculptures in an ironic and ambiguous way" (in cat.: Dimitrijevic, Graham a. o., DAAD, Berlin 1977).

From here, it is an obvious step to the three photographs of the young Spanish artist Santiago Sierra who from a present-day perspective charges the spectrum of forms and meanings of Concept and Minimal Art with political dynamite. *111 constructions with 10 modules and 10 workers* is the simple title describing the conditions of the documented action. Sierra had given instructions to ten workers to form minimalist spatial configurations with white geometric panels, which are immediately reminiscent of Sol LeWitt's modular sculptures. Comparable references to classic Minimal Art can also be found in other works by Sierra. There's first of all the action *Eight People Paid to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* (Guatemala City, 1999), which can be read as a critical treatment of Donald Judd's cubes, as well as the action *Obstruction of a Freeway with a Truck's Trailer* from 1998. At the time, Sierra rented a truck with a 20-meter-long white trailer in Mexico City, drove onto the Periférico, a freeway bypassing the city, which is very busy 24 hours a day, parked the truck at a 90 degree angle to the direction of traffic for five minutes and had everything video-filmed from the air. The video shows a minimalist white beam amidst an urban chaos. Writing in *FAZ* on March 22, Niklas Maak commented: "Upon approaching, you realize that the perfect order results in unbelievable chaos. People honk, climb out of their tin cans, quarrel and ally themselves against the wicked white bar. And you suddenly realize that the most beautiful element of an austere form is the unrest it produces".

Attila Csörgö's works revolve around the dynamic conformation of changeable forms and the associated perceptual experiences, be that in his kinetic light sculptures, Neo-Dadaist machines which are reminiscent of Jean Tinguely, or simple paper folds and their successive

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unfolding, as can be seen in the photographic series entitled *Peeled City II*. The 14 photographs show the unfolding of a model 'skyscraper' built of colored paper and with an adjoining cube; the last picture in the series evidently illustrates that the transformation from a three-dimensional form into plane two-dimensionality incorporates several stages of abstraction which are realized in one go, without the paper being cut or divided.

While Sierra's central theme revolves around the ideological implications of minimalism, superimposing the rigid programs of the post-war avant-gardes and the exploitation of labor in western democracies, young British artist Jim Lambie has opted for a process of recycling and sampling arsenals of abstract-geometric forms. The most important group of works from the more recent time is formed by the segmented, anti-functionally joined and painted door leaves. The radicalism of deformation and the minimalist austerity of the artistic construction trigger a bizarre dialogue with the familiar, homely relief of the doors here. Equally, Tom Sachs' 'reconstructions' of younger classics from art, design and architecture arise from thinking in terms of sampling processes and cover versions. In other words, his artistic strategy could also be described as optimally 'networked' to the extent to which he 'clicks on' defined standards from within existing contexts—be they of an art-historical, political or trivial-aesthetic nature—and networks them with his personal cosmos. In our exhibition, these works are represented by the reproductions made of foamed plastic and hot-melt adhesive of American art classics of the 1960s and 1980s, i.e. Warhol's 'Brillo Boxes' and Peter Halley's urbanistically designed geometric abstractions. The cycle begins—and is completed—at the point in our exhibition where the adaptation by Sachs meet an original by his lecturer Halley and both come together with Robyn Dennys painting *Track 4*, 1961, who can be interpreted as a forerunner of Halley.

Another cycle in this exhibition opens up with respect to the eight British artists represented here. Minimalism and England—has there been anything like it? One is tempted to answer this question with a spontaneous 'no'. But even a fleeting glance at older British art, design and architectural history reveals a link between James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), the great 19th century portraitist, the Habitat design chain founded in 1964 and young positions like those of Jim Lambie or Liam Gillick. Whistler, a dandy and eccentric from the circle of Oscar Wilde's friends, not only gave his portraits and landscapes poetically abstract titles ('Symphony in White', 'Caprice in Purple and Gold') but also developed reduced interior- and

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furniture-design drafts to provide the 'right' environment for his paintings. The interior walls of his 'proto-minimalist' private house in London, built around 1875, consisted of white-painted bricks, and windows, defying the laws of symmetry, were located where they were needed, while his furniture designs celebrated a cubic, geometric style of austerity. Before Whistler, there were the unostentatious, white and severe facades of Victorian London, Sir Owen Jones' pioneering achievement in collecting the ornaments of all cultures of the world ('Grammar of Ornament', London 1856) and the glass barrel vault of the Crystal Palace of 1851. In-between Whistler and Habitat, the first interior designer with a strictly reductionist ethos, you'll find the white relieves of Ben Nicholson, the cutlery design by David Mellor, and then, around 1960, the plastic-geometric space constructions by Anthony Caro and Nigel Hall. Contemporary England boasts outstanding minimalists in applied arts of the caliber of designers Jasper Morrison and James Irwine, Ray Key and Christopher Farr, and of architects John Pawson and Claudio Silvestrini.

The historical development steps starting out from geometric abstraction and minimalist pictorial concepts in 20<sup>th</sup> century England are briefly outlined in the preface of the catalogue: from the foundation of the artists' movement and journal 'Unit One' in 1933, spearheading modernistic art concepts, through to the association of architects and artists in 'Construction England 1950-1960'. In painting, the transition to a genuinely British interpretation of abstraction and minimalism was documented in the legendary 'Situation' exhibition at the RBA Galleries in London in 1960, organized by the artists and curated by Lawrence Alloway. The exhibition brought together the most diversified approaches to large-format abstraction but, in the last room, was complemented by examples of Hard Edge and geometric reduction, which is why this exhibition will essentially remain associated with the breakthrough of these styles. In this, the last room of 'Situation', Robyn Denny was also represented with three major works. One year later, in 1961, the painting *Track 4* was created which we acquired for the Daimler Art Collection. The painting summarizes major contemporary themes, and not only for Denny: the monochromatic pictorial space as a symbol of spiritual and cosmic unleashing, the interlacing of different spatial levels in an emphatically plane pictorial organization, and finally the 'unpainterly' application of low-viscosity paint in muted colors, underlining a decided anti-illusionism. Concretely significant influences for Robyn Denny in the early 1960s were architecture, ornaments and contemporary American role-models: The austere portals and archways and the two-dimensional ornaments of Islamic architecture (especially the Alhambra) inspired him with just as much lasting effect as Sir Owen Jones'

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'Grammar of Ornament' or the strip painting which emerged in the USA in the late 1950s. An incomparably delicate example in our exhibition with its reduced coloredness is Kenneth Noland's strip painting *Draftline* of 1969. Robyn Denny's pictorial architectures have also always been inspired by the worlds of technical and urban symbols, identifying him as a forerunner of Peter Halley whose works hang right next to his.

Undoubtedly one of the most distinguished personalities in British painting in the 1960s, ranging between Color-field painting, Minimal Art and Op Art effects, was Jeremy Moon who died young. While Moon remained largely unknown outside London, the three new acquisitions for the Daimler Art Collection secure the first adequate positioning of his oeuvre in a European collection. In a dialogue with Moon's coloristically outstanding pictures, we have hung one of the architecturally focused pictures of young American artist Sarah Morris—as in the case of Denny and Halley, such a neighborhood opens the eyes for the continued subcutaneous impact of 1960s pictorial concepts on the present time. Anthony Caro, one of the outstanding European post-war sculptors, was a great admirer of Jeremy Moon's oeuvre. This has prompted us to integrate Caro's sculpture with the title *Writing Piece, She is terrified*, 1988/89, which appears to be unexpectedly 'drawing-like and figurative' in our context. Alongside Lambie, the younger generation of British artists is represented here by a visually provocative, monochromatic large-format picture by Ian Davenport as well as by two subtle, minimalist pictorial studies by Hayley Tompkins.

Once you have contemplated the different architectural references in our exhibition—pictorial, structural, political, urbanistic—the pictures and drawings shown here by Max Cole and Marcia Hafif, the American 'Grandes Dames' of minimal pictorial exercises, can also be read from a surprising perspective. In interviews, Max Cole has pointed out time and again that 'simplicity, frontality' and the visible abstraction of Egyptian architecture have influenced her deeply and given her a concept in her search for original gestures and issues in art (see cat.: Max Cole, Edizioni Charta, Milan 2000). Marcia Hafif, by comparison, quotes a key book—'Heinrich Engle, *The Japanese House*, Rutland Vermont 1964'—in the programmatic stocktaking of the development of her oeuvre between 1972 and 1990. Engle's book is significant in terms of the history of architecture and culture because it links the proportional and dimensional relations of Japanese architecture with intellectual issues. One would like to explain the significance of the book for Hafif by saying that her entire oeuvre, too, is a "stocktaking of the

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methods and materials of traditional western painting” (see cat.: Marcia Hafif, From the inventory, Wuppertal 1994), researching the abstract picture as the original representative of genuine scale: the scaling of an inner attitude and symbolic action, of form and process. It is also at this point, at the original function of architectural form language as a representative of intellectual orders, that the œuvre of Sean Scully comes in: “The architecture of our spirituality lies in ruins [...] And yet I believe that it is possible to create something emphatic with elementary shapes painted out of the depths of one’s mind—something that appeals to the architecture of our sensuousness.” (S. S. in exhib. cat.: Sean Scully Twenty Years 1976–1995, New York 1995.)

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**Daimler Contemporary**

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