

**Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties**

James Meyer

Yale University Press, £35

*Reviewed by Anna C Chave*

James Meyer has followed up his fairly inclusive *Minimalism* anthology (Phaidon, 2000) with a far narrower view in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*. The latest book promises—in the spirit of the present entente cordiale among such leading (once opposed) figures in the field as T J Clark and Rosalind Krauss—to be practically all things to all people: historicist, formalist, social, structuralist and deconstructive. Just as Meyer's "syncretic" approach effectively pulls the teeth of critical debate, so too does he pull the teeth of Minimalism itself.

Opening with the well-worn gambit of the contemporaneous fashion photograph—a Minimalist cube dress worn at an opening—to betoken the swift co-optation of the avant-garde by the general culture, Meyer frames a Peter Bürger-influenced account of Minimalism as a mere neo-avant-garde, powerless to shock the bourgeoisie and reduced to making "perspicuous the conditions of its confinement".

Minimalism was indeed caught in an "irresolvable position of conformity and critique", but any veteran of an introductory modern art survey can attest—from the chill pervading the classroom the instant a Carl Andre flashes on to the screen—that Minimalism shock even now, with strategies that can still seem extreme. (Though Meyer details the outrage in 1976 over the Tate's acquisition of Andre's bricks, 'Equivalent VIII', he does so from a posture of belated bemusement, unaware that Minimalist works remain preferred targets of vandals.) As for Minimalism's critical capacity, Meyer adapts, without crediting, a conclusion from my own 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power' (*Arts*, January 1990): that Minimalism might well be considered in Adorno's terms, as deploying a strategy of negation.

Meyer aims, he states early on, to trace the genesis of Minimalist practices. Instead of truly

investigating Minimalism's genesis—and so fully examining Minimalist painting; or the pioneering “dance-constructions” of Simone Forti (whose props led her husband, Robert Morris, to produce comparable props that would soon be glorified as inaugurating Minimalist sculpture); or the path-breaking objects of Walter de Maria, to cite some neglected cases—Meyer actually means (as he also says) to trace the genesis of the discourse on Minimalism, to show how the canon originated.

Such a project could have demystifying and so revisionist effects—as when it emerges that Morris's works, though “less thrilling” than those of many of his peers, “had something else to recommend them. Their lasting fame and the relative obscurity of the other practices in no small way attributable to the powerful discourse surrounding them”, instigated mainly by the wordsmith Morris himself—but that is far from Meyer's intent or larger result.

Rather his project mostly reinforces, and somewhat complicates, the received view of the movement, revisiting critical positions already revisited exhaustively. Thus he rehearses the ceaselessly rehearsed views of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, notwithstanding that their famed critical ships ran aground on the shoals of Minimalism, and most other artistic beachheads of the 1960s, as was recognised even at the time.

In what amounts to a reception study—including a welcome chapter newly charting aspects of the European response to Minimalism—through well-researched analyses of key exhibitions and texts, Meyer effectively illuminates the workings of a dealer-critic system that engineered the ascent of six sculptors now indelibly associated with the movement: Morris, Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Anne Truitt.

Anne Truitt? Well you might ask: deeming her a canonical Minimalist is Meyer's one oddball move. Regardless that the men in the movement shunned her, Truitt's inclusion seems calculated to undermine Minimalism's notoriety as a masculinist bastion (Meyer does allow that female artists suffered



**A new handle on Minimalism? Donald Judd, 'Untitled' (1962)**

from sexism in the 1960s, but bizarrely cautions that “both sexes harboured chauvinistic views”) and to enable a discussion on Minimalism and gender.

Meyer warns in his introduction that his project's historicist character precludes his delving into issues elaborated after the 1960s, such as feminist critiques, or the movement's relation to performance media. But since he proceeds to delve into latter-day issues freely, the warning seems more an excuse for ignoring subjects uncongenial to him, such as experimental dance (whose ties to Minimalism were recognised during the 1960s, in any case), or for making careless sideswipes at the best known of feminist critiques, namely ‘Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power’.

Very briefly, for the record, that my 1990 essay failed to “integrat[e] Foucault's structuralist model of history” is because I did not in fact “identify with”, but was instead expressly critical of “a Foucauldian critique of power”; my references to Albert Speer are not “stunningly ahistorical”, but are linked to Tony Smith's and Frank Stella's interest in him; and I never stated that Stella expressed “admiration” for the pinstriped flannel of his ivy league confederates' suits “by depicting the patterns”. With respect to paintings widely called “pinstriped” from the first, I did observe that “the full connotations of the quintessential Power Fabric could scarcely have been lost on Stella”, given his privileged past.

Inured as I am to critical

indignation over my “iconological” or interpretive approach to Minimalism, I do wish such complaints would be visited on the artists for a change. Andre's Equivalents were, after all, named for Alfred Stieglitz's symbolist Equivalents. Suggestive titles and interpretive comments were rife among the talkative Minimalists, who are nevertheless represented as producing “purely abstract” art—as if any art ever could escape meaning. Titles aside, we cannot but bring associations to bricks, and even Andre has since lifted his injunctions against doing so.

Returning to Truitt, who also liked titles, what separated her from the Minimalists was less her refusals of affiliation—none of the canonical Minimalists was self-identified as such—than her humanism. Admitting this, Meyer points additionally to her “instinctive” use of colour (Judd's vibrant colourism presumably being another matter), and to her work's grounding in personal memory (the memory-based aspects of Andre's practice—his sagas of granddad the bricklayer—apparently also being another matter, or one lost on Meyer).

What of the transcendent valences to Truitt's art? For Meyer, to attach spiritual content to Minimalism is a “glaring betrayal”. On those grounds he can evict the movement's entire California contingent—referring readers to a Krauss essay that divides materialist Easterners from idealist Westerners; exercises in seeing from those in “seeing through”—along with its sometime senior citizens, such as Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Tony Smith and Ronald Bladen (a list ordinarily including Truitt). Suffice it to say that these issues are not so easily settled.

Though he discounts artists' statements that contradict his views of their work, Meyer did interview all the artists he features and he treats them generally with deference and empathy, even presuming to speak for them (“we can imagine Judd replying...”). From his perspective, Minimalism—however diverse and contested a field of practice—is subject to being correctly understood or misunderstood. This book conscientiously lays yet more groundwork for a prevailing, would-be authoritative construction of the movement.