

Minimalism to Expressionism

Painting and Sculpture Since 1965 from the Permanent Collection

Whitney Museum of American Art June 2–September 18, 1983

A radical shift has occurred in the mainstream of American art since the mid 1960s. Using paintings and sculpture from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, this exhibition traces the course of the shift in four basic stages—from Minimalism to Post-Minimalism to New Image art to Neo-Expressionism. The exhibition does not deal with the issue of Minimalism's emergence as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, or with Pop Art, Color Field painting, or Conceptualism. Other later developments are unreported and unseen here, for only through a highly specific focus can some comprehensibility be brought to this period.

The transition from the austere abstract Minimalism of the 1960s to the vibrant expressive figuration of the early 1980s provides such a focus. Minimalism's non-objective, reductive geometry has been traded for an emotion-laden and frequently surreal representation. The reaction against Minimalism, culminating in recent Neo-Expressionism (an inadequate yet useful catch-all term), derives from the majestic pictorial extravaganzas of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still,

Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning. At the same time, Neo-Expressionism also bears the mark of the 1970s in its pluralistic styles and obsession with self. These characteristics, however, are now often fused with personalized images drawn from current events, the mass media, sociology, and religion. Truly international in practice, with New York as just one of its centers, Neo-Expressionism offers intense content and feeling in place of Minimalism's restraint and idealized simplification.

It is a paradox that the systematic rigor of Minimalism developed in an era of license, a time of political violence and social and sexual reform. During the 1960s eccentric behavior and dress became mainstream, use of mind-altering drugs became widespread. The murder of America's national leaders was the decade's horrifying leitmotif. These symptoms of non-conformity and aggression were apparent in a country nonetheless enjoying a continuing economic affluence and more governmental concern for social welfare than has since been known. Yet the greater prosperity and emotional intensity characteristic of the decade begat

in art an austere, formalist sensibility. Art adopted inflexible and authoritarian qualities being abandoned by society as a whole. Minimalism in the 1960s continued the non-objective developments in twentieth-century art that can be traced from Malevich to Mondrian in Europe and, in America, from 1930s geometric abstraction to the early 1950s paintings of Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, and Ad Reinhardt. In Minimalism individual personality was repressed in favor of impersonal execution, serial progressions, and monochromatic and mathematically conceived compositions. The physical properties of materials for their own sake were stressed. Sculpture, with its material and textural emphasis, played a more vanguard role than ever before. Untitled works—works unprejudiced by any associative or narrative connotations—became the norm. Minimalist works are not about external reality, but about themselves; not so concerned with what was made, but with a fusion of process and product. Richard Serra explained his art as "revealing the structure and content and character of a space and a place by defining a physical structure through the elements that I use . . ." Tony



Frank Stella, *Sanbornville III*, 1966



Frank Stella, *Silverstone*, 1981



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968

Smith went so far as to remark, "I don't make sculpture, I speculate in form." Purged from art were all storytelling and social commentary—as well as the belief in spontaneous gesture as encoded emotion, a hallmark of 1950s Abstract Expressionist painting. Concept and process reigned over feeling. Cool, precise icons of formalism filled pristine, white-walled, and artificially lit exhibition spaces.

In Minimalism, life and art were compartmentalized. Artists might take strong, even radical, political positions in their personal lives, yet their art reflected a realm of ideal and depersonalized forms and ideas. It was a realm where, for example, Sol LeWitt's wall drawings were executed by his associates or others, and seldom by the artist himself. The works' permanent existence was only in the form of typewritten documents which described the specific components and contained instructions for realizations—which were always temporary, the drawings being painted over when the exhibitions came to an end. For Donald



Sol LeWitt, *Lines to Points on a Grid*, 1976

Judd's sculptures, the specifications were followed by professional fabricators. For Dan Flavin, this impersonal distancing meant using commercial fluorescent tubes to make his geometric pools of direct and indirect light. In *Ten to 10*, Mel Bochner evoked the most basic of counting systems, choosing common pebbles to elucidate complex mathematical processes. Serial repetition of geometric shapes became the standard device for such quintessential Minimalist sculptors as Carl Andre, Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Smithson, as well as the painters Robert Mangold, Agnes Martin, David Novros, and Robert Ryman. Andre

remarked to Hesse, "real materials, substance, materiality, anything worth doing is worth doing again and again. . . ." Hesse affirmed, "If something is meaningful, maybe it's more meaningful said ten times."

In making art that stressed repetition and formal structure exclusively, artists eliminated individuality and "content," as these had previously been defined: the art referred solely to itself, cutting out the sense of human interaction and emotional interchange traditionally associated with a work of art. Classic Minimalism thus necessitated a new set of reactions from the viewer. An idea had to be as engaging as a feeling.

The diminished vocabulary made possible only a narrow range of statements: certain of the sculptures of Andre, Judd, LeWitt, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and Smithson appear virtually identical. Minimalism's programmatic attitude of pure research, while significantly innovative, soon became ungenerous and infertile. Its purity and perfection of execution quickly set such an exacting standard, and produced such definitive exemplars, that artists began seeking alternatives almost immediately. Yet among



Robert Smithson, *Alogon*, 1966

Minimalism's practitioners were many artists who still sought to express emotion, though within reductive formats. They knew that the Minimalist dialectic made the committed viewer much more aware of minute distinctions. For example, the obsessive grid in an Agnes Martin painting maintains its vital individuality through slight, clearly handmade, variations in execution and through the particularities of the canvas weave: these little denials of the painting's seemingly omnipotent structure created its transcendent power. As Morris observed, "Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience." As Brice Marden explained even more expansively, "Within these smaller confines, confines which I have painted myself into and intend to explore with no regrets, I try to give the viewer something to which he will react subjectively. I believe these are highly emotional paintings not to be admired for any technical or intellectual reason but to be felt." In Marden's *Summer Table*, the painting's panels convey for him the memory of glasses of cool liquid on a table in the garden of a house on a Greek island where he had spent the summer. The light there was



Brice Marden, *Summer Table*, 1972

"intenser, clearer and less shrouded," and its modulations against a backdrop of the garden's plants and the sea beyond were compressed into the painting's subject. A similar abstract compression of light and experience occurs in Christopher Wilmarth's nine *Clearing* sculptures of 1973. For Wilmarth, *Clearing #1* "is the birth clearing, a nascency. It implies a beginning. The light enters more in this piece than the other[s] . . . and the steel just touches along a vertical center line. The light wedges are full, not altered, or eroded. There is much expectancy, a future is implied."

As confirmed by these later works of Marden and Wilmarth, Minimalism began generating its antithesis around 1968, at the height of its power. Though its most brilliant proponents, Andre, Judd, LeWitt, Mangold, and Flavin, continue today to bring great strength and meaning to non-objective, reductive form, by the late 1960s the irrefutable conclusiveness of Minimalism blocked the road for the next generation. Since then, Minimalism has become as notable for its aftermath as for its classic achievements, which have been interpreted as the collapse of modernism.

In the late 1960s the personal, the quixotic, and the representational reentered avant-garde thinking. Art began to routinely spill over into previously non-art areas—site transformation, performance, video, and installation—areas which, while within the range of visual art, denied its discrete objecthood and purely visual status. Definitions



Dan Flavin, *Untitled (for Robert with fond regards)*, 1977



Christopher W. Smith, *Clearing #1 of Nine Clearings for a Standing Man*, 1973

were altered in the rich interchange between previously differentiated art forms. A realism unabashedly based on photography and on the vernacular American environment emerged. The positions of photography and the craft media, particularly clay, were re-evaluated and upgraded. By 1970 a major cultural shift was noticed and named. It was given the alternative designations of Post-Modernism and Post Minimalism, which remain the only terms general enough to describe the pluralism that has ensued.

Post Modernism's first and most forceful application occurred in relationship to architecture, which had much earlier reached an ultimate stage of formal reduction. The initial manifestations of Post-Minimalism—the term more frequently applied to painting and sculpture—may be seen in the sculpture of Jackie Winsor, John Duff, Keith Sonnier, Alan Saret, and Lynda Benglis. Creating highly idiosyncratic, hand made, non-objective objects, all make very basic statements in their chosen materials. Winsor applies her own labor-intensive craft to the fabrication of stark, geometric objects, which are at once



Jackie Winsor, *Bum*, 1978

about both simplification and detail. Chance, indeterminacy, and variable installation also became regular features of Post-Minimalist art and foils for reductive form—as observable in the wrinkled surface of Richard Tuttle's eccentrically shaped cloth piece, the languid and non-replicable repose of Morris' gridded hanging felt, George Rickey's wind-sensitive eighteen-foot verticals, and the ambient interactions of parts in Sonnier's glass and neon construction. Vito Acconci's *False Center for L.A.* conjoins Minimalism and theater; his quartet of simplified, elongated chair forms is accompanied by a taped monologue by the artist, who was formerly a poet. In the paintings of Al Held and, later, Elizabeth Murray, a complicated baroque geometry prevails. Held explores elaborate spatial interplay on a two-dimensional, slick-surface canvas ground. On mottled, single-tone fields of paint, Murray uses shape and line as actors in coded, personal dramas. Nowhere was the Post-Minimalist transition as potent as in Frank Stella's paintings, from *Sanbornville III* to *Silverstone*, the swing from logic to intuition, from reductive to additive, from hands-off to hands-on, is



Elizabeth Murray, *Chair in Memory*, 1978

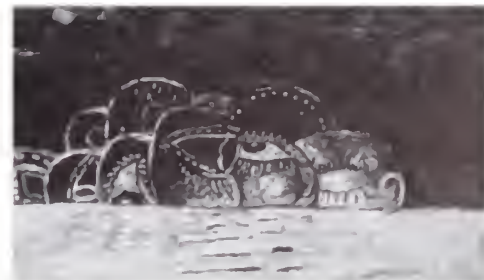
made abundantly clear. Both paintings are about structure, but in Stella's later work the structure of painting is redefined expressionistically.

Along with greater emotion and content in non-objective art, another aftermath of Minimalism was a return to representation, figuration, and decoration. As seen in the work of Robert Kushner, pattern and decoration painting, with its serial repetitions and elaborations on the grid structure, was a florid outgrowth of Minimalism and, in many cases, sublimated meaning to pure visual effervescence. (Photo Realism, one of the first manifestations of this return to representation, is not included here, since its chaste, deadpan representation of facts downplays emotion and individualism.) It was with iconic treatments and ironic narrative, more than with realism, that those who have come to be called New Image painters—Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney, Lois Lane, Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg, and Joe Zucker—reacted to Minimalism. As



Susan Rothenberg, *For the Light*, 1978-79

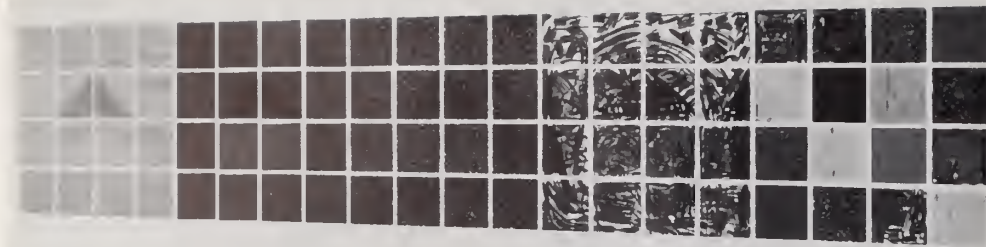
Rothenberg noted of the unfamiliar terrain they were exploring, "I am an image maker who is also an image breaker—trying for a little more." Following a series of paintings that used a horse as the major motif, Rothenberg increasingly offered what appear to be outlined dream fragments on monotone fields of paintstrokes. Philip Guston and, shortly thereafter, Jenney first introduced variations in painterly representation into their literary-minded paintings of the late 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, Jenney had surmised, "you cannot paint out the paint," and "useful spontaneity is planned." With his thick, sculptural frames and loosely painted images, he became a purveyor of cultural illusions and allusions. Guston's subjects and colors were nastier, expelled



Philip Guston, *Cabal*, 1977

from a fecund mind cluttered with literature, doom, and an ecstatic appetite for sensation.

Possessed of a sense of irony (and graduate degrees), many artists who matured in the 1970s picked and chose from earlier styles, forging representations from abstract modes. Bartlett's serial arrangement of eighty white baked-enamel plates recalls Minimalism, while offering a succinct, five-part biographical résumé. The work is named after the five streets on which she lived at birth, upbringing, marriage and graduate education, divorce and confusion, and



Jennifer Bartlett, *Falcon Avenue, Seaside Walk, Dwight Street, Jarvis Street, Greene Street*, 1976

the present; this last section integrates the four previous periods. Bartlett used four different types of paint application for these segments of her life to lock subject and system together. As Joe Zucker observed of himself and others of his generation, "pictorial content becomes an iconography to discuss the topography of painting." Such a merger of means and ends occurs in Joel Shapiro's recent large-scale, geometrized body-part sculptures. Shapiro's *Untitled* (1980-81) is arranged along the lines of a David Smith Cubi, with the added ambiguity



Joel Shapiro, *Untitled*, 1980-81

of being cast in bronze; as Shapiro remarked, it stands poised between "those moments when it appears that it is a figure and other moments when it looks like a bunch of wood stuck together. . . . it simultaneously configures and disfigures." Perceptual equivocation is likewise pursued by Robert Moskowitz in *Swimmer*. He describes its barely broken color field of blue as "like being in New York City—trying to survive. . . . a balance between a realistic thing and an abstract thing." From Bryan Hunt's floating, yet anchored, dirigible shape to Lois Lane's somberly toned yet antic images, these new purveyors of imagery coolly pursued the conflation of opposites.

Within the designation of all art after 1970 as Post-Minimal, the work of these New Image artists can be called pre-expressionist. They still relied on calculated aesthetic strategies to contain intense states of being and self-concerned subjects. A single image dominated the work, and its complexity resided as much in the method of execution as in its



Joe Zucker, *Merlyn's Lab*, 1977

subject. Zucker's description of *Merlyn's Lab* exemplifies the web of formal and narrative issues in New Image paintings. Based on the central character in T.H. White's *Once and Future King*, the painting "depicts the wizard surrounded by various creatures and the instruments of his alchemic science—a badger, an owl, bats, an alligator, a retort, etc. . . . fashioning an alligator skin offers a lot of tactile opportunities for a painter, as does the tutor himself, bedecked in his robes with scepter and vials of magic liquid. Merlyn's alchemy is analogous to the situation of the artist—he is a metaphor for process." Method and metaphor were valued over naturalism and veracity in these works. Surrogates—a wizard, a horse, or a house shape—stood in for the self. The content of New Image art was found within the lives of its artists, yet their lives were seldom the direct subject of their works. These pre-expressionist painters and sculp-



Jedd Garet, *Precarious Notoriety*, 1982

tors valued restraint and release equally. Even when New Image paint application was expressionistic, as in Bartlett's five-part painting, its frenzy was systematically controlled. Intellectually attuned to the simple, iconic presences in Minimalism, New Image artists isolated and assessed personal images in a synthesis of abstraction and representation.

Another source for the new syntax of imagery that developed in the early 1970s was television. The generation of artists that emerged in the 1970s was the first to grow up with television. Its electronic processing of representation and blitz of simple-minded narratives and multiple programming options underlie their new attitudes toward imagery. Painters like Ed Paschke and Jedd Garet process pictorial space in a manner that seems informed by television transmission and the artifice of sets. Distinctly personal and bordering on the perverse, their figuration is surreal, androgenous, and uncomfortably contorted. On the other hand, Nam June Paik's pyramid of television sets uses the medium for itself and, in an outrageously overstated way, to beam its hypnotic message of incessant action and sexual innuendo.

On commercial television, the turn of the dial offers incongruous juxtapositions, and such an iconography of discontinuity has provided the subject for numerous artists since the mid-1970s. Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist had earlier manipulated such simultaneity, but its use became more knowing and ironic in the hands of this generation. For example, the cosmic intentions of the juxtapositions in Kim MacConnel's cheerful and effusive multi-panel work may come as a surprise. He has written that



Kim MacConnel, *Formidable*, 1981

his painting *Formidable* "deals with the problem of Business interests (Tophat Capitalists) driving us with straight line thinking (Pythagorean Theorem) straight into oblivion (the Hand). The hand, a split image of the Abhaya Mudra of Shiva's dance of the universe, the Indian god of destruction and rebirth, is a symbol of the infiniteness of the universe. The pose of the hand, which looks somewhat like the contemporary hand gesture for 'OK,' actually means the opposite: what we do to ourselves on this small planet