

Introduction

In this essay I will be dealing with the idea of exhibition as artwork specifically through the lens of the minimalist art movement of the 1950's and 1960's. This movement was a complete challenge not just to the artwork of the time, but attitudes of the art world as a whole going back centuries. Despite the criticism and debate surrounding it during this period it made and continues to make a massive impact on art and curatorial practice. Through the course of my essay I intend to discuss the topic of the exhibition as artwork in terms of the origins of minimalism, reactions to it, the place of materiality and objects in art and the curatorial and the exhibition as a series of choices fed either knowingly or subconsciously by what has come before. The example I will be drawing on to further my discussion is the work of key minimalist artist Carl Andre. I will analyse his attitudes towards art and the art world at the time of the works in order to clarify some of the key ideas of minimalism, a movement that is to this day difficult to limit and define but is nevertheless closely tied to the concept of the exhibition as artwork.

The origins of Minimalism

The origins of minimalism are hard to define for the simple reason that it wasn't clear where minimalism started and ended. Many artists, curators, choreographers, art critics philosophers and novelists were associated with this label but there were no clear parameters of what was or wasn't minimalist besides a few characteristics which changed depending on the context and field being discussed. In terms of fine art, minimalism was typically sculptural, included geometric forms that were very simple individually, often repeated and arranged in space. Another significant element of minimalist art was that it often was constructed industrially from simple materials like wood or metal based on a design from the artist or using readymade structures. (Brooks, 2019).

The question may arise, why is this art worth discussion if it wasn't even made by the artist, is so impersonal and has so little artistic choice within it? This is where exhibition as artwork as a concept intertwines with minimalism. Outside of an exhibition, these materials would not communicate the idea that these artists were trying to put forward. The fact that they so boldly reject the art of the time and the art for centuries beforehand is what is of interest here. Although there is a clear aesthetic to the art the point it makes is very much at the forefront of the decisions made in its creation and exhibition. These decisions and the exhibition as a whole is the art piece, not simply each brick or each piece of wood. The exhibition of this idea, what is being shown (and what is deliberately not being made or shown) is the artwork.

The point being made

The main idea of minimalist art in the 50s and 60s, though not as neatly summed up as this, was departure from expressionism, removing expression, emotional and artistic choice as much as possible from the work. It was a complete rejection of the abstract expressionist painting popular in the 50s, devoid of gesture, symbols or an autobiographical angle. It instead focused on pure materiality, the physical simple unit and the viewers interaction with it within a space. The idea was to strip away the pretentiousness and worshipped mystical quality of fine art that had made the art scene what it was and what it had been for centuries. Sculptor, conceptual artist and writer Robert Morris who played a large role in the emergence of this new movement was quoted to have said that he could “hear a resounding no at the time, no to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artefact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience”. (Anon, 2016). Minimalism was in doing this saying yes to a very humble but also unapologetic, true to form approach which was all about the materials, the objects, the space, and our cohabitation of the space.

There were no illusions or imposed deep meaning, a direct criticism of the perceived pretentiousness of very gestural abstract expressionism. (Meyer, J.S.).

This is interesting as minimalist art is often viewed as pretentious despite this being the polar opposite of its intention. There is a strong sense of an “I could make that” feeling amongst many art viewers which is very interesting as an idea. The fact remains that despite someone being able to physically replicate the objects shown in a particular minimalist exhibition, this does not render the exhibition unimportant as it is the idea that brought the art into the physical world in the first place and without the idea it could not have existed. (Sarah Pierce, 2019). This is why the work by minimalist artists in the 50s and 60s is such a strong example of exhibition as art work, because it is the statement made by these objects being shown, how they are created, the reaction to them, and what them being shown to the public says about the viewers they are being shown to and the art world in which the exhibition sits that is important, and not each object in its singularity. However, despite this justification for why minimalist art deserves recognition, there's also the fact that this “I could make that” attitude in a way feeds into exactly what minimalist artists were going for in an indirect sense. Their art was all about rejection of this almost spiritual admiration of classical and even more recent pre minimalist artists as master craftsmen who possessed pure genius and were held to such high esteem because of their emotive moving works of art. In this way the reaction to minimalist art may not have been in exact accordance to the ideas of the artist but they did partly prove their point.

Reaction from critics

Minimalist art in all forms received a lot of criticism at the time of its emergence. It was so bold and different from what had come before that it proved difficult to name at first. Critics referred to it as ABC art, primary structures, “cool” art and object art but it wasn't referred to as minimalism until philosopher Robert Wollheim wrote an essay in Arts Magazine called “Minimal Art” in which he discussed work that contained “minimal art content”. (Wollheim, 2019). The artists associated with this title at the time came from many different backgrounds like paint, sculpture and performance art

just to name a few and included artists like Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Anne Truitt, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, Ronald Bladen, Sol leWitt and Carl Andre. These artists however did not agree with or like the label placed on their art as most found it reductive and did not like the negative connotations that the idea of minimal art content drew up about their work ethic or artistic capability.

Carl Andre

Carl Andre was one of the central figures in the minimalist movement. He was tied in terms of style to such minimalist artists as Sol leWitt, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse and Dan Flavin and was groundbreaking in terms of his ideas about what sculpture was, should be or had the possibility to become. His alternative approaches really helped shape and contribute towards defining what would later be called minimalist art. Andre's main belief was not only that sculpture did not have to be worked in the traditional ways, but that it did not have to be worked at all. His sculpture completely rejects the traditional approaches of carving into or building up materials to create sculptural works and instead focuses on the raw material itself, untouched, uncut, simply placed or arranged. Carl Andre also wanted to stray far from the usual exhibition of sculptural works elevated on plinths and bring his work right down onto the ground. He, like all other artists associated with this movement in the 1950s and 1960s was questioning every part of what it meant to create according to traditional methods and challenging them completely and unapologetically in turn changing what sculpture is viewed as and can be viewed as for future generations of artists.

Carl Andre's work in true minimalist fashion employs raw and industrial materials like wood and bricks arranged and laid out in simple regular repetitive formats with nothing binding them together. Even the choice not to use anything to fix the components of the sculpture (such as blocks for example) together speaks to his lack of intention to be the creator of a new thing. His focus is on the simple pre-existing physical form of the objects and the qualities they possess when arranged in basic geometric formats. He places absolutely no metaphor or hidden meaning on these sculptures, they are

simply about materiality and properties of matter. Andre also fits in with other minimalist artists so far as he doesn't associate himself with the name and instead has referred to himself as a "matterist". (Tate, 2019).

Andre began working with wood, by carving and cutting it into simple shapes but then realised that not cutting into them at all appealed to him more. He latched onto the idea of the wood itself being a break of sorts in the space in which it lay, and much preferred this to the literal breaks he was carving and cutting into the wood itself. He became fascinated with his materials interaction with the space they were in as opposed to his interaction with materials as he changed their form. Andre is a perfect example of a minimalist artist engaging in the idea of exhibition as artwork. His work is not just concerned with the objects he uses to make his sculpture, but how they exist in the space, their placement, how they are in contrast to or harmony with the space, the space left between each object. The space between the objects was seen as just as pivotal to the overall work as the objects were. Andre reinforced this idea by saying "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not". Much of his work is done in multiples of the same material such as his work in the exhibition entitled "Mass and Matter" that was shown at the Turner Contemporary Gallery in 2013 which was comprised of eight sculptures made by him between the 1960s and 1980s and was his first public exhibition in the UK in ten years. In these works (two of which are shown in Fig 1.1 and Fig 1.2) Andre is concerned not just with the material but the space left between the objects, their place in relation to the room and each other, the exhibition as a whole rather than the materials themselves as any sort of art object. (Kennedy, 2019)

Rejecting existing structures

The rejection of what came before that we see in the minimalist art movement is definitely not confined to this period and is how all major art movements have come into existence. The only way change can occur is by challenging existing structures and rules. This may appear blatantly obvious, but it is an idea that is relevant to every artist and curators' practice and key to originality and progression in the art world at large. This questioning of existing norms and structures doesn't have to

appear in an overtly anti-establishment way, but can evolve from an objective self-awareness. An awareness of where an artist or curator fits into the art world and what their experience has been which has led them to the conclusions which drive their practice. By recognizing their own experience, internalised conceptions about art, what it is, what it can be, should be and why, they can begin to tease out and question the norms they have come to accept and experiment with rejecting them. When one begins to question the choices they are making, their art practice can grow and change and become far more original in doing so.

A fitting example of this kind of self-exploration is the later work of painter Giorgio de Chirico. In his early career he was highly praised for his surrealist works but later in his career as he began to revisit works by the old masters and recreate some of his earlier paintings, he received an overwhelming amount of criticism. As written by Magali Arriola in an article entitled “Backward Glancing” for a journal called “The exhibitionist”, Chirico’s career was viewed by critics of his time as “a brief flash of creative genius followed by several decades of uncreative mediocrity”. His introspection and desire to improve his technique was viewed at the time as a step backward, away from his ground-breaking work in surrealism and towards the amateur, of recreating and repeating past works of his and other artists. However, this was greatly misunderstood. His work from 1911 until 1918 has been his only period of success by the standard of critics of the time, but his desire to discover his own path and grow his practice in a non-conventional way despite this going against the established conceptions of originality at the time was quite ground-breaking. Andre Breton, co-founder and principal theorist of surrealism was very displeased by Chirico’s departure from conventional surrealism but continued to sell his early paintings. After being denounced by Breton as a self-forger for recreating replicas of his earlier work he continued on this alternative path unapologetically knowingly decreasing the value of his earlier work by making multiples of it. This completely challenged the institution to which his earlier work now belonged and to which his later work was banished from and seen as mediocre by. The misunderstanding of Chirico largely comes down to his intention in repeating these images. It wasn't to completely reject originality and concept and only focus on technique. In fact, it was to

focus on technique and repetition in order to distance himself from conventional image making and bring himself towards seeing an image more as an object which in itself is a very original concept at the time. (edoc.pub, 2019). Despite this being misunderstood at the time, it's a great example of an artist challenging himself and trying to think outside the box and not only reject the preconceptions of everyone else but of his own previous notions of image making.

Conclusion

This then leaves us with the question, what is left to challenge? What structures and unwritten rules are in place today that shape (even unknowingly) our artistic and curatorial practices? Why is the art world today the way it is and what choices are we making that contribute to it, outright reject it or challenge it to progress and change? Artistic practice and the curatorial are all about choices, series of choices that shape what we do in our practices but also how we think, criticise and view this work. In this way any piece of art or exhibition is a series of choices, what to show and what to not show, what elements or concepts to focus on and what is not considered or highlighted. Would a deeper understanding and awareness of these choices, why we are consciously making them but also what has led us to these views make for better artists and curators by giving us another choice - whether or not to challenge them. Could this choice itself be the art, be what is shown, considered and exhibited?

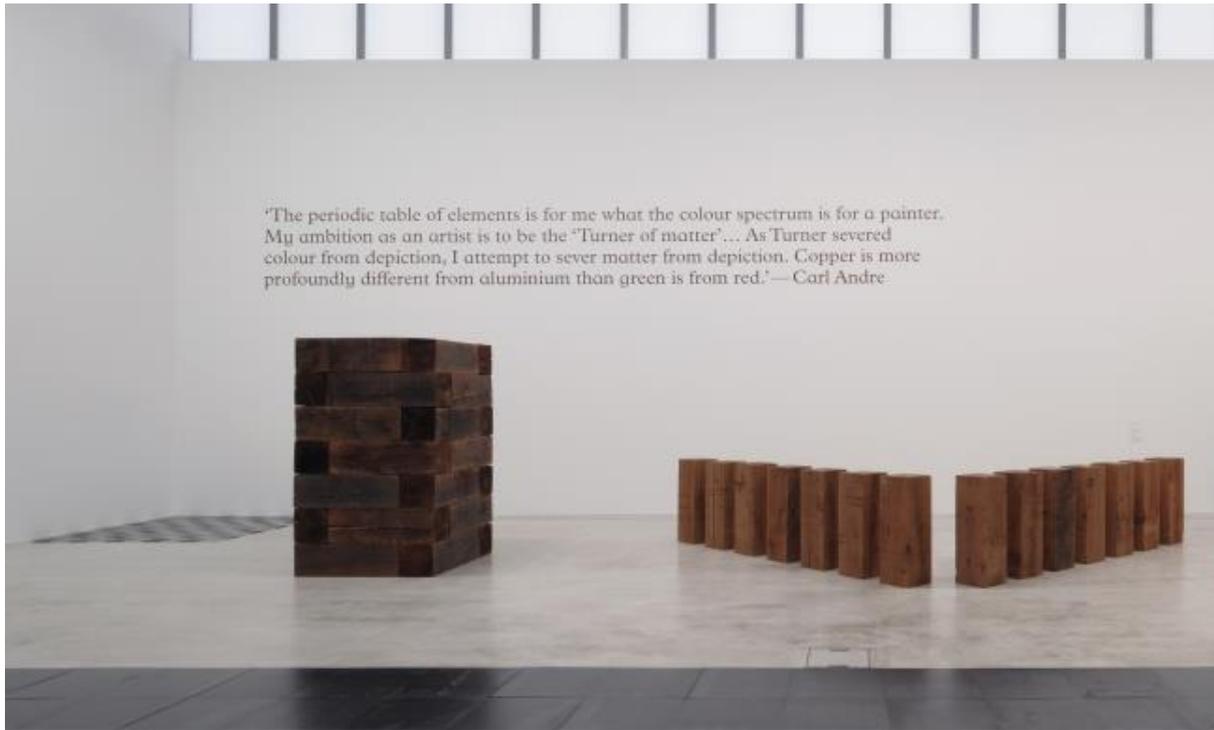


Fig 1.1 Photographer - David Grandorge, Taken from Turner Contemporary Gallery website

<https://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/carl-andre>



Fig 1.2, Carl Andre building Cedar piece, 1964, *Taken from Turner Contemporary Gallery website*

<https://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/carl-andre>

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