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Sculpture in the Reduced Field:
Robert Morris and Minimalism Beyond Phenomenology

An artist's first solo museum show is no place to start. Such a show almost always functions as confirmation of a consensus already arrived at – if not always complete. But Robert Morris presents an unusual case in that his production changed so frequently and considerably from the beginning of the 1960s, when he began to exhibit, to the end of the decade, when he had his first solo museum shows. The first of these, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art from November 24 to December 28, 1969 (then at the Detroit Institute of Arts from January 8 to February 8, 1970), represented a fidgety retrospective, including both existing and new works. And, while the Corcoran show was not the first opportunity to critically assess Morris's oeuvre – he had already exhibited extensively in the U.S. and abroad – the exhibition catalogue included an ambitious essay by Annette Michelson that, in many ways, set the agenda for the subsequent critical reception of Morris.

Theoretically, Michelson situates the course of Morris's artistic journey between the twin stars of Charles Sanders Peirce and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and what she sees as their common concern for perception. In Merleau-Ponty, this preoccupation is clear enough. His phenomenology is predicated on what he called 'the primacy of perception.' To assign a similar perspective to Peirce takes a little more doing, but Michelson identifies a Peircean perceptualism in his notion of 'epistemological firstness.' This critical perspective was picked up and endorsed by Maurice Berger in his book-length study, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, published in 1989. Thus this phenomenological

reading of Morris's sixties production maintained its currency for more than two decades.

Every aspect of that experience [‘confronting sculptures such as those by Robert Morris’s] – the ‘reduction’ on which it is posited, its reflexiveness, the manner in which it illuminates the nature of our feeling and knowing through an object, a spatial situation, suggests an aesthetic analogy to the posture and method of phenomenological inquiry, as it is familiar to us in the tradition of contemporary philosophy.¹

In Husserlian phenomenology, the apprehension of that which appears to us in our perception is a singular and simple act. Michelson’s account equates this Husserlian procedure with Peirce’s idea of ‘firstness.’ But, in fact, for Peirce, the phenomenal encounter is necessarily more complex. At the very least, it includes the components he describes as ‘firstness’ *and* ‘secondness,’ and a thorough account of Peirce’s phenomenology would necessarily include ‘thirdness’ as well. A close look at Peirce’s ‘phaneroscopy,’ – his term for what has come to be known as phenomenology – exposes Michelson’s reading as incomplete; not so much a misreading, as an under-reading. She equates firstness with presentness. But for Peirce firstness is a matter of qualities which exist not in the object, not in the subject, but as potential attributes of objects and of their perception by subjects. ‘Remember,’ Peirce writes, ‘that every description of it must be false to it.’² Firstness is related both to idealism and to something like Chomskyan universal grammar: qualities, as Peirce describes them, are slots waiting to be filled by particular potentials. ‘A quality is a mere abstract potentiality,’ and it is an error to hold that, ‘the potential, or possible, is nothing but what the actual makes it to be.’³

On the other hand, secondness in Peirce is a matter of fact; of actuality. It is possible to think secondness as more closely related to that which phenomenology seeks.

We find secondness in occurrence, because an occurrence is something whose existence consists in our knocking up against it. A hard fact is of the same sort; that is to say, it is something which is there, and which I cannot think away, but am forced to acknowledge as an object [...] The idea of second must be reckoned as an easy one to comprehend. That of first is so tender that you cannot touch it without spoiling it; but that of second is eminently hard and tangible.⁴

But if one wants to leverage Peirce in the way Michelson does, then a fuller account of both firstness and secondness seems warranted. And a very good argument can be made for applying Peirce's notion of thirdness to Morris. Peirce says that, although firstness and secondness 'satisfy the mind for a very long time,' eventually, 'they are found inadequate and the Third is the conception which is then called for.'⁵ Thirdness is the bridge that connects the first to the second, potential to actuality, ideality to reality. Thought this way, thirdness sounds a lot like Kierkegaard's description of consciousness:

If ideality and reality in all naïveté communicated with one another, consciousness would never emerge, for consciousness emerges precisely through the collision, just as it presupposes the collision. Immediately there is no collision, but mediately it is present.⁶

Consciousness is collision. Consciousness is mediation. Thirdness is mediation. To approach it by way of a different metaphor, thirdness is the solution in which both the first and the second are suspended, the solution which allows them to constitute, and be constituted by, thought, experience, and what Peirce refers to as 'every state of the universe at a measurable point of time.'⁷ Put simply, thirdness is relation. At various points, Peirce characterizes as thirds: process, moderation, sympathy ('that by which I feel my neighbors feelings'), signs, representations, generality, infinity, continuity, diffusion, growth, intelligence, dynamics. Thirdness itself is relative, always a product, an effect; and at the same time, a stimulus, a provocation and a facilitation of the first and the second.

There is no absolute third, for the third is of its own nature relative, and this is what we are always thinking, even when we aim at the first or second.⁸

So, even an encounter with firstness is – due to its nature as encounter – an encounter with thirdness. This is not to suggest that Michelson's readings of Peirce and Morris should be jettisoned completely. For one thing, her insight into the theological nature of the notion of presence is invaluable. She rightly sees Modernism, too, as partaking of – or wishing to partake of – this theological presentness. Michelson displays great critical instincts in attempting to read Morris vis-à-vis Peirce. But she doesn't take the interaction between the two, between Peirce's theory and Morris's praxis, far enough. The entirety of Morris's output of the 1960s constitutes a powerful investigation and advocacy of the primacy of thirdness (if that is not oxymoronic); of process, of relation, of encounter, in the gallery arts.

Michelson claims that the effect of Morris's work in the 1960s, was to 'renew the terms in which we understand and reflect upon the modalities of making and perceiving.' Morris achieved this renewal by '[d]eveloping, sustaining a focus upon the irreducibly concrete qualities of sensory experience.'⁹ This suggests an effect on thirdness through a manipulation of firstness. And while Peircean phenomenology, would allow for such an effect, Michelson's emphasis on the senses, on the concrete, on firstness, seems misplaced. It might be more illuminating to focus on the active form of the gerunds 'making' and 'perceiving,' on the relations inherent in these activities between artist, material, and convention, on the one hand, and between beholder and what Morris called the 'situation,' on the other. In other words, Morris's 1960s output might best be considered in terms of thirdness.

It is easier to think in the mode of firstness when considering the work with which Morris is most associated: the gray-painted plywood, steel mesh, fiberglass, and mirrored polyhedrons he made between 1961 and 1968. These sculptures

(supported by a series of essays Morris published in *Artforum*, under the title, 'Notes on Sculpture' parts 1 – 4) aligned him with the burgeoning movement of sculptural minimalism. Michelson was, of course, parsing Morris at the same time she was coming to grips with the meaning and importance of minimalism, judging the work as it was happening without the benefit of critical hindsight. Her perspective helped to forge the consensus on Morris and minimalism. Not only is Morris now accepted as a bonafide high-minimalist, but phenomenology is also regularly employed as the critical crowbar for cracking open his oeuvre and the truths of the movement. This holds even for Maurice Berger, whose book represents an explicit attempt to recuperate Morris's politics from his formalist reception.

Morris's phenomenological games hoped that the relationship between the art object and the viewer might be more or less democratic – free of the social and cultural hierarchies of art world institutions such as the museum.¹⁰

What Berger is indicating is a revision of the structure of aesthetic relations (thirdness), removing the museum from the position of principle power and replacing it with more egalitarian interactions. Berger's concerns throughout the book have little to do with phenomenology – in Michelson's sense of Peircean firstness. Accordingly, for Berger, he does not write strictly of phenomenology, but of 'phenomenological games,' and, elsewhere, of a 'phenomenological imperative' necessitated not by a loyalty to Peirce or Merleau-Ponty, but by a commitment to 'Herbert Marcuse's radical concepts of freedom and desublimation.'¹¹ In retrospect, it seems useful to think Morris through the Peircean notions of thirdness and relation, aligning his sixties work not so much with Donald Judd and Tony Smith (with whom he has often been compared and grouped), but with John Cage, conceptualism, performance, and relational aesthetics.

As early as 1961 – well before his unitary forms – Morris had tested the boundaries of sculpture. His *Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making*, expands its ‘situation’ and relationships in time, at least as much as it tests them in space. The *Box*, as its name suggests is a walnut box, nine and three quarters inches in each dimension. The box contains a small speaker which plays a three hour audio tape of a recording of the sounds of the box being constructed by Morris. The history of *Box* includes two notable events. It debuted, so to speak, as a kind of musical performance at a concert organized in 1961 by Henry Flynt at Harvard which also included works by La Monte Young and Richard Maxfield. That same year, *Box* was also the focus of a private audience with John Cage, who came to see it in Morris’s apartment and apparently sat through the entire three-hour recording.¹² The expanded situation in which Cage would have found himself would have been one in which he, the spectator, would shuttle back and forth in time, between the time of viewing/listening and the time of making. This is a situation in which ‘the object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic.’¹³

For Morris, it is important that the viewer be ‘more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from varying positions and under varying conditions.’¹⁴ In the case of *Box*, these varying positions would be positions in time, rather than space; moving between conditions of production versus reception. Past and present, making and perceiving, become conflated in experience. This situation would seem to parallel Husserl’s notion of phenomenological ‘adumbration,’ in which an object is perceived from multiple perspectives, yet understood – precisely because of the constancy of certain features – to be one and the same object with a set of essential qualities. However, this parallel is limited by disjunctions between spatial and temporal perspective. In Husserl’s adumbration, the subject must change position relative to the object. Whereas in the kind of time-based adumbration initiated by Morris’s *Box*, the shift in perspective is a product of the inexorable movement of time. Neither the subject nor the object must act upon intention; neither must move or shift. With *Box*, Morris discovers that sound

recommends itself as an ideal medium for such temporal adumbration. Sound initiates its own non-intentional, perspective-neutral, shifts in the relation of subject to object. Because sound is immersive, it inevitably creates an environment (a 'situation') that is simultaneously and irredeemably a product of an interaction between spectator/auditor and object/sound-source: a perfect medium for Peircean thirdness. Children cupping their hands over their ears or tilting their heads against sea shells attest to our instinctive awareness of sound's interactional nature and of our ability to effect it.

The series of letters Morris exchanged with John Cage between 1960 and 1963 testify to Morris's explicit interest in Cage's aesthetics.¹⁵ But even without such evidence, it would be easy to connect the dots. As an alternative to Greenbergian specificity, Cage sought to blur boundaries between music, theatre, installation, dance, painting, and poetry. Morris's *Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making* is both the sound of a sculpture and a sculpture of sound. It is a very early – if not *the* earliest – example of a sound sculpture; of a work existing simultaneously, equally, as sculpture and as sound work. As such, it also provides the earliest example of how such heteromedial work might constitute its ontology. Similarly heteromedial, Morris's 'Blank Form,' is a manifesto-as-artwork (or vice versa) from 1961, originally conceived for inclusion in La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low's, *An Anthology of Chance Operations Concept Art Anti-Art Indeterminacy Improvisation Meaningless Work Natural Disasters Plans of Action Stories Diagrams Music Poetry Essays Dance Construction Mathematics Compositions*.¹⁶ (Morris, disenchanted with the burgeoning Fluxus movement – with which Young, Mac Low, and consequently *An Anthology*, were associated – pulled his contributions from *An Anthology* before publication.¹⁷) 'Blank Form' is a text piece: both a set of instructions for making something and something that has been made. In this sense it functions like the text scores and works being produced by Fluxus-associated artists, and others, around the same time. In its manifesto mode, 'Blank Form' agrees, in large part, with the attitude voiced six years later in 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2.'

So long as the form (in the broadest possible sense: situation) is not reduced beyond perception, so long as it perpetuates and upholds itself as being objects in the subject's field of perception, the subject reacts to it in many particular ways when I call it art. He reacts in other ways when I do not call it art. Art is primarily a situation in which one assumes an attitude of reacting to some of one's awareness as art.¹⁸

In addition to its agreement with Morris's later ideas on the expanded situation of the circumstances of artistic encounter, 'Blank Form' also exhibits some of the same recursivity evident in *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. Both works are simultaneously the product of a process, the documentation of that process, and a set of instructions for the replication of that process. Both might be seen as an example of what might be called, *retrospective composition*, in which the act of composition follows the act of performance (which is, itself, an act of proto-reception). In *Box* the 'score' for the sound material of the work is only available (constructable) after the performance/production of the box. This conundrum is produced by the intrinsically problematic nature of the idea of a score. The investigation of this problem, initiated by Cage, reveals the implicit *a posteriori* ontology of the score, which must always follow from some material realization of itself (even if that realization is immaterially located in the mind's ear of the composer). The score as a founding document of *re-creation*, has no stable temporal status. It is both precedent and antecedent of realization. The score always arrives after the fact, to dictate the fact.

The ostensible, unwritten, score for *Box* (something like: 'record the sound of building a walnut box and play the recording back from inside the box') is indeterminate relative to the material realization of the project. The score generates unpredictable material results which – taken for sound, or in Cage's expanded sense, for music – seem to demand their own score. In concretizing the specific values of the resulting sound (pitch, duration, dynamics, placement in time, etc.) a secondary score would negate the fundamental ontology of the

piece, which is not a generator of specifically-organized sounds, but a box which contains the sound of its construction. Such a secondary score would, in fact, be revealed as merely a recording, and any performance following such a score would be revealed as an act of mimicry; of ‘covering’ – in the musical sense – the original. Performing a score, on the other hand, is not seen as an act of covering an original, but of reanimating inert matter. Each act of performing a score is seen as a *new* – if second order – act of creation. Cage implies what Morris’s *Box* makes explicit: the score is never simply an initiation, but always also an iteration. This is yet another aspect of the mythic nature of originality, deconstructed so thoroughly by Rosalind Krauss.¹⁹ The musical heritage of repertoire is highly unoriginal. Which is to say, it is, like all other modes of artistic production, a process of assimilation, reflection, and correction; of response to, and commentary on, the cultural, political, and aesthetic currents of the times and places in which it is produced and received.

It would seem easier to think in the mode of thirdness about a piece like *Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making* than about a piece like *Column*, both from 1961. *Column* is a rectangular plywood column, painted grey, eight feet by two feet by two feet, and seems to have more to do with Morris’s so-called minimalist works. Both *Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making* and *Column* are, at first glance, geometric sculptural forms made of wood. Considered visually, they diverge at the level of surface or finish. *Box* is unpainted, its seams undisguised, the screws of its construction clearly visible. *Column*, on the other hand, is painted and finished to hide its seams and screws. *Box* is apparently handmade, *Column* appears manufactured. At another level – one we might call experiential – *Box* obviously differs from *Column* due to the audio recording playing from within its geometry. But the experiential status of *Column* is more complicated than a photograph is able to convey. The first exhibition of the piece took place as part of a concert organized by LaMonte Young at the Living Theater in New York on 5 February 1962. The sculpture was assigned a seven-minute performance slot in the program of the evening’s activities. *Column* started off standing vertically on

the stage. After three-and-a-half minutes, Morris, positioned offstage, toppled it with a string, bringing the sculpture to a horizontal position, where it lay for the remaining three-and-a-half minutes.

As Berger has noted, *Column* engages much more than form and phenomenological percept.

The notion of temporality and passage would contribute to the dissolution of formalism's romance with idealized form and time. In the end, Morris's metaphoric toppling of the pillars of late Modernism announced an important shift within the American cultural scene as the art object appeared to be dissolving into a field of choreographic gestures.²⁰

As it turns out, *Column*, a seemingly straightforward geometric sculpture, engages thirdness in very explicit ways, introducing performativity, experiential duration, physical movement, temporal form, memory and anticipation, into the sculptural encounter. Echoing Michelson's keyword, Berger cites these introductions as 'transgressions' of sculptural Modernism. From a different aesthetic/ideological position, Michael Fried would agree, referring to these transgressions as 'theatrical' and fretting over their implications.

Michelson's assessment of Morris is an attempt to dissuade Fried of his concerns. She argues that Morris maintains a relationship with formalism predicated on an engagement with 'epistemological firstness' – a term which could be translated into Greenbergian terminology, as something like 'material specificity' or, at a basic level, simply as 'formalism.' Fried's worries are about thirdness. Theatricality is, most certainly, an example of thirdness. Michelson argues, against Morris's theatricality and for a firstness which would, ironically – given her emphasis on transgression – bring Morris back into the Greenbergian/Friedian fold.

But let's take another look at the list of properties *Column* introduces into the sculptural encounter: performativity, experiential duration, physical movement, temporal form, memory and anticipation. In addition to being native to theatrical experience, these properties are also common to musical experience. In fact, some are arguably more specific to music than to theatre. Experiential duration is foregrounded in music, since musical events create and simultaneously inhabit a time specific to their artistic employment. While, dialogue in a play or film exists in and marks time, it also indicates another diegetic time, a referential time. Music, on the other hand, marks only its own structural time, its time of performance. Similarly, temporal form is not material, linguistic, narrative, historical, or psychological form – which is to say, it is not representative or mimetic form. Form in music is made *in* time and *of* time. Time may be a factor, a consideration, in theatre, film, literature, sculpture, and dance, but none of these media invest as much of their form in time itself. As a result, memory and anticipation – retention and protention – are key to the creation and reception of musical form. One must recognise a theme: in repetition, in variation; must recall a previous instance of a fragment of melody, must develop a time-based understanding and anticipation of rhythmic content, in order to construct (or reconstruct) the architecture of a composition and a performance.

When we think about *Column* in this manner – whether we consider it theatrical, transgressive, musical, or something else – we realize that there may be another way to interact with Morris's later, more static minimal sculpture. Pieces such as the 4 mirrored cubes (1965), or the two and three plywood L-beams exhibited together in different positions and orientations (1965 and 1967), assume some of the same properties as *Column* and *Box*. Both present a deceptively geometric, deceptively static, even deceptively minimal, façade, only to reveal more play in their situation of encounter. The mirrored cubes are *merely* geometric, static and minimal, until a spectator walks close enough to be reflected in one of the cube's surfaces. From particular angles, reflections double themselves. From other angles, they initiate an infinite regress, referring in the process to the art historical

trope of the *mise en abyme* (the reflection of a scene within its artistic representation). Of course, these angles are not dictated solely by the work, nor simply by the movement and changing perspective of the spectator relative to the work. They are a function of the situation as a whole: of subject, object, space, light, time, and the subjective actions of other spectators. Similarly, the L-beams function like an oversized, three-dimensional version of the Müller-Lyer illusion in which two identical lines appear to be different lengths due to additional features such as an inward- or outward-pointing arrow head. The forms of the L-beams demand comparison. Are they identical? How do their different positions and orientations effect the spectator's perception of each form individually and of the ensemble? Again, these questions and answers – in other words, the experience of these works – are products of the relation of spectator to work. The experience of these works is the experience of relations, of mediation, of process: of thirdness.

Whether Michelson focused on phenomenology as a result of conversations with Morris or came to these conclusions independently, by the end of the decade, Morris had embraced the notion, at least to the extent of using the term in his 1970 essay “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated,” and in later essays, including “Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide” (1973):

The strategy [the general movement from painting to sculpture in the mid-60s] moved into a number of modalities, each of which played a variation on the structuralist theme of surrounding a given process with systematic developmental rules to produce wholeness and completion. This strongly phenomenological strategy of activities seeking natural limits, regulations, and closures through the release of what was systematic in the alignment between the properties of actions and physical tendencies of a given media seemed to know neither rest nor fatigue, traversing as it did object art, Process art, all kind of documentations of nature and culture, and all kinds of performances, including music.²¹

It is clear that Morris's use of the term is not strictly Husserlian. Nor does it agree with Michelson's sense of Peircean firstness. When he uses the term 'phenomenological,' here and elsewhere, he is referring to an engagement with a pre-existent relation of activity to media. He is interested in how material allows itself to be formed, the compromises demanded by wood, steel, felt, in terms of how it might be manipulated and how it responds to environmental factors such as gravity. This is already a relation to a relation; the artist relating to the relation of media and making. But what Morris explicitly seeks (what, according to him, many artists were seeking at the time) is an understanding of 'natural limits, regulations, and closures.'

Contrary to Michelson, Morris's use of the term does not suggest 'an aesthetic analogy to the posture and method of phenomenological inquiry, as it is familiar to us in the tradition of contemporary philosophy.'²² Phenomenology is a complicated term and a complicated philosophical method. The term, has meant many things to many people at many times. More crucially, phenomenology is not a completed project. Its parameters and concerns expand periodically. Still it is safe to say that Morris's 'phenomenology' – which is to say, his practice – is not, ultimately, about epistemological firstness. Nor is it simply about what Husserl called the *epoché*: the 'bracketing' or 'putting out of action' everything except for that which appears in perception.

Morris's use of the term 'phenomenology' has more in common with the philosophical project of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Again, Michelson makes the connection:

Acknowledging sight as more and other than seeing, he [Morris] proposes that we take serious account of the fact that 'to perceive is to render one's self present to something through the body,' suggesting that we recognize that 'if it seems to subsume a particular set of impressions under a general concept, then in the face of the evidence we must either re-examine our notion of

‘understand’ or of ‘the body.’ Knowing, then, is the body’s functioning in a given environment.²³

The quotes in Michelson’s text are from lectures delivered by Merleau-Ponty at the Collège de France, in the 1950s. In another lecture, at the Société française de philosophie in 1946, Merleau-Ponty asserts the idea of the title under which the lecture was later published, ‘The Primacy of Perception’:

The certainty of ideas is not the foundation of the certainty of perception but is, rather, based on it – in that it is perceptual experience which gives us the passage from one moment to the next and thus realizes the unity of time. In this sense, all consciousness is perceptual, even the consciousness of ourselves.²⁴

This conception of consciousness disagrees with Kierkegaard’s (cited above). Kierkegaard finds consciousness in the friction between ideality and reality, in the awareness of the difference between the two. ‘Consciousness emerges precisely through the collision, just as it presupposes the collision. Immediately there is no collision, but mediately it is present.’ It is only in the mediation of difference – a process of perception, analysis, comparison, interpretation – that consciousness can emerge, constituted by and constitutive of perception. Peirce imagines it similarly: firstness (qualities) precedes secondness (actuality). Qualities (not exactly ideas, but still immaterial constructs) precede perceptual experience. Thirdness is where the two are brought into useful relation. Peirce, in fact, conceives of ‘the consciousness of ourselves’ quite differently than Merleau-Ponty. For Peirce, the ‘man-sign,’ as he calls it, is the product of a semiotic relationship with the self. We are not *immediately* conscious of ourselves, but *mediately*, through the interventions of signs, of representations, of extra-perceptual processes of differentiation and identification.

[C]onsciousness, being a mere sensation, is only part of the *material quality* of the man-sign. Again, consciousness is sometimes used to signify the *I think*, or unity in thought; but this unity is nothing but consistency, or the recognition of it.

Consistency belongs to every sign [...] the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign ... Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.²⁵

To his credit, Merleau-Ponty is willing to accommodate complexities beyond the primacy of perception. Michelson, however, neglects his expansiveness in the same way she under-reads Morris's and Peirce's phenomenological perspectives. Even though Merleau-Ponty's model installs perception at the base of his existential hierarchy, he acknowledges that perception is not the be-all and end-all of his phenomenological concerns.

The idea of going straight to the essence of things is an inconsistent idea if one thinks about it. What is given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others.²⁶

By "others" Merleau-Ponty means history and culture. He calls his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, a "preliminary study,"

which must then be applied to the relation of man to man in language, in knowledge, in society and religion, as it was applied in this work to man's relation to perceptible reality and with respect to man's relation to others on the level of perceptual experience. We call this level of experience "primordial" – not to assert that everything else derives from it by transformations and evolution (we have expressly said that man perceives in a way different from any animal) but rather that it reveals to us the permanent data of the problem which culture attempts to resolve.²⁷

For art history, art theory, art practice; the critical question is where to focus one's attentions: on the primordially of perceptual experience; or on the 'problem which culture attempts to resolve,' the problem of 'the relation of man to man in language, in knowledge, in society and religion.'

Despite Annette Michelson's under-readings of Morris, Peirce, and Merleau-Ponty, many of the most influential critics of the 1970s and 80s adopted and

extended her line of inquiry. Specifically, applied to minimalism, perceptual and phenomenological approaches proved flexible and fecund. But, at the same time, critics concerned with minimalism's meanings and modes, were discovering and utilizing poststructuralist and semiotic methods adapted from theorists including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. These critical approaches and the insights they engendered problematised phenomenology, while highlighting the importance of Merleau-Ponty's critical distinction between perception and culture.

Rosalind Krauss, co-founder with Michelson, of the journal *October*, explicitly identified the critical conjunction:

The history of Modern sculpture coincides with the development of two bodies of thought, phenomenology and structural linguistics.²⁸

In the critical reception of the gallery arts, a balance was struck. The contemporary responses to minimalism, and then conceptualism, notably in the pages of *October*, sought to accommodate perceptual experience in the fashion prescribed by Merleau-Ponty: as the 'permanent data' of which signifying relations are constituted. By 1983, fourteen years after Michelson's catalogue essay on Morris, Krauss contextualized minimalism's use of phenomenology within the art historical transition from abstract expressionism. Krauss sees minimalism as arising from and, in some ways, continuing Greenbergian Modernism's rejection of pictorial illusionism. Understanding Merleau-Ponty's perceptual data as 'the meanings that things present to a given point of view'²⁹ – in other words, as the product of a relation between an object, a subject, and a situation (Peircean thirdness) – 'The *Phenomenology of Perception* became, in the hands of the Americans, a text that was consistently interpreted in the light of their own ambitions toward meaning within an art that was abstract.'³⁰ This isn't equivalent to Greenberg's replacement of illusionism with formalism. Krauss, once a Greenbergian herself, takes a broader view of abstraction. For her, abstraction as manifest in minimalism, relocates the site of relation from the

internal space of the work to the external space of exhibition; from the time of production to the time of reception. Ultimately, she is committed to reading minimalism through linguistic, ontological, epistemological, social, and political signification. It is via this reading that Krauss extends the lines of influence from abstract expressionism to conceptualism, institutional critique and the appropriative practices of the 1980s.

In a 1983 essay on Richard Serra, Krauss points to a significant wrinkle in *thing-itself*-centred phenomenology. Serra's film *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976), which translates his sculpture of time-based experience into the medium of film by holding a steady gaze on a turning railroad bridge, reverses the usual Serra formula, allowing the steel structure to move in relation to the viewer, rather than the other way around. For Krauss, this reversal exposes the core of Serra's methodological concerns. His stalwart resistance to figuration (a Greenbergian inheritance) necessitates the conclusion that to fix the work in time or space is to create an image. The conclusion that time and space are inexorably linked – arrived at not by means of relativity, but strictly in accordance with Merleau-Ponty – implicates phenomenological space with experiential time, replete with history, narrative, relations and a whole host of Peircean thirds which evade, exceed, and, finally, erase, any simple attachment to the *thing itself*.³¹

In the 70s and early-80s, Krauss was in the process of developing a critical discourse – joined to a way of experiencing and a way of thinking – in order to engage the new work emerging at the time. Arriving, as did others, at the term 'Postmodernist,' she set out to distinguish this work from its predecessors.

... it is obvious that the logic of the space of Postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead though the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.³²

As if to echo Merleau-Ponty's critical distinction between the 'primordially' of perceptual experience and the 'problem which culture attempts to resolve,' Krauss locates the Modern-Postmodern rupture in the difference between a concern with a medium's material versus a concern with its terms; a difference between *physis* and *nomos*, between matter and discourse. It becomes apparent that one of the significant attractions of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for artists and critics alike, was its ability to loosen the grip of Greenbergian materiality and medium specificity without dropping it completely.

Phenomenology opened materially-instantiated practices to a wider range of worldly concerns. Merleau-Ponty allowed Morris and Krauss (as paradigmatic examples) to retain material and media as fundamental starting-points from which to investigate culture, language, knowledge, and society. Material is transformed from the *thing itself* into a stand-in for *things in general*, including human things. The management of artistic material becomes an allegory of sorts for the management of worldly material: property, wealth, people, animals, resources, institutions.

Krauss's most explicit statement on the phenomenology informing minimalism comes in a 1973 *Artforum* essay, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture.' She begins from across a certain philosophical divide, summarizing the notion of 'protocol language' in the methodology of logical positivism. Especially on this point, it is easy to see logical positivism and phenomenology as emblems of the split between analytic philosophy, in the first instance, and continental philosophy, in the second. Logical positivism, as employed by Rudolf Carnap, and phenomenology, as inherited and developed by Martin Heidegger, each hold that 'no outside verification is possible of the words we use to point to our private experiences.'³³ The implications of this thought would be put to vastly different use by analytic and continental philosophers as the breach between the two schools widened. But at the early stages of the separation, both sides can be seen to accept this fundamental premise. Krauss works from both sides of the philosophical dispute to attack the same problematic suppositions being used to

motivate and justify minimalism. Her argument in 'Sense and Sensibility' passes through the notion of intentionality common to both the logical positivists and the phenomenologists.

Although she doesn't mention Merleau-Ponty until the seventh page of the essay, her recourse to his phenomenology is crucial. Husserl is never mentioned. It is his essentialist phenomenology against which Krauss is arguing. The turn initiated by Robert Morris's practice and Krauss's theory – from a straightforwardly perceptual minimalism in which the work is a 'natural sign,' to a culturally and historically instantiated and engaged minimalism, in which the work is a nexus of signification – broadly mirrors the evolution of phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. Perhaps the most important aspect common to these evolutions is the expansion of the understanding of the self beyond an auto-identical, auto-confirming, form of experience, to a sense of self predicated on the connection with other selves.

The revelation of this leads away from any notion of consciousness as unified within itself. For the self is understood as completed only after it has surfaced into the world – and the very existence and meaning of the "I" is thus dependent on its manifestation to the "other."³⁴

In this context, Krauss discusses Morris's three L-Beams from 1965. She opposes the reading of the L-Beams as an experience of working through the difference of each of the L-Beams' positioning to arrive at the understanding of their sameness. Instead she suggests that

[N]o matter how clearly we understand that the three Ls are identical, it is impossible to really perceive them – the one upended, the second lying on its sides, and the third poised on its two ends – as the same. The *experienced* shape of the individual sections depends, obviously, upon the orientation of the Ls to the space they share with our bodies.³⁵

In other words, Krauss is rejecting Husserl's central methodology of adumbration, asserting that such a move cannot achieve its stated aim. Even if the object is identical, our experience of it is not. The meaning we might take from the object is read, is understood, is felt, not to be a result of sameness, but a result of difference. Krauss's turn is a turn from Husserl, through Merleau-Ponty, to Derrida. Thus she reads minimalism – Morris, in particular – as an instance of Derridean difference played out in forms; forms, not as simple, specific, or unitary, but as complexes of signification. By the same token, the role of the artist/author must be reimagined in light of this understanding of minimalism. To borrow terms Peter Osborne has used to describe different approaches to conceptual art, 'exclusive' or 'strong' minimalism would posit an artist/author whose private, internal, intentionality, is the cause of the work. In conceptualism, Osborne applies the term to the work of Joseph Kosuth, connecting his practice to the same 'long-discredited logical positivism,' which Krauss indicts in connection with minimalism.³⁶ The alternative is the 'inclusive' or 'weak' version of a mode of practice. (Sol LeWitt is Osborne's example in conceptual art). In reading minimalism through Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, Krauss establishes an inclusive strain of minimalism: a strain with Robert Morris as its founder and figurehead.

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Just as Morris's first solo museum show is no place to start, his emblematic installation at the head of inclusive Minimalism is no place to finish. That alone, amounts to a minor tweak in the history of art. What matters more is the connections such a revision reveals. If we read Morris and, by association, much of Minimalism, inclusively, we can see how these sculptural practices of the 1960s and 70s were not hermetic, asocial, formalist exercises. On the contrary, this branch of Minimalism is part of the post-War passage from "appearance" to "conception",³⁷ from 'the era of taste [to] the era of meaning,'³⁸ and from the 'specific' to the 'generic.'³⁹ Morris's interest in Duchamp is well-documented but still undervalued. Similarly, his relationship with Cage and with other Cage-influenced practitioners such as the Judson Dance Theater (which counted as

members his first and second wives, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer), is often glossed in order to keep Morris firmly within the exclusive Minimalist camp of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.

In the inclusive light shed by Krauss, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, we see Morris's 1960s practice as integral – even indispensable – to the expansion of sculptural practice, specifically, and artistic practice, more generally. This expansion allowed the category of sculpture to include performance, the body as material, process as well as product, ideas in the absence of objects. As such, Minimalism can be seen as part of the same flow of energy and influence as Fluxus, Conceptualism, Joseph Beuys's 'social sculpture,' performative interventions ranging from those of Vito Acconci to VALIE EXPORT to Andrea Fraser to Francis Alÿs, the body-based practices of Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic and, more recently, the work Nicolas Bourriaud has collectively dubbed 'relational aesthetics.'

Notes

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- ¹ Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression', *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery of Art: Washington D.C., 1969, p. 43.
- ² Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A Guess at the Riddle', *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, p. 189.
- ³ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. ed. Justus Buchler, Dover Publications: New York, 1955, p. 85.
- ⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A Guess at the Riddle', *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, pp. 189-90.
- ⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A Guess at the Riddle', *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, p. 190.
- ⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1983, pp. 274-75.
- ⁷ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A Guess at the Riddle', *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, p. 192.
- ⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A Guess at the Riddle', *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, p. 192.
- ⁹ Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression', *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery of Art: Washington D.C., 1969, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, Harper & Row, Publishers: New York, 1989, p. 93.
- ¹¹ Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, Harper & Row, Publishers: New York, 1989, p. 12.
- ¹² Branden W. Joseph, *Outside the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*. Zone Books: New York, 2008. (Joseph's book deals extensively with Flynt, Young, Tony Conrad, and their music and art activities of this period.)
- ¹³ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2', *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1993, p. 15.
- ¹⁴ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2', *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1993, p. 15.
- ¹⁵ See Robert Morris, 'Letters to John Cage.' *October*, Vol. 81, (Summer, 1997), pp. 70-9.
- ¹⁶ La Monte Young, and Jackson Mac Low, *An Anthology of Chance Operations Concept Art Anti-Art Indeterminacy Improvisation Meaningless Work Natural Disasters Plans of Action Stories Diagrams Music Poetry Essays Dance Construction Mathematics Compositions*. Heiner Friedrich, second edition, 1970.
- ¹⁷ Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958 – 1964*. Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with W.W. Norton & Company: New York: 1984, p. 100.
- ¹⁸ Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958 – 1964*. Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with W.W. Norton & Company: New York: 1984, p. 100.
- ¹⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant Garde' in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002 (thirteenth printing).
- ²⁰ Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, Harper & Row, Publishers: New York, 1989, p. 48.
- ²¹ Robert Morris, 'Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide' in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1993, pp. 129-30.
- ²² Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression', *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery of Art: Washington D.C., 1969,, p. 43.
- ²³ Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression', *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery of Art: Washington D.C., 1969, p. 45.
- ²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, Routledge: London and New York, 2002, p. 436.

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- ²⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,' *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991, pp. 83-4.
- ²⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, Routledge: London and New York, 2002, p. 443.
- ²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, Routledge: London and New York, 2002, p. 446.
- ²⁸ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, cited in Hal Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism', *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996, p. 43.
- ²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Richard Serra, a Translation', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002, p. 263.
- ³⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'Richard Serra, a Translation', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002, p. 264.
- ³¹ Krauss's essay on Serra appeared in the catalogue of his first solo exhibition in France at the Centre Pompidou in 1983. Her critical tactic is to introduce Serra in relation to Giacometti and to compare and contrast the relationships of each of their practices to phenomenology. See: Rosalind Krauss, 'Richard Serra, a Translation', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002, pp. 261 - 274.
- ³² Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002, p. 289.
- ³³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture', *Artforum*, November, 1973, p. 46.
- ³⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture', *Artforum*, November, 1973, p. 49.
- ³⁵ Rosalind Krauss, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture', *Artforum*, November, 1973, p. 49.
- ³⁶ Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds. Michael Newman and Jon Bird, Reaktion Books: London, 1999, p. 58.
- ³⁷ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press Inc.: London, 2002, p. 13.
- ³⁸ Arthur C. Danto, 'Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art', *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, Issue 3, 2000, http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/Danto/danto.html, unpaginated. (Accessed 30 May, 2008.)
- ³⁹ Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*. An October Book, The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996, *passim* (see, in particular, Chapter 3: 'The Readymade and the Tube of Paint'.)