COURTESY OF TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK

Secondary Struc TURES

by Tom Moody

Three decades after the heyday of Minimalism, the practice of placing simple, geometric constructions within the institutionally resonant space of the gallery is still thriving. While the original Minimalists sought to make "primary structures" and "specific objects" free of nuance or external reference, treating their art (and the larger "white cube" surrounding it) as value-neutral, in the era of institutional critique beginning in the '80s and lasting into the mid-'90s, both the art and the surrounding space were revealed to be riddled with patriarchal assumptions. Now, at the turn of the millennium, seductive, platonic structures are back, unapologetically empowered by the gallery setting, while the critique has turned outward, focusing on the world beyond the gallery walls.

Although official criteria for a "Minimalist" work were never determined in the '60s (the label itself was hotly disputed), a few common traits were identified by curator Kynaston McShine in his 1966 catalogue essay for the exhibition "Primary Structures": three-dimensionality, the use of "new materials" such as plastics and alloys, a high degree of simplification and self-containment, and the direct experience of the viewer in shaping the work.[1] While the term "Minimalist" was applied to paintings by artists such as Agnes Martin and Frank Stella, it was generally thought most suited to the anonymous, industrial-looking constructions of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, et al., which, lacking any of the familiar indicators of studio practice (such as carving, patinas, or pedestals), posed a greater challenge to existing definitions of art.[2]

The main controversy over Minimalist works in the '60s concerned their ontological status. Were they art? Objects? Things? Few would have disagreed that they were essentially formal statements, lacking political, emotional, or narrative content. Judd, for instance, insisted in 1970 that his work had "[nothing] to do with society, the institutions and grand theories."[3] In her recent survey *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*, art historian Frances Colpitt defines classic Minimalist sculptures as "non-referential." "Released from representation," she writes, "they further remove themselves from allusion by being in themselves new and unique objects, referring to nothing (except, some might argue, to the theories on which they are based.)"[4]

Opposite: Ross Knight, *Nice Job*, 1998. Vinyl sheeting, Velcro, and paint, 96 x 96 x 12 in.

One notable exception to the formalist mainstream, however, was Robert Smithson, an early critical advocate for the movement. In his 1966 essay "Entropy and the New Monuments," he suggested that the emptied-out forms of Judd, LeWitt, et al., referred not to nothing but Nothing: the gradual winding-down of energy and matter that physicists believed would result in the heat-death of the universe.[5] Discussing his peers' work in terms of entropy and decay, at times he seems more like an adversary than a friend: Flavin's fluorescent light installations, he writes, "all but prevent prolonged viewing; ultimately there is nothing to see"; LeWitt's sculptures in the shape of "standardized office buildings" serve as visible clues to a "future of humdrum practicality"; Minimalist objects as a whole "bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age."[6]

Although he suggests that a Minimalist sculpture might be a monument *against* as well as *to* entropy, he is very clearly placing the "hyper-prosaism" of Judd & Co. in the context of a deadening crystallization process he sees engulfing the culture at large, evidenced by Park Avenue's "cold glass boxes" and the "infinite number of housing developments of postwar boom." The Minimalists' choices of materials he relates to a throwaway, commodity culture, as when he discusses Flavin's "instant monuments" made with "parts...purchased at the Radar Fluorescent Company."[7] Yet for all his talk of the lethargy, vapidity, and dullness of consumer society (and, by implication, its art production), "Entropy and the New Monuments" is an exhilarating piece of writing, giving Minimalist works an aura of excitement and danger that is still palpable today.

While Smithson's interpretations of Minimalism weren't necessarily popular with his peers (Judd, in particular, was notably hostile), they became more and more influential as the formalist art of the '60s became the "de-materialized" art of the '70s and then the "deconstructionist" art of the '80s.[8] His ideas of "turning gallery space into gallery time" (referring to Flavin's installations) or creating "hideouts for time" (speaking of Judd's concealed surfaces) were shared by artists such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor, who further slowed down the process of viewing through obsessive hand-labor: weaving, wrapping, and laminating objects into existence rather than simply handing specs to industrial fabricators.[9] And his admonitions to look beyond the gallery walls at societal forces that shape art were echoed in post-Structuralist texts from Europe that were translated in the late '70s and seeped into the art world and academia throughout the '80s.

These developments eventually led to a boom in subverted Minimalist objects: over the course of a couple of decades, simple geometric forms went from having nothing to do with society and "grand theories" to having everything to do with them. In Ronald Jones's *Untitled (peace conference tables designed by the United States and South Vietnam, 1969)* (1987), for example, exquisitely crafted geometric sculptures resembling Alexander Liberman-esque circles on perpendicular legs are revealed (by the title) to have quite specific political roots. Mona Hatoum's *Quartered* (1996), an installation of Judd-like Cor-Ten "prison bunks," comes with a catalogue text equating its structure with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon design.[10] Appealing to the collector's need for flawless objects and the curator's need for didactic explanations, such coded works have become a staple of contemporary galleries and museums.

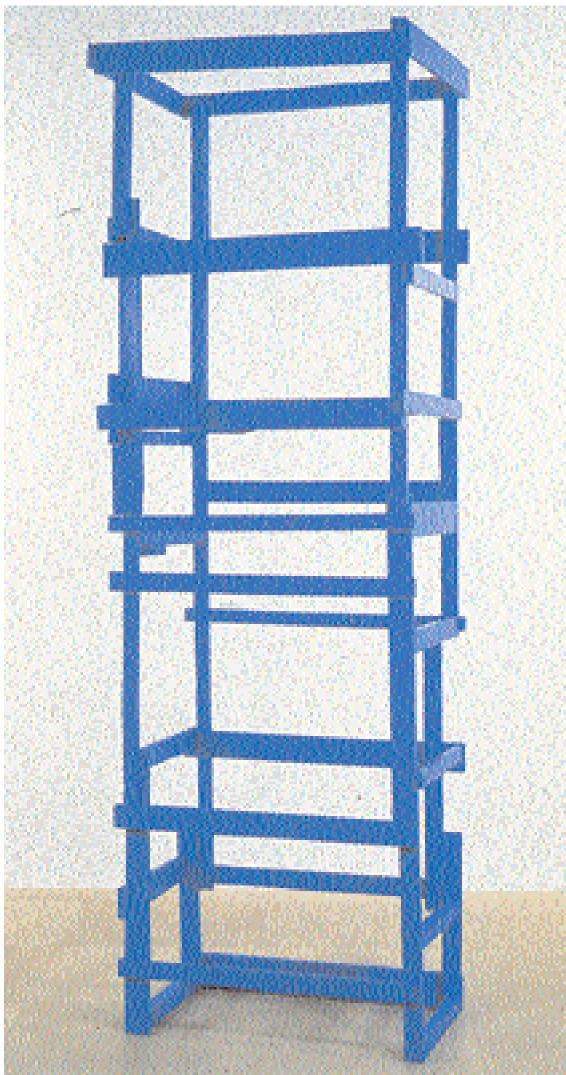
By the early '90s, the perception of Minimalism as a "pure" art untouched by history lay in tatters. The *coup de grâce* against the movement came not from an artwork, however, but from a text. Shortly after the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from New York City's Federal Plaza, Harvard art historian Anna Chave published "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of

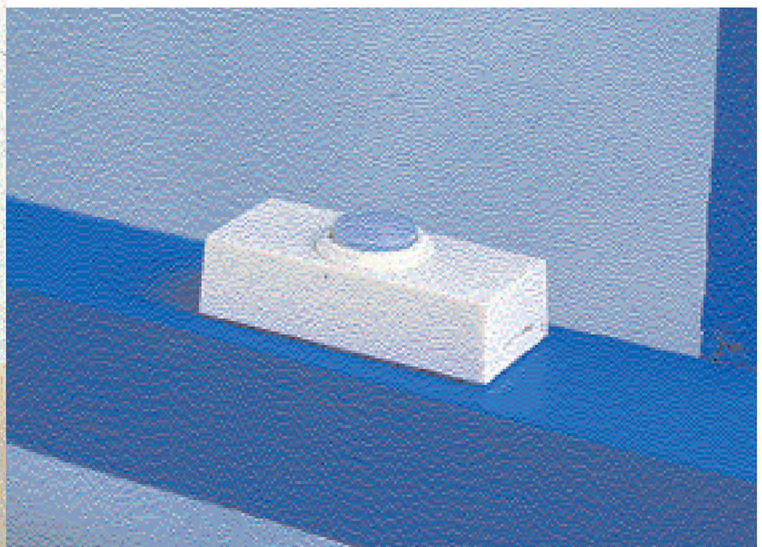
Power," a rousing attack on the boys' club that stops just short of a full-blown ad hominem rant. Analyzing artworks (Walter de Maria's aluminum swastika, Morris's "carceral images," Flavin's phallic "hot rods"), critical vocabulary (Morris's use of "intimacy" as a negative, Judd's incantatory use of the word "powerful"), even titles (Frank Stella's National Socialist-tinged *Arbeit Macht Frei* and *Reichstag*), Chave highlights the disturbing undercurrents of hypermasculinity and social control beneath Minimalism's bland exterior.[11] Seeing it through the eyes of the ordinary viewer, she concludes that "what [most] disturbs [the public at large] about Minimalist art may be what disturbs them about their own lives and times, as the face it projects is society's blankest, steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry and commerce; the unyielding face of the father: a face that is usually far more attractively masked."[12]

As the '90s wore on, Smithson's forward-looking social critique merged with Chave's retrospective, art historical one in an interminable series of Oedipal pranks by artists. Rachel Lachowicz arranged floor tiles made of lipstick in the style of that most macho of Minimalists, Carl Andre, and re-created Yves Klein's "body-impression" paintings using lipstick-smeared, hardbodied young men in the place of female models. Tony Tasset dressed up in Smithson's early '70s-style attire for an earthwork reenactment photo, reducing the thinker to a ludicrous fashion statement. By the mid-'90s, the lampooning of famous artists had gotten so out of hand that "critique" began to seem like an ugly word, and an almost militant, opt-out aestheticism came to the fore (in painting, the color field art of Monique Prieto and Jeff Elrod; in sculpture, the pop biomorphism of Liz Larner, Peter Soriano, and Daniel Wiener).

And while the pleasure principle is very much in evidence in the work of Rachel Harrison, Ross Knight, and Michael Phelan—three artists who have exhibited Minimalist-type objects in the past few years—there is also a wry, ambiguous criticality, harking back to the spirit of Smithson's early writings. Instead of tweaking their forerunners, they are looking beyond the gallery walls to the vast pool of potential art produced by the postindustrial "monoculture"—a barrage of media, architecture, and design iconography, which at this point includes Minimalist knockoffs. For these artists, the Minimalist-style cube, temporarily housed within gallery walls and offered for the viewer's contemplation and delectation, isn't a soapbox, but a link in a greater chain of association and causation.

Harrison, for example, examines kitsch with the same keen eye that Smithson once trained on the intricacies of the natural world. Instead of crystallography and mapmaking, she specializes in a semantics of images and products, finding odd equivalencies among celebrities, consumer goods, and the discarded tropes of formal abstraction. In *Won Ton John* (1996), for example, dozens of photoreproductions of people named





Left and detail: Rachel Harrison, *The Bell Tower*, 1999. Wood and wireless doorbell, 100 x 32 x 20.5 in. Opposite: Michael Phelan, *Rack-Master*, 1997. PVC tubing, flourescent fixtures and tubing, Styrofoam, resin, stainless steel tubing, and rubber, installation view.

> Seductive, platonic structures are back, empowered by the gallery setting, the critique turned outward on the world beyond the gallery.

John—Travolta, Kennedy, Ritter, Adams, Bon Jovi, McEnroe, John the Baptist, Pope John Paul—are matched with a corresponding number of multicolored porcelain won tons, while in *Teaching Bo to Count Backwards* (1996), the Minimalist obsession with mathematical sequences (e.g., Sol LeWitt's iterations of the cube) translates into a rigorous interpolation of canned olives and photos of Bo Derek.

In her most recent solo show, Harrison's often complicated installations were pared down to a compact group of freestanding objects, still pitting the qualitative against the quantitative, the platonic against the demotic, but with fewer "working parts." *Bustle in Your Hedgerow* (1999), a five-and-a-half-foot-high, L-shaped wall covered with dark green, stucco-like material, blocks the viewer's passage like a stunted, gritty Richard Serra. Affixed to opposite sides of the wall like wheat-pasted handbills are two blurry color photographs, obviously from a recent tabloid, depicting Liz Taylor wandering around outdoors in a frumpy nightdress and looking, to put it mildly, "out-of-it."[13] The green in the background of the photo, combined with the green of the stucco wall, creates the implication that we're in the star's back garden, invading her privacy along with the *National Enquirer*.

Bell Tower (1999), a wooden structure over nine feet tall, appears to have been made with odd-sized pieces of lumber pretty much as they came off the scrap pile, with no greater goal in mind than erecting a platform of a certain height and not having it fall over. Yet for all its jury-rigged splints and skewed angles, the structure has balance, and the pastel blue paint coating every surface—the type of color undoubtedly found pleasing in focus groups—gives it an ergonomic, yuppie schoolyard look. Initially the tower seems pristine in its own clunky way, but one eventually notices an anomaly: a small plastic doorbell resting on a horizontal strut, about halfway up the platform. If one should be so bold as to push it, a loud, radio-activated tone reverberates elsewhere in the gallery.

In much of Harrison's work, there is a kind of internal tug-of-war of elements, what the formalists called "relational" with respect to composi-

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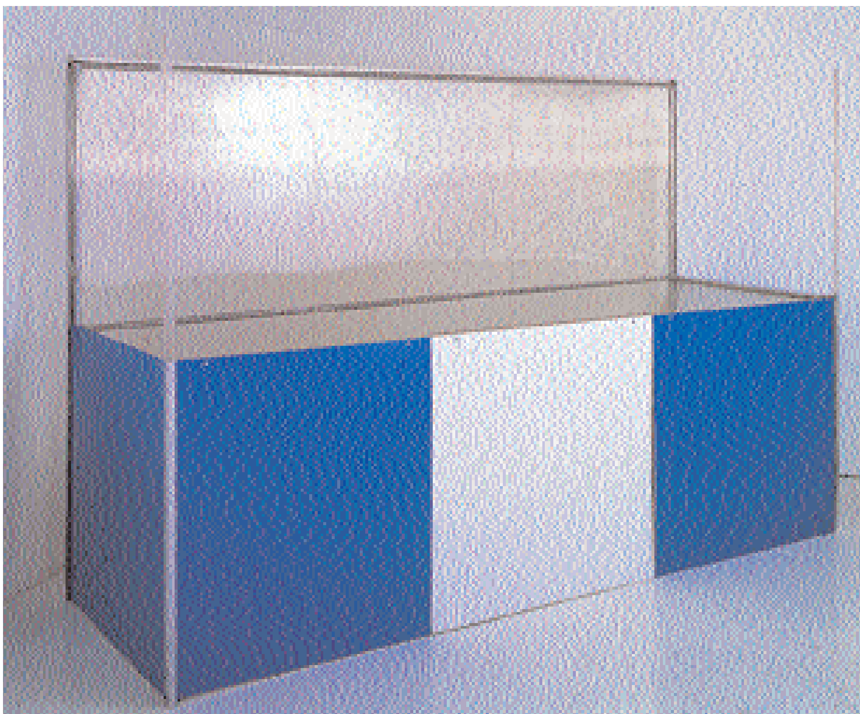
tion, extended to include social, economic, material, and "mediational" factors. In stripped-down works like *Bustle* and *Bell Tower*, this struggle is more clearly revealed. In one sense, the doorbell and the Liz photos are blemishes on holistic "primary structures" (already compromised through the use of cheesy stucco and scrap lumber). In another, the bell and photos are the respective pieces, with the structures serving as wildly overdetermined display mechanisms. *Bustle*, despite its efforts to bridge the gap between "base" and "blemish" (through color and implied narrative), ultimately resists closure, while *Bell Tower*, suggesting lavish infrastructural support for an extremely minor innovation, gives us a rather apt metaphor for capitalist-style marketing.

Where Harrison has perversely reintroduced the issue of the pedestal, which all but disappeared in the Minimalist era, Michael Phelan appears to be classically Minimalist in discarding both the pedestal and the issue of "relations" in his work. He shares with Harrison the Minimalist fascination with "new materials," making them the main focus of his oeuvre. Tapping into the astonishing array of middlebrow items currently available through home-improvement catalogues and merchandisers such as Home Depot, he obtains products that are smooth, streamlined, and slightly below the radar of our attention—water coolers, aquarium tanks, plastic lumber, vinyl shelving, inflatable mattresses—presenting them as Duchampian readymades. Although sometimes altered in subtle ways, they are presented "straight," sitting innocuously on the gallery floor.

Other than locating them in an art gallery, Phelan gives us no clue how to react to these items intellectually; there are no Constructivist shelves à la Haim Steinbach or revelatory titles à la Ronald Jones. This is refreshing after years of conceptual pieces with obligatory back story, such as Hatoum's pedantic "prison bunks." Faced with a work like Phelan's *Fenced* (1999)—a five-foot-high, six-foot-wide, three-foot-deep doorless enclosure of white vinyl fencing—we're left to our own interpretive devices. It might be a showroom sample from the fence manufacturer, a dog run into which small pets would have to be gently lowered, or a disposable, biodegradable crypt for an age of escalating land values. Literally and figuratively, there is no easy way into the work.

Which is not to say that a piece such as *Rack-Master* (1997), a jungle gym-like construction made of PVC shelving, fluorescent lights, and sleek aqua slabs of Styrofoam coated with Envirotex resin, is devoid of art historical reference: it looks like something Flavin, LeWitt, and California "finish fetish" Minimalist John McCracken might have come up with after a night of heavy beer drinking. On one level, Phelan is flattering the insider by making connections between those artists' work and the modules and stackables from IKEA or the Container Store, but on another, more perverse plane, he is creating a conflict between our ethical and aesthetic judgments by displaying a bad faith item that might actually exist out there in consumer-land (portable tanning booth? drying rack for surfboards?) and making it as seductive as possible. Rarely have ersatz, nonecological materials looked so good.

While Phelan and Harrison focus primarily on found images and "things," Ross Knight samples bits and pieces of what might be called "found design." Using a limited but highly versatile repertoire of materials—aluminum pipes, corrugated vinyl sheeting, Velcro, paint—he erects flimsy, portable structures that are essentially abstract (like classic Minimalist works, they unfold and change as the viewer moves in and around them) but invoke influences ranging across the socio-economic spectrum, from high-tech trade show architecture to point-of-sale advertising displays to the jury-rigged shelters of the homeless. Highly



Ross Knight, *Monument*, 1998. Vinyl sheeting, aluminum, Velcro, and paint, 96 x 144 x 48 in.

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sensitive to context, these constructions change with their placement and angle of view. *Thru* (1998), for example, an eight-foot-high box open at the top and back, might be a hallway, a carnival booth, or a high school stage set for "the city," depending on where you are standing when you encounter it.

The everyday proportions in Knight's work are based mostly on unwritten, commonsense conventions. *Monument* (1998), for example, recalls a food stall at a street fair because three of its walls are at "countertop height" (or what we assume is countertop height). *Your Name* (1998), a chest-high structure shaped like a prism standing on end, recalls a lectern or pulpit. Yet, occasionally, works incorporate quite specific measurements taken from the peculiar conventions of architecture and construction contracting. *Be Something* (1998), a vertical piece resembling a cross between an office cubicle and a shopping mall kiosk, includes a gap near the floor, roughly the height of a shoe, that designers call "toe clearance," an amenity that presumably allows the (hypothetical) corporate drone trapped inside to feel less oppressed.

Closer to the hands-on crudeness of Harrison's sculptures than Phelan's buff *objets trouvés*, Knight's pieces suggest full-sized maquettes, hurriedly erected to get a sense of how more polished works might be arranged in the gallery, then simply left in place. There is humor in the flaws one notes sprinkled throughout the work (strips of protruding Velcro, misdrilled screw-holes, erratically cut lengths of plastic), a record of trial and error sufficiently rich and satisfying to call into question exactly what a more "polished" or "finished" work might be. Like Harrison, Knight isn't shy about applying pigment to structures that a truth-to-materialist like Donald Judd would say should be left unadorned. Of the three artists, Knight is the most sensuous and brushy in his use of paint, and for all the crudeness of their application, his colors—turquoises, creams, browns, oranges—are ravishing.

Rather than critiquing the generic, patriarchal "white cube" of the gallery, Harrison, Phelan, and Knight take its empowering presence as given, exploiting the tension that arises between austere surroundings and their subtly humorous constructions. Instead of jousting with a defunct artistic philosophy, the three artists are moving ahead, staking out their critical positions within global commodity culture, much as a diplomat builds on gains made by more militant forerunners in the geopolitical arena. Rather than primary structures pretending to have meaning-unto-themselves, they are proudly making secondary structures, which retain, or creatively recombine, the histories of their component parts.

Tom Moody is an artist and critic based in New York.

Notes

1 Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), p. 111.

2 The Minimalists persuasively argued that real space and real color were superior to "relics," that is, depictions of same. Equally compelling was their belief that painters had achieved a rough equivalence between what was "in" the rectangle and the rectangle itself (i.e., in the monochrome) and therefore had nowhere else to go. See Philip Leider, "Perfect Unlikeness," *Artforum*, February 2000, p. 100.

3 Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts*, January 1990, p. 54.

4 Colpitt, op. cit., p. 102. By "theories," she is referring mainly to questions such as whether or not Minimalist bricks and light bulbs were art, and what role was played by the spectator in the creation of a Minimalist work.

5 Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 11. What recent theories about a propulsive force causing the universe to expand at an ever-greater rate will do to our notions of entropy (and Smithson's) remains to be seen.

6 Smithson, op. cit., p. 11 ("nothing to see"); p. 15 ("humdrum practicality"); p.11 ("Ice Age").

7 Ibid., p. 12 ("to or against entropy"); p. 16 ("hyper-prosaism"); p. 12 (glass boxes); p. 13 (housing developments); p.11 (Radar Fluorescent Company).

8 Judd refused to publish in *Artforum* because it gave a platform to Minimalist detractor Michael Fried, but according to ex-editor Philip Leider, he "hated Smithson too." Leider, op. cit., p. 103, n. 1. During the "10" show at Dwan Gallery, organized by Smithson and Ad Reinhardt, Judd even had a button made with the legend "ROBERT SMITHSON IS NOT MY SPOKESMAN." Conversation with John Weber, February 4, 2000.

9 Smithson, op. cit., p. 11.

10 See Angela Vettese in *Mona Hatoum: Quarters* (Milan: Viafarini, 1996), n.p. The exhibition was held October 16–November 21, 1996.

11 Chave, op. cit., pp. 50, 52 (de Maria); p. 56 ("carceral images"); p. 45 ("hot rod"); p. 57 ("intimacy"); p. 56 ("powerful"); pp. 46–48 (Stella titles).

12 Ibid., p. 55.

13 The photos, captioned "Liz Tragedy," accompanied an early '90s *National Enquirer* article, which explained that she was "caught at dawn in her garden suffering from insomnia clutching a Danielle Steele novel in her nightdress." E-mail from Rachel Harrison, November 24, 1999.

Michael Phelan, *Fenced,* 1999. Vinyl fencing, 58 x 72 x 36 in.

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