**The Crux of Minimalist Criticism**

by

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Written over half a century ago, Michael Fried’s major essay ‘Art and Objecthood’ positioned Minimalism not only as a significant—albeit highly problematic—development in artistic practice but also as codified by a distinct emphasis upon the written word. Preferring to call Minimalism ‘Literalism’, Fried remarked: ‘The enterprise known variously as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, and Specific Objects is largely ideological. It seeks to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words and in fact has been so formulated by some of its leading practitioners’. In this context, the appellation ‘Literalism’ is worth paying some heed. Within ‘Art and Objecthood’ it is a word that strategically points in several directions that are, nonetheless, rooted in the materiality of the Minimalist object in particular and artworks in general. For instance, literalism referred to Minimalism’s concentration upon materials in such a way that they become devoid of metaphoric or semiotic articulation; but it also suggested that Minimalist artists read—and took *literally*—Clement Greenberg’s influential account of modernism and medium specificity. Yet the word ‘literalism’ gestures in another direction. To the eye and ear, ‘literalism’ is obviously close to ‘literature’ and the ‘literary’. And this is not linguistic coincidence, but the outcome of a shared etymological history deriving from the late Latin ‘literalis’ (meaning ‘of and belonging to letters/writing’) and *litera* (meaning ‘letter, alphabetic sign; literature, books’).

In this paper, then, I want to explore what is at stake in this secondary sense of ‘literalism’ as well as its consequences. Although it never caught on as a name for the body of practices emergent and quickly reaching an apogee in the mid-1960s, a key claim of this paper is that ‘literalism’ stands as an apposite alternative designation to the more widely accepted ‘Minimalism’, capturing as it does its linguistic as well as its materialist dimension. ‘ABC Art’, another alternative that likewise never caught on, also indicates a similar claim through its reference to simple conventional structures and the basics of language. But what kind of writing was imbricated in Minimalism? And how does it compare with the overtly textual operations that would mark wide swathes of conceptualism in the second half of the 1960s? My overall answer to these questions is that Minimalism’s writing was interlinked with art criticism, but what this means will take some explanation.

As a way of approaching Minimalism’s relation to writing, it is useful to consider the largely discursive sources marshaled by Fried in ‘Art and Objecthood’. In order to construct his argument, Fried examines three programmatic texts (two written by Robert Morris and one by Donald Judd) alongside two published interviews (one with Tony Smith and the other a transcript of a radio interview featuring Judd and Fried’s close friend, Frank Stella). These are not the only discursive sources that ‘Art and Objecthood’ depends upon, however, as in the background of its discussion is Clement Greenberg’s 1962 essay ‘After Abstract Expressionism’ and two essays by the philosopher Stanley Cavell, namely ‘Music Discomposed’ and ‘The Avoidance of Love’.

To be sure, there is nothing remotely unusual about an art critic referring to textual material in support of their argument—far from it. Rather, the reason why I list the discourses utilized as evidence in ‘Art and Objecthood’ is that the mere presence of discourses already posits the claim about Minimalism that Fried will explicate. Put more baldly, one of his basic contentions is that these discourses—embodied in major essays like Judd’s ‘Specific Objects’ and Morris’ multi-part ‘Notes on Sculpture’—*precede* the experience of the Minimalist object and then goes onto determinatively subtend and hence define the content of that experience. The consequence of this discursive predetermination is not only the establishment, in Fried’s eyes, of a particularly vicious hermeneutic circle but also the virtual blocking of the beholder’s own distinct phenomenological experience insofar as their experience will broadly follow the protocols already given to them via the pre-existing discourse. In that respect, Fried holds that the various texts written by Morris and others *prescribe* as much as—if not more than—*describe* the experience required of Minimalist artworks.

Insofar as the written element is especially at the forefront of Fried’s mind, it is worth taking seriously the sense that this element is far from incidental to Minimalist artworks. The question, then, is why did such writing become so central to the Minimalist enterprise and why did Fried perceive it to be such a threat beyond his worry that it potentially restricts the beholder’s own specific response? After all, artists writing about their own practices, or even about their forebears and colleagues, has long been a well-established activity. What, then, was at stake here? In his brief essay on Robert Smithson’s writings published in 1979, Craig Owens analysed the ‘eruption of language into the aesthetic field in the 1960s [that] would occur with all the force of the return of the repressed‘.[[1]](#footnote-1) Owens explicitly links this ‘eruption’ with Minimalism in particular.

The argument proposed by Owens clearly reflects his own reading of key essays by Roland Barthes and the growing availability of 1960s stucturalist and post-structuralist theories to the art-critical scene of the late 1970s. However, I want to suggest that Minimalism’s own utilization of discourse was just *before* the shift towards textuality described by Owens but, also, played a major role in setting the conditions of that shift, thereby assisting in its enactment. Rather than evincing a concern for the materiality and open-endedness of the text as highlighted in post-structuralist theory, the writings produced by the Minimalists were conceived in response to American art criticism. Especially prominent here, of course, is Clement Greenberg and the formalist-modernist focus of his criticism.

Greenberg’s centrality to Minimalism becomes apparent in several places. For example, ‘Art and Objecthood’ is simultaneously a fierce attack upon Minimalism and an Oedipal rejection of Greenberg’s critical positions. The conjunction was hardly arbitrary to Fried’s mind: in conceiving modernism teleologically as the progressive stripping of each art medium’s contingent qualities in order to uncover its hidden ‘essence’, Greenberg’s criticism had—it seemed to Fried—provided the relevant theoretical and historical framework that legitimated the Minimalist enterprise (even if this was an enterprise that would be fervently refused by Greenberg). Because Minimalism appeared to follow as a corollary from Greenberg’s conclusions, then it world appear a viable strategy to critique and delegitimize Minimalism by challenging Greenberg. Fried has, broadly speaking, two lines of attack here. Firstly, he deems it strategically necessary to challenge Greenberg’s teleological narrative of modernist painting’s development, thereby removing the seeming inevitability of Minimalism as a outcome of that development. This he achieves in his earlier essay on Frank Stella by rethinking the history of modernism through Thomas Kuhn’s influential discussion of scientific history as delineated by the notion of the paradigm shift. And the second approach, more evident in ‘Art and Objecthood’, is to displace the critical assertion of a medium’s essence through a quasi-deconstructive rethinking of the relationship between essence and convention.

While Fried makes a case for the direct continuity leading from Greenberg to Minimalism, other forms of linkage are evident. Take, for example, Judd’s essay ‘Specific Objects’ published in 1965. Although written ostensibly as a report surveying the growing concern for three-dimensional artworks in contemporary practice, it has been much noted that Judd’s frames of reference explicitly challenged Greenberg’s criticism. The essentialist demand for medium specificity, so crucial to Greenberg’s thinking, is countered by Judd when he famously opens his essay with the claim that ‘the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture’. Yet the arguments proffered in ‘Specific Objects’ do not constitute a total rejection of Greenberg’s influential criticism. On the contrary, Judd fundamentally accepted the terms deployed by the older critic and more or less posited the next logical step that would go beyond Greenberg. It is with quite some acuteness, therefore, that Thierry de Duve writes: ‘Judd’s justification for minimal art is absolutely overdetermined, albeit *a contrario*, by the Greenbergian doctrine’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If we therefore conjoin the various pieces of evidence together, it might be proposed that Minimalism was thus less a response to developments in art practice than a response to those developments as mediated through art criticism. Because art-critical discourse set the stage for Minimalism, it is perhaps unsurprising that its self-understanding would be articulated through forms of writing—art-critical writing, in particular.[[3]](#footnote-3) Writing was not incidental or supplemental to Minimalism; on the contrary, it was utterly fundamental and ran in parallel to the fabrication of objects that responded to key issues tackled with great cogency in art criticism. Yet such writing was not, at this juncture, the eruption of language into the field of the visual as described by Owens. Nonetheless, this would be the direction of travel.

In further focusing upon what is at stake here, Stanley Cavell’s essay ‘Music Discomposed’ proves especially illuminating. Written on-and-off between 1960 and 1965, the essay firstly serves as an examination of the place of critical-theoretical writing published in contemporary music journals as a justification or explanation of avant-garde compositions. Just as Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’ replies to the emergent Minimalist generation within the visual arts, Cavell can be taken as in dialogue with experimental composers such as John Cage who would prove influential upon Minimalism within music. The parallel between the two essays is hardly accidental inasmuch as Fried and Cavell were entering around this period into a protracted conversation that would mutually enrich their cultural perspectives. Whilst only mentioned once in the footnotes to ‘Art and Objecthood’, Cavell’s ‘Music Discomposed’ is an extremely crucial companion piece that illuminates Fried’s stance contra Minimalism.

Regardless of its title, it is obvious that the theoretical discourse surrounding experimental music is largely an entry point to a broader constellation of matters: namely, the relationship between criticism as such and works of art; the role of criticism as interpretation and legitimation; and finally the conjoined necessity and impossibility of criticism within the specific context of late-modernism. This last point is especially worth underscoring as it reflects the uncertain place that criticism has come to occupy under modernism. In the foreword to his 1969 book of essays *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell pithily defines ‘the essential fact’ of modernism as located ‘in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of the enterprise, in the fact this relation has become problematic’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although it would be impossible to flesh out what is meant in this context, such a definition is apiece with the increasingly problematic role that notions of criteria have become freighted with.

For Cavell, the difficulty of establishing criteria within modernism does not result in the wholesale abandonment of criteria. Instead, according to Cavell, it leads to criticism becoming all the more necessary as a kind of Kantian reflective judgement that would seek to construct generalizable theories from the experience of artworks in all their particularity. Yet the absence of criteria renders it impossible to know whether or not criticism has been successful in this function. And so the critic becomes ‘part detective, part lawyer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Time might resolve this confusion and form a canon, but the critic, or artist, or public, cannot await the apparently settled judgement of posterity. The burden of criticism belongs, though, not to the critic alone. Modernism has increasingly forced this burden to be taken up by artists themselves, yet this does nothing to alleviate the burden as ultimately it cannot be known *a priori* whether such criticism drafted in support of their work or generation can decide how their work counts—if it counts.[[6]](#footnote-6) The crime or deed of glory is a problem less borne by the critic as such than by criticism.

In the absence of clear rules for judgment, it becomes evident that the place of art criticism is now significantly uncertain. New developments within practice demand critical accounting partly in order to determine their cultural importance but equally in order to guide the beholder in comprehending how the artwork is to be registered in their experience. Perhaps more than any of mediums available to the late-modernist artist, Minimalism acknowledged that criticism could not merely be *about* artworks but must become a component *of* or written *alongside* artworks. This altered the place of criticism in relation to art, thereby making it difficult to conclude where its proper place should be. Such a difficulty is apparent in numerous ways in ‘Music Discomposed’, but two passages prove especially instructive. Cavell highlights the challenge, and its unavoidability, when he writes: ‘Often one does not know whether interest is elicited and sustained primarily by the object or by what can be said about the object. My suggestion is not that this is bad, but that it is definitive of a modernist situation’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Further on, Cavell argues: ‘The issue is simply this: we know that criticism ought to come only after the fact of art, but we cannot *insure* that it will come only after the fact’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Of course, this suggests that criticism may *precede* the artwork, that criticism may overstep its bounds, and occupy an improper place in relation to such artworks.

At root here is the qualm that art-critical writing produced by artists in relation to their own practices will fundamentally displace the role of the art critic. Theoretically speaking, this worry is somewhat over-blown insofar as the artist’s intended meaning, no matter how clearly written, still needs to be tested, interpreted, art-critically judged, and set in correspondence to the experience of the artwork. Moreover, the art-critical judgement voiced by the critic should not be perceived as the expression of a final authoritative judgement, , but instead as a judgement that is provisional in character and hence eminently revisable according to other criteria and later circumstances. That is to say, criticism can itself call for and require further acts of criticism.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But it would not be quite correct to settle at this juncture because, even if the underlying fear expressed here is exaggerated, it was felt keenly nonetheless. Arguably, however, the fear is less about artists’ writings overtaking the acuity of the professional critic than a displaced concern that criticism as such, in the context of late-modernism, is now of uncertain legitimacy. This deeper fear, or the situation it partakes in, might well be considered as symptomatic of an oft-mentioned but rather nebulous ‘crisis of criticism’. In a sense, both Minimalism and Fried aim to forestall this crisis by positing criticism as adequate both to the artwork and to the experience of the artwork. Making matters all the more difficult for them is the absence of publicly communicable criteria or ready-made conventions that the artwork can be judged according to. Clearly, this is problem experienced by Fried and Minimalism alike and definitive of criticism as a whole. Art criticism, therefore, is not to be viewed as judging individual artworks through comparison to sets of rules; on the contrary, it is an activity that tries to determine what forms of significance, value, and conventions interlace at a given moment.

In a now-classic essay ‘The Crux of Minimalism’, Hal Foster compellingly argues that ‘*minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up* . . . minimalism breaks with late-modernist art [and] prepares the postmodernist art to come’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Because of its transitoriness, its status as a crux between contradictory forces, it is obvious that the relation between criticism and art described in this paper could not hold. On the other side of the crux was not just the burgeoning elision of the criticism/artwork distinction, but also the acknowledgment and subsequent exploration of language in its materialist dimensions. In closing, it seems worthwhile to give a brief sense of the place of writing after Minimalism. It is sufficient enough for our purposes to take Robert Smithson’s practice as an example. In his essay ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects’, Smithson assertively presents written language in its materiality and availability to geological comprehension:

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. . . . Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.

Just as he refuses to construe minerals and their names as functioning according to an unmotivated or arbitrary semiotic correspondence, there is also a rejection of the separation of language *about* art and language *as* art. Numerous instances of this abound within Smithson’s practice—one can gesture towards his *Heap of Language* in which picturing and writing combine into a single ambiguous graphic form, or one can refer to such essays such as *Mirror-Travels in the Yucatan* (originally published in *Artforum*) that serve less to describe and document a series of dismantled artworks than to be the artwork itself.

Such emphasis upon language *as* art, though, should not be taken as resolving the complex interrelation between art and criticism that featured so determinatively in Minimalism. Instead of offering resolution, the textual turn arguably side-stepped the difficulties involved by electing to produce writing rather than criticism. This not at all intended as a negative evaluation of these practices as even this dodge continues to raise crucial questions regarding the uncertain place of criticism in relation to the artwork, or perhaps the weaving of criticism and artwork. Towards the end of the nineteen-seventies, allegory became a key concept in art and criticism, thereby hinting at their comingling. As Stephen Melville wrote in an important essay of 1981, ‘allegorical works do not exist except in a universe of continuing allegoresis, commentary, and interpretation. Allegory demands criticism, confusing the line between itself and its criticism—in such confusion criticism must take account of itself as well as of its simpler “object.”’

All this is to suggest that the history of art necessarily incorporates the history of art criticism, and that criticism should not be perceived merely as the discursive reception/evaluation of artworks, and hence detached from them; instead criticism must be understood as actively engaged in artworks, and as a productive rather than receptive force. Minimalism perhaps did not invent this situation, but it was arguably the first art movement to insist upon it.

1. p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thierry de Duve, p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is little wonder, therefore, that the artist Sol LeWitt complained . . . (this frustration led to his own turn towards critical discourse). Add this to the main text one day? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. xxxiii [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Criticism is ultimately bound up in the conditions of [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cavell, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While at the level of theory the notion that programmatic art-critical writings by artists obviates the need for art critics may be exaggerated, nonetheless in terms of institutional structures and the division of the artworld into various sectors it may seem that the fear underlying this notion can be very real indeed. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Foster, ‘The Crux of Minimalism’ p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)