A Reductive Abstract Art

Although many works of art can be described as “minimal,” the name Minimalism refers specifically to a kind of reductive abstract art that emerged during the early 1960s. At the time, some critics preferred names like “ABC,” “Boring,” or “Literal” Art, and even “No-Art Nihilism,” which they believed best summed up the literal presentation and lack of expressive content characterizing this new aesthetic. While scholars have recently argued for a broader definition of Minimalism that would include artists in number of disciplines, the term remains closely linked to sculpture of the period. Donald Judd’s *Untitled* (stack pieces) is characteristic in its use of spare geometric forms, repeated to create a unified whole that calls attention to its physical size in relationship to the viewer. Like most Minimalists, Judd used industrial materials and processes to manufacture his work, but his preference for color and shiny surfaces distinguished him among the artists who pioneered the style.

Lack of Apparent Meaning

What most people find disturbing about Minimalism is its lack of any apparent meaning. Like Pop Art, which emerged simultaneously, Minimalism presented ordinary subject matter in a literal way that lacked expressive features or metaphorical content; likewise, the use of commercial processes smacked of mass production and seemed to reject traditional expectations of skill and originality in art. In these ways, both movements were, in part, a response to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism, which had held that painting conveys profound subjective meaning. However, whereas Pop artists depicted recognizable images from kitsch sources, the Minimalists exhibited their plywood boxes, florescent lights and concrete blocks directly on gallery floors, which seemed even more difficult to distinguish as “Art.” (One well-known story tells of an art dealer, who visited Carl Andre’s studio during the winter and unknowingly burned a sculpture for firewood while the artist was away.) Moreover, when asked to explain his black-striped paintings of 1959, Frank Stella responded, “What you see is what you see.” Stella’s comment implied that, not only was there no meaning, but that none was necessary to demonstrate the object’s artistic value.

Writings

Given these facts, it may seem odd to learn that hundreds of essays and books have been written about Minimalism, many by the artists themselves. It is significant that, although Minimalist art shares similar features, the artists associated with the movement developed their aesthetic ideas from variety of philosophical and artistic influences. Through their writings, Minimalist artists put forth distinctive positions about the work they produced. In addition to his role as a sculptor, Judd was a prominent art critic, and his reviews provide eloquent explanations of his intent—shared by Stella and Dan Flavin—to eliminate the illusionism and “subjective” decision-making of traditional painting. Robert Morris, whose sculpture was influenced by avant-garde dance and performance, published a series of texts, arguing for sculpture to be understood in physical and psychological terms; and, Sol LeWitt introduced the term Conceptual Art to explain the use of seriality and systemic structure in his cubic grid-like forms.

Legacy

In this way, the artists, along with critics and art historians over the past 50 years, have developed a critical discourse that surrounds the art objects, but which is essential to understanding Minimalism itself. Likewise, such artists as Richard Serra, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Maya Lin and Rachel Whiteread, who use Minimalist practice of the early 1960s as a point of departure for their own creative exploration, continue to contribute to the movement’s legacy and our understanding of its significance today.

Text by Virginia Spivey