



Gerard Byrne

A thing is a hole in a thing it is not

January 9–February 27, 2011

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

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at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10am - 5pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12- 5pm
Closed Mondays
http://www.renaissancesociety.org

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Opening Reception: January 9, 4:00–7:00pm

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How Long is Now?

In the decade spanning 1958 to 1968, developments in American visual art moved at a fast clip. In the wake of a triumphal Abstract Expressionism came Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Keeping abreast was a challenge fielded by the burgeoning rank of critics eager to sort out debates well in advance of history. Over and above the artwork itself, proof of a major paradigm shift lay in the robust discourse surrounding the so-called “new art.” The polemics were anything but centralized, being argued by artists, critics and curators through exhibition catalogues, reviews and art journals. E.P. Dutton & Co.’s decision to publish a series of “new art” anthologies was all but a fait accompli. Between 1965 and 1968 it produced three volumes edited by the critic Gregory Battcock: *The New Art* (1965), *The New American Cinema* (1967), and *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968). Of these, *Minimal Art* has by far had the longest lease on life. It remains in circulation, having been reprinted by the University of California Press in 1995. In addition to seminal essays by Michael Fried (*Art and Objecthood*), Clement Greenberg (*The Recentness of Sculpture*), Robert Morris (*Notes on Sculpture*), and Barbara Rose (*ABC Art*), it contains the interview with Frank Stella from whence his dictum, “What you see, is what you see,” as well as Tony Smith’s recounting of his epiphanic drive along the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. Whereas Dutton had its eye on a 1968 readership, the transmission of these documents over two generations unwittingly converted the genealogy of Minimalism into the stuff of myth.

Minimalism’s genealogy is mythic precisely because the work is situated in and outside of history. As the culmination of an art for art’s sake, Minimalism is securely tethered to a trajectory of modernism dating as far back as Manet. The movement’s key figures expanded a self-reflexivity previously reserved for painting into an equation comprised of object, viewer, space, and most important, time. Paradoxically, extending what was an historically evolving logic only served to sever their work’s relationship with history. Minimalism’s staunch anti-representational posture, combined with a recourse to phenomenology, renders it ahistorical by design. Encountered as an obligatory period room, minimalist works instigate a ritual participation in a time-mediated aesthetic experience rooted in the here and now. Minimalism, however, was above all else highly self-conscious. Inscribed in the ahistorical “real time” aesthetic of the here and now is an historical consciousness belonging to the there and then of Minimalism’s inception. The past engendered by Minimalist period rooms is a past responsible for crafting an eternal present, a

degree zero, an artistic logic so conclusive that, no matter how dated or of its moment, extends into this present, displacing all history save for that which brought those works of art into being. As a result, these period rooms function as portals allowing this present to co-exist with a present from half a century ago.

For Dublin-based artist Gerard Byrne (b. 1969), the medium best suited for soliciting from Minimalism a tale of two presents is film. His multi-channel video installation, *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*, titled with a quote from Carl Andre, consists of vignettes whose mainstay are dramatizations. Two of these—sculptor Tony Smith’s New Jersey Turnpike drive, and Robert Morris’s 1962 performance cum sculpture *Column*—belong to art historical lore, handed down as transcribed oral accounts. Another vignette has, as its audio track, a 1964 interview with Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin conducted by Bruce Glaser for WBAI radio, New York. For that vignette’s visuals, Byrne cast four actors who pose as the artists and interviewer in a period-style sound studio.

A fourth vignette, filmed in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland features iconic minimalist works from their collection. Works by Stella, Morris, Judd, Flavin and Andre were selected and installed as minimalist period rooms per Byrne’s instruction. Brokered through conspicuously filmic machinations, it is a highly faceted vignette whose concerns are the transmission and mediation of Minimalism’s conceptual, historical, and museological underpinnings and implications. In addition, the vignette’s sequences shift between past and present with style of dress and comportment being the only clues as to whether a scene is meant to be taking place circa ‘09 or circa ‘69, leaving the time frame for those scenes void of people hopelessly indeterminate.

In two scenes featuring a dapper Dutch narrator, Byrne crafts a fictional scenario, using film to project over time and into our present Minimalism’s spatio-temporal tenets as espoused in the past. The narrator’s cigarette is an anachronism announcing a moment belonging in spirit to the era of Dutton’s anthologies. Clearly, the “new art” demanded a new narrator: yesteryear’s connoisseur has undergone a makeover—gone are the pipe, tweed and hornrims. In one scene he quotes Donald Judd, citing the artist’s desire to break with a tradition of European art. In another scene, he speaks of the “dreiklang,” the “triad” of object, viewer and space. More important than either of these points is his pompous air, legible as a dated convention requisite for any televisual discussion of art, new or old. It signifies the extent to which he is wholly

absorbed by and in the moment from which he speaks: a point summed up in the deep drag he takes on his cigarette while standing before a Flavin.

To address the temporal conditions undergirding Minimalism more directly and as a subject unto itself, Byrne staged a reenactment of Robert Morris’s legendary 1962 performance cum sculpture work *Column* originally mounted at The Living Theater in New York. Morris developed the piece after having taken an interest in dance, wanting to replace dancers with objects representing basic positions such as rigidly standing or lying prostrate. For *Column*, Morris built a hollow plywood plinth measuring two feet square and eight feet high, which he painted gray. The plinth stood on a vacant stage in a vertical position for three-and-a-half minutes after which time it is toppled with the yank of a string whose one end is affixed to the plinth’s top and the other is held off stage by Morris. The plinth remained on the floor horizontally for the performance’s remaining three-and-a-half minutes. Though a simple event, *Column* held numerous implications for what could be said to constitute the aesthetic experience particularly with regard to sculpture, admitting into the discussion notions of time and the body heretofore banished from a modernist rhetoric based exclusively on the eye. Byrne’s reenactment is brazenly dramatic, generating suspense through its emphasis on a ticking watch, a spotlight and a ripcord.

Although illustrative, *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* is extremely self-reflexive. It not only engages minimalist works and primary source texts directly, it addresses Minimalism’s subsequent mediation through photography and film. This includes reference to *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*’s own making. Furthermore, as part of that self-reflexivity, *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* is phenomenological in its own right, calling attention to itself as a projection-based installation. Toward that end, Byrne has installed an external shutter system on each projector. At various moments, the shutter pivots down, completely blocking the projection, leaving only sound. If Minimalism has been relegated to an art historical past, thanks to such exhibitions as Anne Goldstein’s seminal 2004 survey *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968*, it is a past from which we are hardly extricated. As the full blossoming of modernist ideology, Minimalism also contains the seeds of postmodernism. Even through an irony-driven morphology, its debates remain active such that the question Byrne asks of history is not how soon but how long is now.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION

Sunday, January 9, 2011, 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm

Featuring a talk with the artist in Kent Hall room 120, 5:00pm to 6:00 pm

CONCERT

Sunday, January 23, 2011, 8:00pm

Tony Conrad, violin

Conrad’s various activities (music, filmmaking, visual arts) and associations (Jack Smith, Dream Syndicate) make his status as “legend” and “treasure” well warranted. A key figure in the development of minimalist music, Conrad’s electrified and electrifying performances are wholly vital and without compromise. His spike and drone concoctions are delicate and volatile, some part fierce to some part sublime. This concert will take place in the gallery. FREE

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Sunday, January 30, 2011, 2:00 pm

Donald Judd: Artist, Critic, Designer, Activist, Curator

Led by Christine Mehring, Associate Professor of Art History, the University of Chicago

Judd’s multiple roles as artist, critic, designer, activist, and curator will form the basis for discussion led by Mehring. The roundtable’s four participants—Erica Cooke, Jadine Colingwood, Solveig Nelson and Jennifer Sichel—will present research based on issues raised in Mehring’s Judd seminar, which took place Fall of 2010. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 106, 1025 East 58th Street (on the Main Quadrangle of the University, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE

LECTURE

Sunday, February 6, 2011, 2:00 pm

Megan Luke

Collegiate Assistant Professor, Art History, the University of Chicago

A Picture Is a Shaped Thing: Minimalism and the Problem of ‘European Painting’

Luke is a modernist with multi-faceted research interests. She co-curated the 2006 exhibition *Frank Stella 1958* at the Sackler Gallery at Harvard University. It was the first exhibition to examine the seminal work Frank Stella created in 1958, bringing together more than 20 works from this period of tremendous experimentation and productivity. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 106, 1025 East 58th Street (on the Main Quadrangle of the University, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE

PANEL

Sunday, February 27, 2011, 2:00pm

Minimalism Now

Rachel Harrison, sculptor

James Meyer, Associate Professor of Art History, Emory University

David Raskin, Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

This panel puts the issue of Minimalism’s morphology and relevance to a noteworthy scholar/artist cast. The subject of several monographs, Harrison has exhibited internationally in leading venues. Meyer is the author of *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s* (Yale University Press, 2001). Raskin is the author of *Donald Judd* (Yale University Press, 2010). This event will take place in Kent Hall room 120 (on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE

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at The Renaissance Society

This exhibition has been made possible with funding from Culture Ireland.

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[this side and that side]
Gerard Byrne, *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*, 2010, video stills

Essay by Hanna Walker. Layout by the .Jill. Graphic Design, Chicago.

