

art

## Carl Andre: Radical Simplicity and Sculpture

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In many ways the career of Carl Andre has become a touchstone for the way we feel about art of the 1970s. From the start, his radically simple works of art have demanded more than a little tolerance on the part of his audience. One says “tolerance” because it refers to viewers’ patience on confronting a work with the complete absence of cultural material; his metal floor pieces, stacked wooden beams, and rows of similar objects require no art knowledge to be understood. Instead, Andre’s audience works out a brief but necessary history of physical interaction with the art, whose serial repetitions require passing by them but no more than that. So profound a radicalization of art is not without problems: It is true that a lot of excellent criticism has been written about the minimalists, but such writing has served more as an inquiry into motives than it has been useful in describing the particulars of the art. Andre, and Donald Judd and Dan Flavin and Richard Serra’s refusal to cater to even the most basic need for a context in art, either physical or cultural, was seen at the time as concomitant with a major refusal to acquiesce with either the politics—the ongoing trauma of the Vietnam War—or the relatively recent precedence of modernism, whose high style and aristocratic culture the age rejected.

Indeed, the qualifications of the times were extraordinarily basic; as Judd wrote at the time, an object needed only to be “interesting” to satisfy the criterion for sculpture. And Andre’s work has played out in exactly such a fashion. Indeed, he may be the most extreme player in a game notable for its extremism; his work is marked by a repudiation of form except on the most basic level, as we can immediately speculate on seeing flat plates of steel lain on the floor. This is to be seen, on one level, as a statement of elemental simplicity—what you see is what you get, nothing lesser or greater than that. The sculptures look rather like works in anticipation of an Armageddon; they feel mystical in their closed relations with viewers, whose need for something to grasp beyond sheets of steel is not even considered, being outside the trajectory of any dialogue one might devise. But for all of Andre’s extremism and formal nihilism, the art has come to look, on a visit to his retrospective at Dia: Beacon, stylized in its self-containment. Although the show does represent the zenith of minimal art, it is also transparently unembellished, and seems indifferent to accessibility. As a result, the works are neutral, in terms of their actual and potential audience, in their cool distance toward the viewer, who must find his own reason for their meaningfulness.

As a result, Andre’s work aligns itself not with powerlessness but with power (this is the major point Anna Chave makes in her fine essay “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power”)—that is, the right to form itself without the acknowledgment or interaction of the audience. Just as important, and perhaps troubling in their alienation, Andre’s works were committed to industrial process rather than cultural adornment. As it turns out, Andre’s refusal to generate a style that could be easily accessed has been seen by

corporate minds as empty enough of content to be used as decoration in the working place: the exact opposite of what might be supportively called the radical unity—the purity of meaning—found in his sculptures. This has happened because the art's neutrality as culture has allowed and enabled viewers to make of it what they have wanted. So it is one of the ironies of the passage of time that Andre's work now can be seen as lacking depth for both formal and thematic reasons; moreover, it is ironic that the only way we have to salvage his work from such criticism is the application of a formal reading. I am not attempting to deny the strength of Andre's art, which is genuine; rather, my point includes the position of minimalism in general. The situation of esthetic denial needs to be regarded because it looks like a final step in contemporary art history, which is not true, not only because we were in a time of pluralism in the '70s, when Andre and other minimalists were working, but also because art continues no matter what may have happened previously. (Additionally, we have not looked closely enough at minimalist efforts in other cultures.)

The real question facing the viewer of minimalism has to do with place—sculpture relations to architectural sites. In the large rooms of the Dia show, one found that Andre's work tended to look grand and rational: three-dimensional exercises for the viewer intent on constructing a dialogue free of expressionism or baroque decoration. The work quite simply *is*: however, it proves difficult to bring it to life except in its interaction with the viewer. One might find this recalcitrance a part of radical extremism on Andre's part, whose visual intelligence extends to sheer impositions of form but does not attempt active communication. Thus, the minimalist artwork remains mute—this is true of Judd and Serra's work, which attempt to impose a nearly impossible set of boundaries on the art's interaction with its audience. Indeed, the only chance one has of civilizing the discourse between Andre's art and his audience is to specify its site, its relations with the room's dimensions as they contain the sculpture. So the sphere of inference is made larger in order to create a living space in dialogue with the figure of the person and, beyond that, the architectural construction accommodating the viewer and object. Serra has made a career of siting the work in relation to its environmental context, but Andre has done something different: he has imagined an art whose serial repetition is its entire conversation with people, who turn to means other than culture to make sense of its implications.

Indeed, intimation is central to the experience of Andre's art, whose radical simplicity is not so easily understood. The floor pieces—squares of metal laid out on the gallery floor in regular patterns—are compelling for their ability to occupy the space above it, as well their willingness to incorporate the action of walking *upon* the squares into an awareness of bodily form and the permission to interact with the work in ways not usually allowed in a professional art space. At Dia, I was allowed to walk on only one floor work, a long horizontal with a fairly narrow width. Doing so suggested a transgressive activity, an uncomfortable feeling made more so by the presence of the security guards. But the sense of trespass soon wore off, favoring the examination of one's body in the vertical space the metal squares commanded. Time itself became an active element in our experience of the sculpture; recording one's interactions over a period of time is central to understanding Andre's art. In essence, here, what Andre is offering us is a sense of

freedom—but it is based on the infringement of space. Thus, we are all morally culpable in a sense; we all violate the sculpture as we walk across the space above it. The sense of breaching the environment involves both walking on and above the art, whose very simplicity directs the viewer toward intellectual perceptions of physical existence, capable of referring to—and also confounding—both body and mind.

One says “confounding” because the viewers encountering Andre’s art must make their peace with the extreme lack of cues facing them as they negotiate a territory—a body of space—rather than examining an object. The dimensions facing the viewer tend to shift from size to time and the body’s interaction with time. The interaction also creates the impression of a performance as the viewer encompasses a site leading him across its physical embellishment, however diminished it may be, of the environment. Thus, we begin with little to lay claim to, which we then *experience* rather than see in our interaction with metal plates simply laid on the floor. Like most minimalist art, Andre’s efforts forge experience in an active sense rather than establishing the more passive gaze as the means by which the sculpture is comprehended. At the time of minimalism’s inception, there was something thoroughly exciting about the swerve from object to event and its attendant emphasis on how we might interact with the piece in front of us. So, in some ways, Andre’s minimalism consists of a physical rejection of the object in favor of the intangible consequences of an occurrence over time. This shift is thoroughgoing in its implications, demanding the full-flown involvement of the viewer’s body and mind. The experience counts at least as much as the object.

What, then, are we to make of the sculptures if our gaze bounces off their featureless simplicity and returns us to ourselves again? How much of a story must we develop so as to make sense of what Andre hopes is a genuinely affecting poverty of form? It seems to me that Andre’s art works because of the attention he pays to materials; and, more realistically, because of the position we are placed in, as arbiters of the visual equivalent of silence (although we do in fact hear the sounds of metal plates when we walk over them). The aspect of Andre’s art that is likely the hardest to accept is its refusal to communicate; ironically, this intransigence has resulted in excellent writing about minimalism as a styleless style. Perhaps minimalism is the ultimate sequence in modernist sculpture, in large part because its end game feels permanent and incontrovertible. Its lack of a culture does not result in timeless beauty, however; instead, it addresses a final moment in art of the time. Indeed, it is bound to its time in ways that have made its continuation compromised, with the notable exception of Richard Serra’s art, which even today performs the idealism of an industrialized *arte povera*. Still, it should be remembered that Serra’s extreme thresholds of simplicity maintain an intelligible if aggressive beauty, even if we recognize that to call this moment American is not quite right—artists in other cultures were working similarly at the same time.

What is the most purposeful and accurate approach toward the interpretation of a body of work famous for our ability to do just that—to read meaning into an art whose privilege is based upon its entitlement to do or say nothing about itself? In 1968, Andre established *Joint*, a series of hay bales connecting a forest to an open plain. As striking as the single line of bails may be, perhaps its greatest achievement has more to do with the *idea* of

joining two highly established but very different categories of landscape. The piece illustrates minimalism's strengths and weaknesses in the same moment: the forms move even beyond abstraction, toward the conceptual bias that was occurring at the time. While the conceptual orientation permits Andre the freedom to close down any penchant for meaning beyond the deconstruction of form, oddly enough doing so requires sophisticated formal thought to justify the minimalist movement's enjoyment of a world that was at once intransigent about accessibility and in real need for a committed public that would rescue the art from its own, self-chosen boundaries. This makes it clear that Andre's art, like that of his colleagues Serra and Judd, is almost desperately in need of a context that would establish the art as an act of importance, despite our lack of knowledge as to what it actually means.

Perhaps it can be said that minimalism is coy about its philosophical gestures. Are we meant simply to take the gestures at face value? Or are they committed to implications it is our job to find out? It is true that a few works do witness a bearing toward art history: there is an installational placement of Andre's art at Dia that consists of individual wood pieces, shaped so that they follow fairly closely the forms of Brancusi's pedestals. The discovery that Brancusi's sculpture was placed on what a later generation would conceive as sculpture in its own right seems important and justified in a conceptual sense. Surely Andre's pedestals have a genuine presence of their own, which makes it clear how the artist can both be beholden and independent in the same moment. But it is also true that the homage to sculpture's great modernist provocatively sets aside the actual work Brancusi made—in favor of a humbler, more abstract approach to art. At first it feels as though Andre is rejecting monumentality, but that doesn't seem to be true if we look at some of his stacked or stepped large pieces. Perhaps a more accurate view would center on Andre's willingness to strip away the historical references we usually associate with the creation of a memorial. If these works are in fact monuments, whom are they remembering? It is impossible to say.

Another work, entitled *Pyramid*, effectively establishes a historical reference by its name. Built of wood that is arranged in an X-pattern on all four sides, *Pyramid* shows us that Andre's nihilism is not absolute. But certainly the drive seems to move in the direction of a self-negation so complete it would seem that the exhibition occurs without evidence of the artist's hand. Is this a form of true selflessness, or is it a calculating view in which self-reference is extinguished by the attractiveness of untouched materials? In some respects, the absence of the hand in Andre's oeuvre is highly disturbing; one could easily imagine that this work has been produced entirely by machine. This may be the best way to regard Andre's art—namely, as relics of industrial anonymity. Clearly, the work is important historically and fits the most ambitious expressions of its time. But on another level, its equanimity is not necessarily intrinsically calm and demands to be energized by the audience's interaction with it. In fact, on seeing the show, I have never so seen art so committed to completing its presence by means of a visitor's reaction. Never have I approached work so completely unfinished in a perceptual sense; without the presence of people, and as installation shots of the works without visitors show, the sculptures remain inert and incomplete.

Even Andre's drawings concern the establishment of a physical space beyond the lines that define them two-dimensionally, as happens in the floor drawing named *4-Segment Hexagon*. The lines describe triangles that form larger units, culminating in the hexagon of the title. This work, like most of Andre's pieces, is determinedly horizontal, as opposed to the generally vertical thrust of historical sculpture. Working this way enables Andre to place his viewer directly *in* the sculpture, so that the physical presence of the person's body is incorporated into the hexagon's final form. As has been noted already, moving into the field above the drawing can be seen as an act of transgression; and we remember that the piece was made in 1974, still a volatile time in American culture. But rebellion aside, the true value of *4-Segment Hexagon* shows us that even a drawing can command considerable three-dimensional space, transcending its original function as a two-dimensional design. The drawing acts as an invitation to transform its implicit space, resulting in an interaction that can be described as complementing the suggested indications of the black lines the work is made up of. The interaction thus becomes as important as the experience of the drawing alone. It is an interesting achievement that puts the work squarely in contemporary life, in the direction of experience rather than appreciation of the object.

*Base 7 Aluminum Stack* does have the shape of a pyramid, so the work cannot be written off as purely ahistorical. Yet the interest of the piece seems to lie more in the 49 aluminum ingots that it consists of. These ingots are silver in color and transparently build the larger gestalt, and they suggest the overall shape of the pyramid in their individual elements. The form of the work cannot be reduced further without damaging the purity of the composition. In fact, what interests us about *Base 7 Aluminum Stack* is its simplicity, which does away with the complex intricacies favored by other sculptors. This directness is best understood by the way Andre's viewers find a narrative in their interaction with the physicality of the object; meaning is generated by awareness of the audience as individuals pass by the work of art. Their willing recognition of the sculpture's individual agency forms the texture of its experience—one must pass by the piece to be sure of its sculptural existence, which in this case is more than a bit hidden by its lack of cultural associations. We may take the lack of context for granted now, as we are used to the way the sculptures make their impression on Andre's audience. But at the time, the simplicity of the art seemed thoroughly radicalized to the point of a pure existentialism.

Today, one of the biggest questions facing sculpture—indeed, art in general—is its accessibility beyond the reaches of the contemporary art industry. It seems obvious that Andre's art refuses to pander to his audience, but the absence of a point of entry, whereby the viewer can see an intention, makes the work difficult to understand. Perhaps it is better to think of Andre's art as purely an act of intention—to the point where its motivation seems mostly abstract and formal. It takes a savvy visitor who can make sense of the Dia exhibition's extreme simplicity, offering the visitor serial repetitions of form that stand alone, without circumstances that would engender an easier art experience. But Andre's determination to see the impulse of minimalism exist as valid by itself gives the art a seeming self-sufficiency—even though it is clear, from studying the work over time, that the sculptures are in fact highly vulnerable by themselves and require interaction to

fully function as art. As it turns out, Andre is willing to move to the logical finalities of his choice in *Scatter Piece*, in which the visual interest of chance becomes the artist's subject. Metal spheres and rectangular objects are simply distributed on the floor, leaving the viewer with an illustration of entropy.

Andre's randomness possesses philosophical points that are interesting in the extreme. Is he suggesting, in *Scatter Piece*, that the work envisions a meaninglessly scattered reality? Or is he responsible for the chance placement as a series of actual, consciously determined decisions that reflect a realism created by the mindful actions of people? It is hard to take sides here, but sometimes the content of a work can be rich enough to sustain two opposing views at the same time. Perhaps we should be wise and submit to the sheer emptiness of the questions, which posit beliefs that are extremely hard to explore for answers to the queries above. I am not putting forward that Andre is committed to a know-nothing mystical reality; instead, I think he is asking questions that really cannot be solved, although in this case, they are beautifully represented. The work shows that our measurements of entropy are themselves entropic—that is, they are driven toward a loss and not a gain of information that would explain the work in rational terms. As almost always happens in Andre's art, one is forced to speculate and find a reason for the decision-making that goes into his sculptures, which are for most intents and purposes silent in their declaration of purity.

It becomes clear, then, that the motive—and the motif—of Andre's work remains on some level distant from explanation. This limits the accessibility of his art, no matter how populist or proletarian his political beliefs may be. In a physical sense, minimalism relies on the history of the viewer's interaction with the sculptures for clarification; similarly, the intellectual implications of the work need to be clarified—in Andre's case this is done by written explanations to render his art more interpretable. It is not a matter of deliberate obscurity; rather, it concerns the history of art as it now occurs. The old parameters for sculpture are gone, and the new ones are so demanding of abstract intelligence that one might as well leave off speculation in favor of an emphasis on the sensuous appreciation of the forms themselves. Despite their insistence on a deep-seated reductivism, an emphasis on materials alone, the sculptures command space in a primarily intellectual fashion. The tension between emptiness and being is remarkable in Andre's art, which bridges one state of existence with another that is its opposite. The idealism of Andre's sculptures is made clear by the fact that they are both entirely self-sufficient and poverty-stricken in their expressiveness. A philosophy of perception needs to be enjoined so as to render the work understandable; moreover, it is important to recognize just how need-ridden the sculptures are for a way of thinking that would explain their extreme simplicity. But in an art world now made conventional by an excessive reliance on intellectualism, a purely conceptual reading may fall flat even as it makes sense of Andre's work. In the long run, despite their genuine achievement in a highly particular moment in time and place—in the 1960s and '70s in New York—Andre's sculptures may simply be too distant from us to sustain a reputation beyond a specific period in the culture. And so, for the present, we are meant to push our comprehension of his art forward in both a theoretical and materials sense, toward a just reading of art that asks both so much and so little from us.

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