The Artist as Critic: A Parodic Reading of Robert Morris’s Writing and Minimalist Sculpture
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Begun in 1961, Robert Morris’s minimalist sculptures are polyhedrons made of stock four by eight foot plywood sheets and painted grey. In a 1991 interview, Morris volunteered a telling remark about his major written treatise on this work, his 1966 *Artforum* essay “Notes on Sculpture.” He stated that this essay—which has always been read as serious and celebrated as a foundational text for the minimalist movement—was in fact begun as a parody of formalist criticism. Taking this remark as my starting point, I will describe how Morris’s writing and sculpture mock Greenbergian medium specificity. Whereas Happenings, Fluxus, and other art practices developing at the time were radical enough not to warrant the attention of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, Morris’s self-constructed identity as ‘serious formalist critic’ was a useful strategy for forcing these critics to disclose their modernist allegiances, with Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” becoming a highly significant arguing point for a number of artists and critics. I will discuss why the art world was ripe for Morris’s parody and consider the efficacy of the position of artist-critic.

While Morris revealed that his essay “Notes on Sculpture” had begun as a parody of formalist criticism, I submit that evidence of a parodic, mocking tone lingers in the published version. Citing Greenberg and Fried, Morris notes that the intrinsic property that has come to the fore in painting is “the nature of the literal qualities of the support,” and adds, “[i]t has been a long dialogue with a limit.” Since sculpture was never involved with illusionism, Morris writes, it “could not possibly have based the efforts of fifty years upon the rather pious, if somewhat contradictory, act of giving up this illusionism and approaching the object.” In sculpture, “space, light, and materials have always functioned concretely and literally.” Morris suggests, then, that
literalness and objecthood (terms Fried would take up in his criticism of Morris’s work) are in fact more specific to sculpture than painting. One begins to imagine Morris’s *Corner Piece* illustrated on the adjacent page as proclaiming: If a literal object concerned with the qualities of the support is what you are looking for, now, *this* is an object.

Morris then mocks Greenberg and Fried’s persistent interest in historical trajectories and “comparison with the painting of the past whose quality is not in doubt”: Greenberg and Fried went back to Manet to build their narrative, and Morris goes back to Tatlin. Constructivism was autonomous or specific, according to Morris, because it referred neither to the figure nor to architecture. Morris points out that this autonomy “was not sustained in the work of the greatest American sculptor, [. . .] David Smith.” While still, parodically, referring to Smith as “the greatest,” Morris’s identification of Smith’s work as non-medium specific would not have sat well with Smith’s most ardent supporter, Greenberg. Morris is essentially asserting that Greenberg’s prize sculptor is not a good sculptor based on the critic’s own criteria. Indeed, Greenberg and Fried both supported the coloured “optical” or “painterly” sculpture of Smith and later Anthony Caro. Morris’s implication is also that Greenberg should support Morris’s sculpture instead, since he follows his statement about Smith with: “Today there is a reassertion of the non-imagistic as an essential condition.” Yet, he adds that “in passing, it should be noted that this condition has been weakened by a variety of works which, while maintaining the non-imagistic, focus themselves in terms of the highly decorative, the precious, or the gigantic.” The reference here is no doubt first to Donald Judd and then to the monumental works by sculptors like Ronald Bladen and Robert Grosvenor with whom Morris would exhibit at “Primary Structures” at the Jewish Museum two months later. Mockingly laying bare the trivial prejudices that result from the systematic nature of medium specificity, Morris goes on to
explain: “There is nothing inherently wrong with these qualities; each offers a concrete experience. But they happen not to be relevant experiences for sculpture.”

Morris rejects relief next, stating: “The relief has always been accepted as a viable mode. However, it cannot be accepted today as legitimate.” This statement, which mimics the authoritative, prescriptive tone of a critic, not only is another dig directed toward Judd, it also contradicts Morris’s own practice; he too created reliefs at the same time that he was building his grey polyhedrons—a fact which further corroborates Morris’s remark that he first wrote this essay as a parody.\textsuperscript{6} Morris rejected relief because the wall delimits the number of views of the object. Yet, the only sculpture as opposed to sculptural drawing illustrated in the article is Morris’s \textit{Corner Piece}. Even it sits in the corner such that only one face is accessible, like a relief.

In another, more straightforward, critique of medium specificity Morris asks, “could a work exist which has only one property? Obviously not, since nothing exists which has only one property. A single, pure sensation cannot be transmissible precisely because one perceives simultaneously more than one as parts in any given situation: if colour, then also dimension; if flatness, then texture.” After eliminating colour as optical and thus “inconsistent with the physical nature of sculpture,” Morris focuses on shape. He promotes “simpler forms which create strong gestalt sensations.” After making some humourously obvious statements about complex, simple, regular, and irregular polyhedrons, Morris notes that sculpture involving unitary forms “often elicits the complaint among critics that such works are beyond analysis.” To retain the semblance of sincerity, which is crucial for eliciting the later responses of Greenberg and Fried, Morris claims that the experience is not simple and relations are not cancelled. “Rather they are bound more cohesively and indivisibly together,” in a way that makes past
sculpture extraneous. Unitary forms also “establish both a new limit and a new freedom for sculpture.” One is free of shape because all information about it is exhausted: “One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt.” Yet one is bound to shape because it is “constant and indivisible.” This implies that Greenberg and Fried’s criticism contains its own obsolescence. Medium specificity leads to the end of criticism: the medium is as specific as it can be and all information is exhausted.

In “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” published the following October, Morris begins by justifying his use of the term sculpture for “the new work.” He dismisses structure since it “applies to either anything or to how a thing is put together” as well as object since “[e]very rigid body is an object.” The retention of the term sculpture is an important strategy, since it places Morris’s text in a dialogue with Greenberg and Fried, unlike Judd’s more radical approach, which was to term the new work ‘Specific Objects’ and argue that they were “neither painting nor sculpture.” Morris also insists in his essay that his works are not conceived as an environment, a point he repeats in a March 1967 interview with David Sylvester. James Meyer suggests that Morris’s insistence may stem from a desire to refute the environment-readings of a number of critics as well as to distinguish his work from that of other installation artists (George Segal, Lucas Samaras, Yayoi Kusama, and Claes Oldenburg) who were, like Morris, associated with New York City’s Green Gallery. Meyer observes that “Morris had flirted with environments before,” such as in his 1961 Fluxus-affiliated Passageway, a corridor which narrows and curves to a point out of reach and sight; “however, he now wanted to be seen as a sculptor.”

Like so many of Morris’s endeavours, his minimalist sculptures and his texts are art about art (the influence of Duchamp is never far away). Morris’s first statement about his minimalist sculptures was written in 1960 and is titled “Blank Form”: “the subject reacts to it in
many particular ways when I call it art. He reacts in other ways when I do not call it art. Art is primarily a situation in which one assumes an attitude of reacting to some of one’s awareness as art. [. . .] Blank form is like life, essentially empty, allowing plenty of room for disquisitions on its nature and mocking each in its turn.”12 With this as well as the parodic “Notes on Sculpture, Part 1” in mind, it seems many statements from Part 2 are so humourously obvious they would not warrant attention in everyday experience but are attended to because the objects are “called art”:

One knows immediately what is smaller and what is larger than himself. It is obvious yet important to take note of the fact that things smaller than ourselves are seen differently than things larger. Large-sized objects exhibit size more specifically as an element. The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one’s body size, and the object. Properties which are not read as detail in large works become detail in small works.

Art historian James Meyer concludes that “the difference between ‘Blank Form’ and ‘Notes on Sculpture’ is the difference between the neo-dada or Cagean Morris of 1961 and the minimal Morris of 1966.”13 I would suggest, however, that the difference between “Blank Form” and “Notes on Sculpture” is one of strategy, not of intent. In short, Morris’s minimalism is neo-dada keyed to the art world of the late 1960s. Morris’s minimalist sculptures were in fact produced concurrently with and exhibited alongside his neo-dada objects. At a 1963 solo show at the Green Gallery, three minimalist sculptures were surrounded by, for example, a nine by nine inch box which contained a speaker emitting the sound of the box’s own making; a suspended bucket containing water and a circulating pump titled Fountain in reference to Duchamp; a set of eight, grey vials containing Morris’s bodily fluids; three rulers each thirty-six units long but of visibly different lengths; a lead base supporting a ring of keys, each of which is inscribed with a word from Duchamp’s Green Box;14 a Card File of alphabetized index cards listing the steps of its own making under entries such as “Alphabets,” “Cross Filing,” “Delays,” “Deleted Entries,”
and “Mistakes”; a printout of Morris’s brain waves recorded while he contemplated himself and sized to correspond to the length of his body; and a box with an I-shaped door which opens to reveal a photograph of the grinning, nude artist in “parodic mockery of the phallic male genius.”

The Green Gallery was owned by collectors Robert and Ethel Scull, who operated a successful New York City taxicab fleet. “The primary benefit for the Sculls was early access to some of the best new work at prices they essentially controlled”; the primary benefit to Morris was a venue for his neo-dada and minimalist art, and the accompanying prestige that exhibiting bestows. As frustration with Greenberg’s dominance mounted, it became popular for new collectors to support ostracized artists, and the New York art world indeed expanded substantially.

In terms of commercial galleries, the count jumped from one hundred and twenty-three in 1955 to two hundred and forty-six in 1965. In terms of collectors, there were approximately two dozen in 1945, 200 in 1960, and over 2,000 by 1970. Morris’s work was the first of many minimal art purchases by the Italian industrialist Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, a significant collector of contemporary art in Europe. Morris’s sculptures were displayed in numerous exhibitions on both coasts of the U.S., reviewed extensively, and reproduced in his own art critical essays. He won First Prize at the 1967 Guggenheim International Exhibition, and from 1969 to 1971 he was offered large solo exhibitions at Washington’s Corcoran Gallery, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Whitney, and the Tate. These instances of legitimization are significant, since operating within Greenberg and Fried’s purview was an essential condition for launching an effective, parodic critique.

More radical practices lacked this art world legitimization. I submit that it is for this reason that they could not adequately enact an appreciable shift in art critical sensibility. Fried’s
dreaded temporal flow and theatricality had in fact already “become a commonplace of avant-garde practice” through John Cage, Happenings, and Fluxus. What made Morris’s minimalist sculptures a threat was that they feigned “modernist” visual interest and posed as the proper subjects of medium-specific criticism. Radical practices which were polemically independent from the gallery did not speak Greenberg and Fried’s language and thereby threaten it from within. Morris wrote: “Blank Form is still in the great tradition of artistic weakness—taste. That is to say I prefer it—especially to content (as opposed to ‘anti-form’ for the attempt to contradict one’s taste).” Morris’s minimalism is not explicitly anti-art; rather, it operates from within “the great tradition.”

It was not until Fried was thus goaded to react, to footnote a list of artists whose work he deemed degenerate and to codify his position, that an appreciable critical shift occurred. Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” is thus a seminal text. That its primary subject of critique turns out to be a calculated parody—even if unknowingly on Fried’s part—is a crucial and unrecognized reason for its significance. A consciously covert parody produces a different type of reaction than a deliberately radical provocation. In Fried, it created an urgency and a thoroughgoing re-articulation of allegiances; it prohibited a reaction of either blanket dismissal (such as Greenberg’s essay, “Recentness of Sculpture”), or one more instantiation of ideals (such as Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting”). Keyed to address Greenberg’s persistent dominance and made possible by changes in the gallery and collecting scene, Morris’s minimalism and its role in Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” is thus one of the important plotlines in the story of the 1960s backlash against Greenbergian modernism.

After reporting Morris’s recollection that his “Notes” “had begun as a parody of formalist criticism,” James Meyer continues: “Only at [Barbara] Rose’s urging did [Morris] transform the
text into a bona fide formal analysis.” It struck me as odd that this advice would come from critic Barbara Rose. In her own criticism that year, she pursued non-formalist directions and drifted apart from Michael Fried. I asked Rose whether she recalled “urging [Morris to]
transform the text into a bona fide formal analysis.” She responded: “Yes this is true. I urged Bob to be serious not ironic. His MA thesis was on Brancusi so obviously he could write cogently about sculpture. There was a certain amount of mockery about academic criticism among artists but as an art historian I knew that what Bob had to say about sculpture would be worth reading not as a joke but as a serious text.” Thus, it seems Rose’s recommendation to Morris actually pertained to tone rather than methodology. Her suggestion was that he be ‘serious’, not that he be ‘formalist’, as (Meyer’s phrasing of) Morris’s comment reports. I contend that being “an art historian” does not only suggest that “he could write cogently about sculpture”; it also puts him in a position to see the value of an ironic or parodic strategy. In a 1962 letter to Henry Flynt, Morris stated, “I think today art is a form of art history.”

With Artforum’s circulation of 15,000, and with readily available catalogue and anthology reprints of Morris’s essays, art criticism was clearly a key to making oneself known. The phenomenon of the artist-as-critic can be seen as an assertion of authority on the part of artists against critics like Greenberg. Morris explained: “I rejected from the beginning the market- and media-driven prescription that the visual should be promoted to a worshipful ontology while the wordless artist, a mute fabricator of consistent artefacts, was forbidden to set foot on theoretical and critical ground.”

Writing was also a useful way to ensure that one stood out among artists producing similar works in this newly lucrative art world. In style, content, as well as implicit and explicit criticisms, Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture” were produced in negative relation to Judd’s writing.
Whereas Judd indicates in his important essay “Specific Objects” that his objects are the most specific, Morris demonstrates in “Notes on Sculpture” that his sculptures are the most “advanced.” “It was a brilliant move,” Meyer observes: “by the end of the year, one critic could confidently assert that ‘so-called Minimalistic sculpture, essentially a reduction of form to three-dimensional geometricized shapes, is largely an outgrowth of propositions advanced by Morris.’”

Whether Morris is deemed a charlatan, as when Peter Schjeldahl remarks that “[i]f he had never lived, the shape of art history since 1960 would be little different” and Roberta Smith calls him “an artistic kleptomaniac,” or whether he is celebrated for perceiving the evolving art world with an unprecedented acuteness, Morris’s minimal, “blank forms” continue to parade as formalist sculptures in major institutions. Thomas Crow notes in his book *The Rise of the Sixties* that “[i]n any large European or American city, intrigued audiences in the tens of thousands find themselves drawn to exhibitions of this same difficult art [. . .]. If much of the work on show nevertheless remains puzzling and remote to those without a secure initiation in the ways of the art world, it is because that wider audience lacks a useful explanatory narrative.” In the case of Morris’s minimalism, an explanatory narrative which allows for parody and blankness by recognizing Morris’s role in shaping the work’s reception is highly pertinent.

2 Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (Feb. 1966): 43. Subsequent Morris quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from page 43 or 44 of this essay.


5 David Antin also notes the work toward which Morris’s comments are directed (Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* [New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1994], 37).

6 Likewise, although Morris rejected mathematical systems and seriality in his “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” he would, as James Meyer points out, produce serial sculptures himself the following year (*Minimalism: Art and Polemics*, 159-60).

7 Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (Oct. 1966): 21. Subsequent quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from page 21 or 23 of this essay.


11 In 1965, Barbara Rose stated: “Morris’s purpose is, I think, obviously enough, to teach or to question certain very basic ideas about art, its meaning, and function.” In 1970, Jack Burnham wrote: “I have felt for some time: that Morris’s sculpture is essentially criticism about sculpture” (Rose, “Looking at American Sculpture,” *Artforum* 3, no. 5 [Feb. 1965]: 35-36; Burnham, “Robert Morris: Retrospective in Detroit,” *Artforum* 8, no. 7 [Mar. 1970]: 71).


14 Duchamp’s *Green Box* (1934) contains his notes for the *Large Glass* (1915-23). When Philip Johnson was tardy in his payment for this work, titled *Litanies*, Morris produced *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* (1963) which consists of a lead relief of *Litanies* and a notarized letter withdrawing “all aesthetic quality and content” from the work. Johnson subsequently purchased both pieces and donated them to the Museum of Modern Art, New York.


21 Morris, “Blank Form.”

22 Fried, “‘Art and Objecthood,’” 130n8.

31 Crow, 7.