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Minimal Art and the Spatial Experience of the Light

Abstract: This article traces how sources of electrical the light associated with minimal sculptures leads to the expansion of the sculptural space beyond the boundaries of the object through the process of light propagation (Dan Flavin, Carl Andre) and contributes to the creation of spatial and perceptual situations specific to minimal art. The relationship between art and technology and the use of electric light in artistic installations is continued by the group of artists and engineers E.A.T. (Experiments in Arts and Technology). We will thus follow a paradigm of working with space, in which light becomes a device for transforming spatial perception and producing sensations and affects. The aesthetic experience thus created, with the help of light sources, puts the viewer in front of a complex spatial experience, paradigmatic for the art of the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Minimal Art, installation art, light, aesthetic experience, spatial art.

Minimal art appeared in 1960 as a reaction to abstract expressionism, pop art and conceptual art. Its characteristic was a formal focus on the three-dimensional artistic object, reduced to simple geometric shapes, as well as on its spatial perception. It shares with pop art the orientation towards the world of industrial production, the objects being produced mainly from industrial materials (steel, Plexiglas, glass, etc.). The British philosopher Richard Wollheim also uses this term *minimalism* to refer to some paintings and objects that have a rich conceptual, intellectual content but a poor formal content, like Marcel Duchamp's *ready-made*. (Wollheim, 1965, 26-33). The term of minimal art took hold with some difficulty. There were alternatives such as ABC art, primary structures, post-pictorial relief or literary art. (De Duve, 2003, 180).

Minimalism "attempted, first and foremost, to subvert any artistic *style* (...)". It took: "forms of an idealistically designed geometry, rather than of an intuitive self-expression. However, since its dominant period (1963-1968), it has started to resemble a style so much that critics use minimalist to categorize any painting or sculpture that is non- figurative, non-

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** Article realized with the support of the Multidisciplinary Research Institute in Art – National University of Arts George Enescu Iași within the grants financed from the research funds of UNAGE for the year 2022.

referential and non-narrative, or even far from geometric." (Colpitt, 1993, 133).

Of these features, it is the term of *literal art*, as well as the *non-referential* and *non-narrative* characteristics of minimalist geometric objects, that particularly draw our attention. In terms of Norman Bryson's distinction, which we used in the previous chapters, the *literal* feature of minimal art signals a blurring of the discursive character of modern art and the return of the figurative in contemporary art. This situation is linked by Michael Fried to a special type of sensitivity, to which the material presence of the object is essential – or, as Fried calls it, its *objecthood* instead of the message. (Fried, 2000, 836-838).

If materiality has always been an essential element of the sculptural form, in modern art it nevertheless tended to be circumvented in favor of another secondary discourse – by resorting to symbols, emblems, metaphor, narration or allegory. But installing this regime of objecthood is made possible in minimal art precisely by the *literal* character of the artistic discourse or message, which allows the attention to be focused on the shape of the object instead of its significance or the iconographic program which the work would bring into play. The literal character of minimal art contributes therefore to the volatilization of the metaphor of light by eliminating the discursive aspects of artistic objects and by emphasizing their material aspects (in particular the materiality of light). Thus, the metaphor of light joins the field of aesthetic experience, understood as a perceptual, subjective and corporeal experience.

From the point of view of the viewer's experience, minimal art can be described as a type of art involving the viewer's corporal presence in front of the artwork, which is reduced to an objectual presence. It is about creating a common perceptual horizon which the viewer and the object are both part of. The object and its perception are mutually defined. Thus, despite its formal, geometric simplicity, minimalism implies Michael Fried's concept of temporality or duration of the reception experience, as opposed to the experience of modern art that had no duration but merely "presence and instantaneousness". (Colpitt, 1993, 93-94)

Not only does experiencing a work of minimal art take place over time, but it has neither beginning nor end, according to Fried. On this basis, the American critic concludes that the objects themselves are treated compositionally as if they were infinite. However, Donald Judd, an important representative of American minimal art, supported the method "one thing after another", privileging unity at the compositional level over the extension of space. What is certain is that in minimal art, the outward shape is the object, and the uniqueness of its geometrically simple outward shape ensures its artistic viability. If thus the object has no interiority, it

opens towards the outside space it is located in and towards its relationship with the viewers.

In fact, all this discussion regarding the open or closed nature of the shape of the artwork, as well as the one regarding the temporal nature of the experience of its reception, stems from the meaning of this concept. It is settled by resorting to the dialectic between the synthetic character of the visual experience of the shape and its duration at the level of its corporal synthesis. "The instantaneousness of the form (Gestalt), as Morris knew, is a central idea of minimalism. The form is perceived in its entirety at once. What happens over time is the experience: a series of perceptual states based on the relations of the viewer's body with the objects" (Colpitt, 1993, 92-93).

Michael Fried used the notion of "theatricality" to describe the at once spatial and temporal character of the experience of the object in minimal art, which focuses on the actual circumstances in which the viewer encounters the work of art. (Fried, 2000, 838). For Fried, this new artistic relationship involves creating a situation (which, by definition, encompasses the viewer) in which the object manifests its presence (often aggressively and obscurely) and asks the viewer for his attention by making him aware of its presence (often at the level of the corporal perception of the surrounding space). It could therefore be concluded that what makes minimalism a special trend are precisely its philosophical assumptions. According to Francis Colpitt, "it expresses beliefs about itself and about the subjective perception of the world based on materiality - objecthood- and the space occupied by that material and the body of the artist/viewer." (Colpitt, 1993, 133)

The participation of the audience fulfills a very important purpose in this context, while lighting functions here as a way of confronting the viewer with his own personality and physical image and, at the same time, of reading reality as a unit. It is an exercise in perception that can help understand the world and contemporary society, which by nature is fragmented. Revelations may occur through space and objects, which create an experience for each individual viewer.

Morris's minimalist sculptures from the mid-60s consisted of rigorously built geometrical objects. Usually, he arranged these objects in "situations" where "each is aware of his own body, while being aware of every piece of the work", as Iabel describe one of the pieces from the TATE collection from 1971. (Iabel, 2004) This example illustrates this idea. As the viewer walks among the four large mirror cubes, rigorously placed in the gallery, they reflect the surrounding surfaces, resulting in interaction between the gallery space and the viewer. Initially, these cubes were installed in the garden of the Tate Gallery in London for Morris's exhibition in 1971, but

later remained in the gallery where the exhibition was rearranged. (Label, 2004).

In 1965 the Greek artist Stephen Antonakos builds a cubic skeleton made of blue neon, which he simply calls - the blue box. The cube marks a spatial rupture, but at the same time tends to visually incorporate the gaps it forms. According to gestalt principles we tend to perceive the shape which is most familiar to our visual memory, and in this case our eye is trying to give materiality to the empty sides of the cube. The light contributes to this visual experience.

In his works, Daniel Buren mixes the minimalist language with the neo-conceptualist influences of the '80s. His clear intention is to put the spotlight on and to recover the importance of the artwork in contemporary creation. Buren is conducting a critical investigation into art, and his works always say something about the idea of pure art. The artist never uses an expressionist manner, and this is also visible in the work *Through the Reflecting Glass* (1983). As with other works, in this one the artist aims for a basic level of information and the interaction with the audience. In this case, the interaction involves a direct contact between the artwork and the viewer, who is invited to look for the meaning of the work himself. The work is also part of the space where it is exposed and cannot be separated from it. The surrounding space, although not part of the work, is inseparable from it if the work is to have visual consistency. (Barro, 2006, 25).

The fragmentation of the composition creates a game of reality in which the viewer has to rebuild his own reality starting from these fragments. The process can be difficult or easy, but it is certainly an exercise in reflecting on the separate parts of the daily reality in which we live, and which influences our lives.

The work 2 (*30AL*) *Seattle* by the minimalist artist Carl Andre is composed of rectangular pieces arranged in a very well calculated and very simple geometric manner. The pieces, only 5 cm thick, emphasize the horizontality of the ground and highlight the geometric play and the texture of the polished aluminum they are made of.

The relationship to Constantin Brancusi's work *Endless Column* is obvious and the artist himself stated that his only wish was to build *the Endless Column* in a horizontal position. It is in fact the same column but placed horizontally. (Barro, 2006, 32) Like other avant-garde artists (especially with reference to geometric abstractionism), Brancusi, along with Frank Stella, are the acknowledged bases of minimal language.

What is interesting here is the perception of the work. It can be seen at the same time as an entire piece, composed of smaller pieces joined together, or as a mirror (due to its well-polished aluminum surface reflecting the surrounding area) which forms a fragmented image of the surrounding world and reality, and implicitly of the light information around it.

Along with this example, the viewer can experience different perception situations. The aluminum's reflections give him the possibility of perceiving the space mediated by the presence of a fragmented mirror on the ground. This type of relation with space can also be encountered in other minimalist works such as – *Untitled*, Ángel Bados, 1991, or *Untitled*, Donald Judd, 1988.

The beginning of 1960 marks an important moment in the artistic career of Dan Flavin, a US minimalist artist, through a series of eight works entitled *Icons*. The combination of neon, electric light bulbs and regular geometric shapes will give rise to visual formulas that bring him closer to conceptual art, precisely because of the presence of a message beyond the concrete forms of the work. It is also the first time he uses the electric light bulb and he increasingly makes use of the fluorescent tubes. These series of works also represent the link between his paintings and later light installations.

The theme from which Flavin starts is mainly related to the return to the primary conditions of an iconological representation. This was certainly part of the radical change in North American art at the beginning of the mid-century. The above-mentioned artists Donald Judd or Carl Andre wanted to achieve objective and non-illusory works of art (Thierolf, Vogt, 2009, 7) and Flavin found what was perhaps one of the most suitable materials for this new type of art – light. The contrast between the materiality of the object and the immateriality of light creates a constant tension between the artwork, seen as an object in itself, and the message that transpires beyond the physical limits of the object. The spiritual dimension is of use to Flavin here, as, along with the use of light, he draws on the entire metaphoric system that accompanies its presence and gives it its spiritual character. *Icons* make accessible the very genesis of this tension and ambiguity present in Flavin's work, the juxtaposition between light and object, between matter and message.

Flavin does not lay claim to evoking a spiritual fact, but to signaling its presence in matter. If it may be called so, it is a return to metaphor through matter, light and object. The strong contrast offered by the juxtaposition of the two types of matter gives rise not only to the antithesis but also to the idea of interdependence between the two regimes – the objectual and the luminous one. *Icon IV*, for example, combines a white square with the white light of a neon, placed at the top. It is the work that best highlights the aseptic aspect of Flavin's aesthetics. (Thierolf, Vogt, 2009, 14) The message is backed by emotional motives that make the artist dedicate the work to his brother as a funeral homage. The references to the valences of color and pure, immaculate space originate in the Asian culture, either in Chinese

culture (funeral white) or in Buddhism. The subtitle (*pure land*) confirms these references. *Icon V* is, as the artist himself said, "the result of more than ten years of research". (Thierolf, Vogt, 2009, 16) The iconoclast aspect of his works is also worth bringing up. Although the titles refer to the iconographic feature of an image, it is precisely its absence that refers to the spiritual space, which lies beyond the actual image. With Malevici as a precursor, Flavin takes up ideas of Russian Suprematism, but links them to minimalist discourse.

Dan Flavin's light installations, built of fluorescent tubes (neon's) of various shapes and colors, brings simple forms, without complications or details, in the viewer's sights. His sculptures use a minimalist language and are designed to be walked around and perceived more easily. The extension of the sculptural space outside the limits of the object through the process of light propagation is one of the fundamental aspects of his works.

For Flavin, light becomes an autonomous material suitable for creating the spatial and perceptive situations specific to minimal art. (Ferrer, 2001, 52) He will even make a distinction between the light cast by the fluorescent lamp and the lamp itself, which retains its autonomy as an object. When we look at his works, we can easily distinguish the shape of the neon, and around them is the light environment. Flavin attaches great importance to this environment, stating that "the environment guides the artist" (Flavin, 1966, 27-29).

In a review of the work *the nominal three* (1963), Joseph Kosuth places Flavin at the beginning of the end of modernism. Kosuth also notes that his works are a bridge between the art of Duchamp and that of the '60s, establishing a direct lineage to *ready-made*. Flavin's work, says Kosuth, is not a simple lamp, nor a delightful object, nor optical circus, but is what it itself is, an art object full of the responsible subjectivity of the author. (Kosuth, 1999, 18)

These works use electric light as an environment and an element of the artistic vocabulary. They are part of a living and concrete space. The use of neon brings the public closer to everyday life, to the elements of their domestic existence which they are accustomed to and come in daily contact with, but which now become an artwork, changing their functionality.

Thus, the viewer can experience a new form of interaction with his daily references. The light that propagates creates an environment around it, and the work thus takes up more space than the physical limits of the neon. The surrounding space is taken up by an aura that amplifies the work itself, creating the right environment for contemplation. Flavin's works use the third dimensionality by arranging the fluorescent tubes horizontally and vertically. One specific example is the work *Untitled (to Paul Gredinger)* from 1990 where two neon tubes are placed horizontally and perpendicularly to five vertical tubes (against the wall, two shorter, framed by three longer

ones). The work is also based on bringing the viewer closer to a spiritual space, in a conceptualist manner. It is a "contemplative meeting", where the real space is enlarged and extended by the light's reflections and its propagation power. It essentially changes the shape of space, turning it into light energy. (Kosuth, 1999, 19)

Bringing the viewer closer to a spiritual space and favoring the contemplative state is achieved starting from common, everyday objects. The space, enlarged and extended by the light's reflexing, creates for the viewer a precise illumination of the room, linked to everyday streetlights and consequently to profane lighting.

Most of Flavin's work is dedicated to friends or people who influenced him a lot. In a few cases, these are the artists who have marked his career and who are honored by the very so-called Monuments. This is the name that the homage to Vladimir Tatlin, begun in 1964, bears. In this case, the vertical fluorescent lights are placed in the shape of a pyramid recalling the Russian artist's upward spiral, *Monument for the Third International* (1919-1920). Tatlin's motto "real materials are real spaces" was relevant not only to Flavin, but to minimal art as a whole. (Colpitt, 1999, 23) The reliefs created by Tatlin between 1915-1916, placed at the meeting point of two walls, are the source of inspiration for Flavin's diagonal works, where he aims to relate two different spatial planes, as in the works *Monument on the survival of Mrs. Reppin*, of 1966, or *Green crossing green (to Piet Modrian who lacked green)*, of the same year.

One of Flavin's innovations consists in placing a neon tube at the meeting point between two walls. By doing this, the artist argued in favor of eliminating the edge that separated the two walls (and thus of the boundary between them) and the creation of a continuous space.

Dan Flavin remains one of the minimalist artists for whom the exploitation of the gallery space, the mechanism of visual perception and the use of light create unique experiences of space and matter for viewers who come into contact with his work. Light no longer plays the functional role it did in pop art, nor that of cancelling matter and shape as in conceptual art, but exists in itself, for itself and in order to create a space and an experience.

Created in 1966, the E.A.T. group (Experiments in Arts and Technology), was based on the collaboration between the artist Robert Rauschenberg and the engineer Billy Klüver, a laser specialist, but also on organizing an event: *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, which consisted of a series of performances by artists and engineers. The group was officially launched the following year when Robert Whitman and Fred Waldhauer

joined them. A collaboration between Klüver and these artists had existed since 1960. As a scientific researcher at Bell Telephone Laboratories, he would help Jean Tinguely with the technological aspects of setting up the work *Homage to New York City*, a self-destructive kinetic sculpture. (Wardrip-Fruin, 2003, 211-212).

Ever since its establishment as an organization, E.A.T. has sought to create a platform for the close collaboration of artists with engineers, with a view to achieving common projects in which artistic sensitivity and vision would be combined with the technical skills and knowledge of the engineers. This group certainly marks a necessity that the two "camps" felt, a need for rapprochement and mutual borrowing. The integration of artists in today's increasingly technological contemporary society was limited by their ability to be connected to technological developments. Concerning engineers, there was also a trend toward more sensibility and closeness to a society that did not always understand their latest innovations. The group's interest in popularizing the collaboration relationship between technology and science is highlighted by its editing the catalogue *The Machine*, as a result of a contest organized by E.A.T. together with the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1968. The catalogue is a chronological and illustrated selection regarding the relationship between the artist and technology from Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer to Nam June Paik and Hans Haacke.

Their first event, *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, involved artists, dancers, composers, and engineers. It tried to "stage" various situations, using the resources of science and technology. These enabled the viewer-cum-actor to observe the optical effects of holography, of communication through ultrasounds or through the sounds of their own bodies (the heartrate, for example), which were amplified and transmitted on a screen. (Ferrer, 2001, 92) Holography, laser, sounds and electronic images, light allow both the artist and the spectator to confront the technological world, a parallel world, but one which offers the possibility of diversifying materials and their force of expression in visual arts.

One of their most important projects was designing the pavilion for the 1970 Exhibition in Osaka, Japan. *Pepsi Pavilion* consisted of a huge half-sphere that contained an equally large spherical mirror within it. After entering a dark room where only moving shapes generated by laser light could be distinguished, visitors climbed a flight of stairs and reached the generous space overhead. Here, above them was a large aluminum mirror built according to an idea of Bob Whitman's. The mirror provided the image of the entire space, only upside down, and the optical effect was like that of a hologram. The spectacular effect of duplicating the gravitational planes is based on the optical projection of the space and light into the mirror. Robert Breer, the artistic director of the Pavilion, says that the

project attempts an "isolation of the senses and the creation of new relationships between them." And by animating the viewers they tried to offer them a "profound psychological experience that should make them aware of the world around them." (Breer, 2005, 323) The play of light generated by the mirror's reflective properties amplifies the participants' perceptual sensations but at the same time dissipates the room's spatial coordinates.

Conclusions. Along with the other currents of the neo-avant-garde of the 60-70s, Minimal art is responsible for the development of the artistic installation environment - an environment that will impose a new spatial and compositional sensibility. This new environment is supported by a paradigm of the "open art work" in which the viewer and the artwork, as well as the artwork and the space in which it is installed, are in an interdependent relationship. As we already see in this article, such a paradigm of working with space uses both architecture and technology to ultimately produce "aesthetic experiences". Light here becomes a device for transforming spatial perception and producing sensations and affects, associated either with countering the world of consumption, or with a world in which communication and technology considerably affect the relationship of human conscience to the world and to society.

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