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ASPECTS OF THE FAILURE OF SIXTIES AMERICAN ART

A DEGREE THESIS

PAUL TARPEY

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INTRODUCTION

There are aspects of the sixties American art experience that can be seen to have a relevance within the eighties.

There is an absence contained within this thought that has been misrepresented.

The political and social side of this art perhaps makes sense within this absence.

One of the conceptions of sixties art is of an attitude that presumed that art, as a pinnacle of modern culture, could be used as a platform for discussion. The notion of a political attitude was one that emerged as artists, primarily in America, redefined their space in response to the growing commodification of objects and artists themselves. The artist as pop star was an event that the Sixties have claimed more than any other era, transgressing the caricature of the romantic outsider. The new modern masters of that era reacted against the venerated norm - at that time abstract expressionism and a way of production promoted by critics such as Clement Greenberg. Artists such as Rauchenberg, Johns and Warhol had achieved the status of the previous generation without the norm of a 'lifetime's struggle'.

The reaction of these artists was an art historical one. A development of the Fifties monopoly but not in the perceived logical path that Pollock's generation had laid down, i.e. an unbroken path through impressionism, expressionism, cubism, abstract expressionism. The Sixties generation produced work that was grounded in the culture and experience of their time. An art experience that in recognising the unfeasibility of the previous generation's 'existentialism' undertook work that allowed a reading of it as social.

In part, there was a vague conception of starting afresh, mediating the discipline of painting primarily through an attitude that seemed the antithesis of the previous generation's formula. By this time a type of appreciation had been established towards American Art.

Painting loosely allowed readings of it as the struggle of achievement, the soul of the artist on canvas, the modern psyche laid bare on a flat plane of worked paint with its various social readings implying a documentation of the greatness of the American way. Just as Paris and its culture had come to be regarded as classic from the canon of master works since the beginning of the century, the new generation of Sixties artists found themselves with a choice of continuation or not. This new work was offered to an audience that had accepted the claims of abstract expressionism as the ultimate logical extension of the European modern achievement. Being now linear the new work initially was not read as belonging. In retrospect this problem was quickly rectified. The emergence of a new art in the advanced consumer climate of the late fifties-sixties was recognised by a system of promoters, galleries and critics intent on establishing the art and themselves as working products.

The new art surmounted it's initially perceived reaction and settled down to the business of creating a scene that complemented it both financially and critically. By promoting the artworld at the time mainly in New York as participatory, a base was established that allowed anything that occurred to be construed as culturally significant.

Thus the phrase "everyone should be famous for fifteen minutes", though uttered by an artist, could not specifically be seen to apply to artists only. This reinforced the conception that something was happening. Art became important and in an age of pronounced media glorification it's relevance was seen and measured by the amount of attention it received. The oscillatory links between youth culture and the emerging thrust of the new art forced a dimension on the art mechanisation that was not as pronounced in other eras especially in America - the social aspect. Previous socially affiliated art in the States would have been the art schemes of the depression initiated by the government. Many of the previous generation's masters had participated in these schemes (and in the main disowned work produced by them as 'craft').

The new social aspect attached to the sixties generation was much looser. In embracing popular culture and investing in it an importance that was previously disowned in artmaking, various new critiques were formulated that went against the "straight" post war fifties philosophies of America's dominance as the primary industrial power in the free world.

By recognising the double standards implied in the definition of the free world, the new art forged links with emerging radical politics. By the late sixties the space afforded by the general conception of freedom in society began to be explored. The rapid cultural change after 1968 announced a new set of social and political conditions that could at least be recognised by art if not challenged by it. This attitude by now was international with re-emphasised interest in the traditional European avant garde (i.e. Duchamp's influence on the emerging conceptual movement). European artists responded creating a more coherent internationalism than the previous era of expressionism fostered on a post war Europe as a glorification of American society.

Both American and European artists could be said to have recognised a space afforded to them in society that would allow a critical exploration, not just of previous art, but its role in the ideology of advanced industrial capitalism.

At the end of the eighties, looking back at the art of the sixties-seventies has now become an exercise in nostalgia. More than any epoch those times are generally perceived as progressive, a manifestation of strength in terms of the appreciation of critically successful work. The equal rise of an art community and art practices offered their success as a triumph of a progressive philosophical attitude. The artists had a 'seriousness' about them. Coupled with the fact that this relatively new work began to sell instantly, the whole exercise was embodied with a weight that allowed the work to be regarded as important.

"Minimal art with it's self-sufficient non-relational forms and non-hierarchical arrangements of equal members functions as a metaphor for relationships in an ideally levelled non-stratified democratic society." '

The new directions that this art took involved redefining traditional avant-garde techniques in regard to the studio, the artist and the gallery. This in turn brought with it an increasingly sophisticated response from the market. To promote what was initially seen as difficult art, and this was an art that often questioned the gallery as forum, the promoters became as multi-media in their attitudes as the artists.

By default these exercises - for example 'happenings' - in giving the impression of furthering and breaking boundaries involving (in theory) non-art participation, became vaguely established as progressive, social, honest in the public sphere.

"I believe that art is shedding it's vaunted mystery for a common sense of keenly realised decoration. Symbolising is dwindling - becoming slight. We are pressing downwards towards no art, a mutual sense of psychologically indifferent decoration, a mutual pleasure of seeing known to everyone." *

The impression that a politics of art was being formulated persists. The new art arose in response to the excesses of the previous generation and the established venerated commodification of their achievement. Minimalism and pop, while still remaining basically within the arena of culture, attempted to subvert the notion that everything achieved in the name of culture had to be invested with mythic status. This was a culture that had it's status confirmed by the acceptance of 'modern art' as a viable product of modern society from the forties onwards.

The freedom given by these new directions, often encompassing popular cultural activities (i.e. Warhol's experiment), reinforced the idea that a basis was being formed for future art disciplines. That in turn would function in the future Utopian "levelled, non-stratified democratic society".

The levels of freedom explored were undertaken in the art magazines. Criticism formed an important basis. An internationalism emerged within which the 'local' was not really emphasised. The bible that was the art magazine played a major part in the creation of 'the' movement. The sixties writers such as, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Barbara Rose and Clement Greenberg worked closely with artists. There was a monitoring, an eagerness to put firmly in perspective the 'newness'. Whether Greenberg's insistent reading of minimalism as paintings total reductionism or Judd and Morris' writing that was characterised by "a rigorous abstinence from all attempts at interpretation and at historical prescription."

Works from the late sixties can be seen to be radical in the sense that an application was fostered that put methods of art production and critical analysis firmly on the agenda.

Pop art, for example, depended on "the idea and sources of motivation outside art".⁴ This idealism matured and generated progression in a way that was denied to previous art practices. By this I mean previous art movements up to the middle of the twentieth century contained a factor of obsolescence. Once the initial phase of exploration of a concept, expressionism, etc. had worn off, the movement became easy to define culminating in a mannerist phase and offering interest in so far as it became something to react to.

This factor of art writing/creation can be applied to most movements, minimalism and pop included. It is a construct of taste-value, and it is firmly placed within the academic ghetto that is art criticism. It is this construct that is used by curators, collectors and media workers as a gauge that determines the worth of a practice. The worth of something is also welded to the idea of success that creates the concept of relevance.

For a while this norm was subverted. The new art of the sixties demanded active participation. It looked back to DADA and Duchamp rather than developing directly from preceding movements. The media in covering the phenomenon revealed itself in the process of participating.

Art's function in respect to the time it was created in was one of active critical exploration purporting to define the times that were in the language that was. Though still inherently aesthetic, there officially became a link between art and political action (active art unions and incidents such as Robert Morris' protest against American overseas imperialism that involved him closing down his show) the nature of a certain type of work became associated with a certain type of attitude.

Previously, when art was political it was discussed within a different criteria of effectiveness. The aesthetic was not it's foremost quality. Under the rhetoric of agit-prop and propaganda it's concerns were labelled didactical, common even, in terms of high art. Previous mediations between instigators of culture and political activism (i.e. the Constructivists) tended to be contained aspects. In the European tradition this 'discrepancy' was often explained within a humanist argument (i.e. Picasso's tangential links with socialism).

The sixties politicisation does not seem to have been initially a determined stance. Artists and critics casually arrived at a political position if in some cases at all.

Benjamin Buchloh explains the position of critics at that time as "depoliticised" where apoliticalness is due to a self-imposed condition of passivity and complacency within academic specialisations where devotion to discursive detail and scholarly exactitude had displaced the urgency of an activist and interventionist conception of critical practice. ⁵

With the advent of the seventies the previous two decades of American art could be put into perspective. Minimalism, the work of Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Judd and Morris were now seen as forming an established canon. Criticism was mature in the sense of being aware of it's position of having come through a significant decade of change. The power of Greenberg's and Fried's reductionist theories had been displaced in the definitions attested to the new art.

Though aware, this new critical base, was not constructed in a way that it could be seen to offer total liberation. There is a failure implied here and it is one, as Buchloh points out, of understanding. A refusal to understand art production as the "dialectical counterpart of mass cultural and ideological formations and their determining impact on high cultural production". ⁶

The aspects of minimalism, or more accurately post-minimalism and conceptualism that hold important today are those that are contained within the work of artists that matured after the initial settling period of the sixties. In the works of Hans Haacke, Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers the disciplines of process are applied to confront the ideologies of cultural and social production.

Within the increasing sophisticated promotion and conception of art, aspects of the minimal achievement of the sixties were beginning to be isolated and marginalised within it's own linear system. By now, that period in history is one defined by the celebration of individual oeuvres and authors.

"Not only do we have to grasp that art is part of social production but we also have to realise that it is itself productive, that it actively produces meanings. Art is constitutive of ideology, it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced and even redefined." ⁶⁵

In opposition to the idea of the artist as master of a vision the works of Haacke, Weiner, etc., took on board a discipline that came to terms with the fact that a defined, directed autonomy by an artist was being

negated through the infrastructure of professional art promotion.

"With the disintegration of traditional ties between producer and consumer of the arts the artist actually is in certain ways, a free-floating unattached individual, not bound by patron or commission. In this way, the conditions of work are even more sharply contrasted with those of other types of work. It is easy to see in this context how the artist comes to be idealised as a representative of non-forced and truly expressive activity (overlooking where necessary the virtual impossibility in very many cases of actually making a living wage out of such work)."

Because of the nature of their work artists that map the conflict between high and mass culture and pose the question of the transformation of the historical dialect are often isolated. This isolation Buchloh has explained as being due to the reinforced "compartmentalization" of intellectual labour and the licence held by criticism to play "historical role casting".²³

In 1969 Barbara Rose writing in Art Forum about the political implications' of Claus Oldenberg's store-art showroom in the New York slums described the exercise as "a revolutionary personality faced with an impasse in American politics".

Although it was work dealing with the status of art commodification in a materialistic society, Rose sums up this direction of minimalism as a diversion, a 'reaction' that colours a great deal of the new art we are now seeing. 9

It seemed beyond Rose to formulate an attitude that would put the new practical directions of minimalism into perspective. Thus a slack emerges, the new canon of minimalism is reinforced.

Responding to Rose's linking of Oldenberg's minimalism with social content, the figurative painter Leon Golub states his opinion:

"In that the words won't fit the facts the language of political terminology, the implied references are not proportionate to the ideas exemplified by the artifacts described or the artists presumed intent." 10

Golub's latent humanism is here responding basely to the cliches of 'modern art'. If there's nothing there it doesn't mean anything. He is implying that if political art is being made it must be concrete in a way that minimal art is not. Equally Rose's vagueness reinforced the idea.

Golub emerges again as one of the most prominent figures in the return to painting in the eighties. Prominent in the sense that as a sixties artist now seen with political content he seemed to give the market an honesty as distinct from the accusation of careerism that was levelled at most of the other painters. Within this promotion of the calculated retrieval of the art object as a source of investment. The absence of the argument of a specific placing-definition of political art in the mainstream was not taken up. In response to the commodification of his work Golub stated:

"I can't put a means test on anybody that might purchase a painting. You can say Saatchi or anybody else who buys a work owns me, takes possession of my mind, so to speak of my art. But then I enter his home or his situation or his environment . . . the main thing I have always wanted was to go public. I wanted to have some historical role, not just so that I'm a famous artist. It's reporting on circumstances, if nobody sees the work it makes no kind of report."''

Golub unashamedly places his faith in what he would like to see as an unmediated market where the honesty of his work on canvas is seen for what it is. In retrospect concerning his earlier remarks a case could be made in his favour that he was right all along and that a political art is only really political when it's as direct as his is.

This is an argument that has helped the market and by implication a linear reading of art history that forces a conception of minimal arts political direction as an unsuccessful diversification.

To further this point I would like to quote Jeffrey Deit, a current dealer in 'post-conceptual' art, neo-geo:

"All the time neo-expressionism dominated some of the galleries and captured alot of attention in the media, there was still a very strong strain in the American art world of work in this conceptual tradition"¹²

By this conceptual tradition is meant the appropriation of various motifs and styles from the sixties. In one way it is a rigorous examination of late modernism in the sixties, in another there is a total process of ignoring implied. The main prerogative is one where the assorted manifestations of the market are so inherent in the attitude that the disciplines are purely self-referential. They quote history:

"Its a no-mans-land that alot of us enjoy moving around in, the thing is not to lose your sense of humour because its only art"¹³

The legacy of absence is recognised, an absence of achievement. In presenting the work of the sixties the new generation that specifically tackled this subject look upon it as the absence implied by death, they see themselves engaged in its rebirth.

There is not an undertaking of socio-critical exploration i.e. what exactly do these concerns imply, because of the insularity of the project. The social aspects of these concerns are not defined, mentioned or touched upon. The neo-geo phenomenon initially perceived as the superficial reordering of late modernist emblems has settled down, (since the 1986 Boston exhibition 'Endgame'), in a financially supported shell engaging themselves in what they have termed as a critically necessary conversation.¹⁴

Whereas arts self-referential examination in the sixties became examination of its social and economic context, this new art concerns itself solely with the visual. Stella's dictum 'you only see what is there' is applicable but the originality of his exercise in context, raised attitudes that fostered the reassessment of previous attitudes. There is no need for that in this new art.

"In art as elsewhere incestuous unions are designed to ensure the future but in fact they guarantee decadence"¹⁵

The criticism that surrounds this manifestation hints that the original concerns of the early conceptual exercise, for example, use-value objects for aesthetic-exchange value.

Today use-value is now largely a projection of exchange value but both are now largely subsumed by sign exchange value. By this logic art works are no different from consumer goods.

Brian O'Doherty spoke of the sixties art occurring in a restless social context

"in which a potentially revolutionary situation existed. That quasi-revolution failed as it had to. But some of its insights and lessons remain."¹⁶

He concludes by saying there is a vested interest in suppressing them. By purporting sincerity in reassessing the conceptual movement the neo-geo exercise supported by a generation of collectors will ensure that the significant pointers from the sixties will remain thoroughly suppressed.

CONCLUSION

Minimal arts failure was it's inability to focus in terms of criticism it's functional role in capitalist society. By it's attitude it is inherently a political art. It's attitude can be read as radical in the achievements of its main protagonists to reassess the relation of high culture to mass culture and thus by implication, it is a social art. A definition of it at the time was not formulated thus the very concept exists as nebulous.

Barbara Rose was one who never took on the task of the full political implicatons of the collective work. This work tentatively seemed to formulate itself in opposition to the infrastructure that presented it (museums, etc., various managers of the public consciousness).

The critical success of Judd, Morris and Flavin was based on the achievement of dissecting the previous historical canon and in opening a space for relevant progressive art and criticism. In firmly grounding this achievement in the sixties it can be seen that Judd et al created an equal canon that eventually was seized by market forces to strengthen the conception of an academic system of taste arbitration. The major casualties of what could be called entrenchment were the political conceptualists, Haacke, etc.

It can be seen that these political conceptualists are put in the position of continually attempting to establish the original space afforded (often in theory) to the arts that the atmosphere of the political, intellectual climate of the sixties did.

Michael Fried is regarded as conservative in his attempts at the time to place the original minimalists within a theatrical realm. How then should we regard Judd and Flavin who as Daniel Buren reported in May 1986, censored a piece by him for the Guggenheim museum on the grounds that it was "in-aesthetic" "

A nostalgia for the sixties and it's upheavals will always exist if only for it's possibilities. The appropriations of the neo-geo artists of the eighties have shown the sixties contain a much more potent form of the nostalgia than say the types of epoch superficially plundered in the works of neo-expressionism. There will always be a confused unfinished air in regard to the minimal art exercise - a sort of truth wrapped up in failure.

What cannot fail is of course the consolidated managerial process that is the capitalist construct of the art market. The commodification that minimal art originally questioned has reaffirmed itself at the expense of the critical failure of the sixties.

The failure is often seen as a failure of a type of truth. Tangential to this the market has established itself and has acquired a perceived honesty by it's resilience. In claiming the sculpture and painting of the sixties as their own in the eighties i.e. giving them 'classic' status, it seeks a part in their past history which is not a political past.

CONCLUDED

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