

Sculpture since 1960

Since the 1960s the medium of sculpture has been an open question rather than a consistent category. Sculpture's three-dimensionality, its temporal and spatial incitements to the viewer, and its relations to bodies, quotidian objects, and built structures have all been expanded upon to the point where it might at first seem that any artistic practice can be nominated as "sculpture." Rather than lead to the dissolution

of the medium of sculpture, however, this historical situation has facilitated the centrality of the sculptural in contemporary art. Its questions have become generative of entirely distinct and coherent new media or artistic practices (as in the consolidation of performance and of installation art since the 1960s or with the emergence of social practice in recent decades). There has also been an equally vital continued investigation of the potentials and capacities for three-dimensional representation as sculpture's distinction from the quotidian and the pictorial.

In what follows I will examine some of the major tendencies in sculpture in America and Europe since 1960. While there are key texts in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the major positions in sculptural aesthetics in recent decades have been established through artistic practice itself. Consequently, individual artists are cited as exemplary of tendencies and positions, but I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive history of sculpture so much as to delineate broadly the vicissitudes of its evaluation.

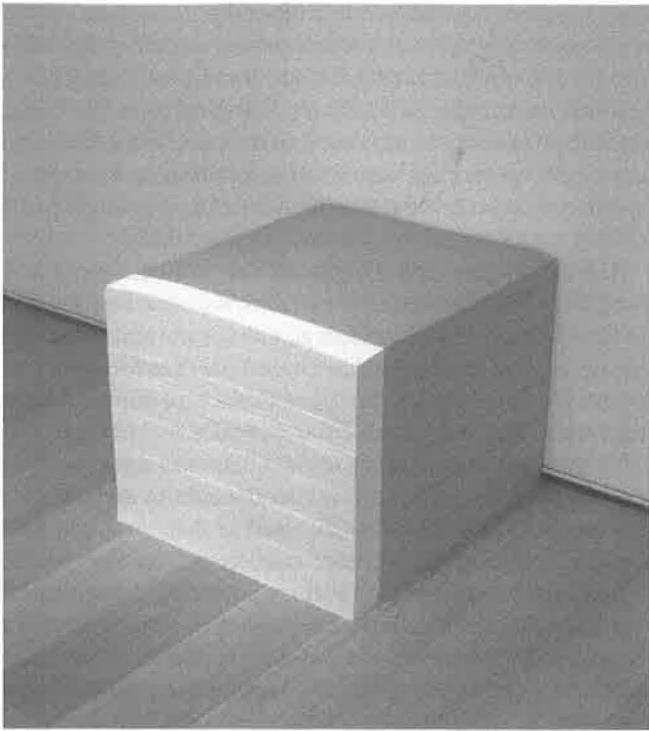
The New Base: Minimalism in the 1960s. Without a doubt, the movement that has come to be known as Minimalism proved to be one of the most impactful for artistic practice since the 1960s (Foster, 1996; Potts, 2000). Minimalism reacted to the dominant logic of modernist criticism put forth by Clement Greenberg, who asserted a teleological view that art was best judged according to how well it advanced the distillation of the core traits of its medium. Artist-critics such as Donald Judd (1965) and Robert Morris (1993) rejected Greenberg's emphasis on the pictorial and posited the unvaried three-dimensional object as a retort. While Judd argued that works should be neither painting nor sculpture but rather nonfunctional, nonrepresentational "objects" and Morris chidingly stripped sculpture down to performative propositions, both advocated for simple, reductive, and geometric works that critics, viewers, and other artists nevertheless understood as "sculpture." Both Judd and Morris took as axiomatic a radical suppression of representation. This was achieved, in part, through a compression of the formal dynamics of artworks to singular units either alone or nonhierarchically and serially related. Minimalism aimed to bracket the authorship of the artist through the elimination of traces of making or uniqueness as well as through the reliance on premade or fabricated industrial components. Combined with the extreme reduction of form, viewers encountering such works in the gallery or museum were understood to find their own perceptual encounter with the object activated.

With its uninflected and intentionally boring objects, Minimalism shifted emphasis away from the sculptural object to the viewing situation more broadly. In this way, Minimalism refocused the criteria of evaluation on the variable perceptual reactions resulting from the viewer's engagements with the object in a specific time and place. The most adroit account of these art-theoretical moves came not from Mini-

malism's defenders, but from one of its most ardent critics, Michael Fried. His "Art and Objecthood" (1967) remains one of the most important art critical texts of the twentieth century, and its effects continue to be felt in sculptural discourse to the present day. Fried provided the best definition of Minimalism in the course of his defense of the art object's autonomy and his critique of what he understood to be Minimalism's cheapening of the aesthetic experience to mere "theater." Fried's attack on Minimalism had a counter-effect and canonized Minimalism and its shift of emphasis to the viewer. Subsequent sculptors and critics valued the situational, spatial, and relational capacities of sculpture, and it has been their exploration that has fueled the expansion of the sculptural medium to incorporate performance, architecture, and installation.

Importantly, Fried chose to attack the Minimalists' claims that they had fully suppressed sculptural representation—in particular, anthropomorphism. In one of the most compelling parts of his argument, he contended that these objects in human scale displaced space and demanded physical relationality in much the same way as statues. In other words, by occupying the category of sculpture (even in spite of their makers' assertions that they had moved beyond traditional medium distinctions), Minimal objects were not as literal and nonreferential as their creators posited. By contrast, their claims to be nonrepresentational were subverted by their activation of bodily relations of scale. Representation and figuration, in other words, continued to operate in even the most rigorously reductive objects as the denominator against which claims of literalism were judged. The recognition of implicit anthropomorphism in the sculptural encounter proved to be a prescient observation, as the potentials of three-dimensional representation continue to be central to object-making to the present day.

Sculpture Expanded: The 1970s. Minimalism quickly engendered a number of reactions and adaptations, loosely grouped under the term "Postminimalism," dubbed by Robert Pincus-Witten (1977). Postminimalist artists often shared the Minimalists' deployment of geometric structure, seriality, and emphasis on viewing situation, but they rejected its aspirations to anonymity, its look of perfected industrial fabrication, and its implicit universalism. Artists such as Eva Hesse and Richard Serra created geometric works that attended to the effects of gravity on materials, that modified geometric structure through individuation of parts, and that addressed the viewer as embodied co-habitant rather than as mere perceptual coordinate. "Limitations of weight, physical properties, and materials cannot be imagined," Serra said in 1970, arguing for the directness of the viewer's comprehension of gravity and weight in relation to their own proprioception (Serra, 1994). On Serra's works, the artist-critic Scott Burton (2012) remarked in 1969, "Material instability creates impermanence," drawing out the underlying importance of temporality in Serra's actively balanced works, as well as positing a



Untitled (Silver Beach), 1990 (offset print on paper, endless copies), Felix Gonzalez-Torres. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, THROUGH PRIOR BEQUEST OF MARGUERITA S. RITMAN, THROUGH PRIOR GIFT OF LUCILLE E. AND JOSEPH L. BLOCK; SARA SZOLD AND MARJORIE AND LOUIS SUSMAN FUNDS, 2005.19. © THE FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES FOUNDATION

contingent mode of sculpture that would reject the logic of the permanent monument. In this and other writings, Burton (2012) criticized Minimalism for its generalization of the viewer, arguing instead—as Hesse and Serra did in their works—for an address to the viewer that activated individualized embodiments, personal histories, and affect. Pincus-Witten nominated Burton as one of the central Postminimalists, and his writing and sculpture offer important formulations of the problems and potentials of sculpture after Minimalism. In the mid-1970s, Burton turned from his work as a performance artist to begin making functional sculpture in the form of chairs and benches. These works trumped Minimalism’s activation of the viewer’s relations by offering actual and intimate bodily encounters (through being used, for instance). Consequently, they were accessible to non-art audiences who might not know or care that they were sitting upon a sculpture. Extending the Minimalist suppression of the artist’s authorship, Burton made sculptures that intentionally camouflaged themselves as recognizable and functional furniture. These performative “pragmatic sculptures” aimed at more demotic and public forms of conceptually engaged art. This stance would position Burton as one of the key players in the development of public art in the 1980s.

Overall, while Minimalism established a new direction for sculpture, it was the practice and theory of Postminimalism

that has proven to be most generative of the subsequent range of attitudes toward the variable sculptural object, materiality, site-specificity, temporality, and direct engagements with the viewer’s physicality (Krauss, 1977; Wagner, 2012). Such was the case with the proliferation of installation art in the 1970s (Potts, 2001). Beginning in the late 1960s, many Postminimalist artists turned away from coherent form to “anti-form” works that were adaptable and variable according to their placement and that were in dialogue in a more sustained way with their sites. (Morris, 1993; Williams, 2000; Potts, 2000). Installation art developed quickly and became increasingly spectacular to the point where it is better understood as a new medium rather than as a sub-category of sculpture (Bishop, 2005). Similarly, many artists extended Postminimalism in works that left the conventional exhibition space behind—most notably, land art and earthworks. Intervening in the landscape, such artists as Robert Smithson, Mary Miss, and Michael Heizer inverted the emerging priorities of installation art and its emphasis on spatial immersion. Often, earthworks were only experienced as displaced through mediations by photography and film, creating an imagined rather than an actual bodily and spatial encounter that, however mediated, was understood to have its prototype in the sculptural (Krauss, 1977).

Performance art, too, developed rapidly during the 1970s, and some artists extended sculpture’s physical address to the viewer into the larger arenas of daily life and the social. A key figure was Joseph Beuys, who defined sculpture as a creation (be it an object, a thought, an action) that becomes added to the world and its history. “[Man] is dependent on his social circumstances, but he is free in his thinking, and here is the point of origin of sculpture. The thought is sculpture.” Believing in the symbolic power of this creation to intervene in history, Beuys would famously declare that, “every human being is an artist” (Beuys and Sharp, 1969). Beuys’s theory of “social sculpture” would prove to be a touchstone for many sculptors as well as for the emergence of public practice as art in the subsequent decades. Similarly, Gilbert & George understood themselves as “living sculpture.” In addition to creating performance works that took on the guise of statuary, such as their famous *Singing Sculpture* (first performed 1970), they categorized their daily activities as sculptural practice. Their evenings drinking at their local pub were their “drinking sculptures” that they documented with photographic collages. Chris Burden adapted Minimalist logics but put forth his own body as the literal (anthropomorphic) object, shifting the activation of the viewer from a perceptual to an ethical proposition. Eleanor Antin, in her 1972 *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, also used her own body as sculptural medium in this feminist work that critiqued both the history of ideal figures in sculpture and normative prescriptions for women’s contemporary bodies. All of these performance practices defined themselves in relation to sculpture, appropriating the medium’s address to

the body, its figurative tradition, and its signification of civic or social authority.

While installation art, land art, and performance were in dialogue with the medium of sculpture, they strained the definitions of that category to the point where some post-modernist critics could not envision its future.

Predicting the End of Sculpture. At the end of the 1970s, Rosalind Krauss produced a number of important texts on sculpture, including her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977). Rewriting the history of twentieth-century modernism, Krauss advocated for an understanding of sculpture that rejected the logic of the monument and the statue. Rather than a stylistic history, Krauss traced the persistence of modern sculptors' questioning of the narrative transparency and the self-contained unity underwriting the canonical centrality of the freestanding statue and the public monument. Krauss instead told the story of a fracturing of the implied inner core of the statue into an open, variable, and receptive spatial relation with the viewer—"from a static, idealized medium to a temporal and material one."

Krauss followed *Passages* with an important article that redirected its triumphal history. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979) remains one of the most oft-cited postmodernist writings on sculpture. This article attempted to periorize a break with modernism and declare the viability of postmodernist practices that exceeded (and overloaded) conventional categories of medium. In one of the most compelling descriptions of the dissolution of the category of sculpture, Krauss defended such new categories as earthworks, installation, and anti-form as logical outgrowths of the quietus of the medium of sculpture. Krauss's structuralist argument is seductive, but its taxonomies rely on a reduction of all previous sculpture to that of the monument (leaving little room for the vital traditions of the ideal statue, the portrait bust, the statuette, or mobile liturgical sculpture, for instance). This text has had a significant impact on sculptural practice (more so than *Passages*) and has been used, somewhat against Krauss's intention, as a license to further nominate varied practices as sculpture. While Krauss began her argument with a case against the historicist incorporation of new modes into the conventions of sculpture, many readers have done just the opposite. They have used the notion of an "expanded field" not to declare new modes of practice but rather to further extend the boundaries of "sculpture," reinforcing the centrality of the category in the decades since her text.

Another prediction of the end of the medium of sculpture was offered by Benjamin Buchloh in his 1980 essay "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture" (Buchloh 2000). Writing in defense of the artist's dislocations of objects and alterations of museum spaces, Buchloh upheld Asher as the negation of modern sculpture's history of anxious relations with the consumer object and with mass production.

Since Asher's spatially and temporally contingent works were made through subtraction or dislocation rather than production, they both revealed and transcended sculpture's status as commodity in Buchloh's dialectical narrative. While less influential than Krauss's text of the same year, Buchloh's essay nevertheless has been taken as establishing a lineage of non-material sculptural practices, lending a political pedigree to such later practices as relational aesthetics.

Object, Body, and Public in the 1980s. Krauss and Buchloh both advocated for a teleological view that seemed to foreclose the material object as a sculptural aim, yet it was the object that emerged as the central concern for sculpture of the 1980s—whether that be as critique of commodification or as repository of affects and politics.

A dominant theme of art of the 1980s was the postmodernist critique of contemporary media culture and its reinforcement of commodification. Rather than produce new images, artists mined popular culture and advertising for representations that could be appropriated in the service of cultural critique. Within the medium of sculpture, such an approach led directly to the commodity object. Indeed, one sees a resurgence of object-based sculptural practices after the previous decade of their dissolution into performance and installation. Artists such as Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, and Allan McCollum reframed the authority given to the mass-produced, commodity object. These artists were far from unified in their attitude, however. McCollum, for instance, appears more oppositional than an artist such as Koons who, with a willful avoidance of irony, celebrates rather than attacks the spectacles of fame and media culture. These artists reinvested in Marcel Duchamp's tactic of the ready-made object nominated as art, but shifted the question from the definition of art to issues of exchange value, symbolic value, and sign value of objects, images, and brands (Baudrillard, 1981).

The refocus on the object as sculpture in the 1980s also drew heavily on a renewed interest in psychoanalytic theory and the critique it afforded of identity and subjectivity. Just as Duchamp's ready-made reemerged as a touchstone for the 1980s, so too did the Surrealist object. A key figure in this was Louise Bourgeois (Potts, 2000; Wagner, 2012). By the 1980s, Bourgeois's career as an artist had spanned over four decades, but it experienced a major reevaluation at this time. In traditional sculptural materials such as marble and bronze as well as with techniques of assemblage and installation, Bourgeois came to exemplify a post-Freudian psychoanalytic approach with her symbolically charged objects that visualized repression, sublimation, limitations of language, obsession, and aggression (Bourgeois, 1998). Her sculptures read as deeply individual while, at the same time, they served as extrapolations of larger cultural questions about feminism, motherhood, gender, power, and sexuality. This relied on her foregrounding of sculptural representation and her accumulative renderings of the human body and its parts.

In the 1970s, it appeared (for instance, to Krauss and Buchloh) that contemporary figurative sculpture was an impossibility, yet one of the most important areas of critique for art of the subsequent decades was the politics of the representation of the human body. Consequently, the 1980s saw a resurgence of figural representation in works from artists who adopted feminism, critiqued racism, and intervened in the AIDS crisis. Drawing upon the provocations of the history of the Surrealist object, artists such as Robert Gober, Rona Pondick, Mike Kelley, and Kiki Smith reinvested in sculptural figuration. For them, the three-dimensional rendering of the human body served as a provocation to politics and to the psyche, and their works demonstrated how effective and critical figuration could be. Within the medium of sculpture the human figure (as form or analogue) has consistently been central, due to sculpture's physical relationality in three dimensions, and the artists of the 1980s reestablished its viability and variability for contemporary sculpture.

The other main development in sculpture in the 1980s was the widespread debate about public art. The two key moments were the dedication of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* in 1982 and the 1985 trial surrounding Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York City. The Minimalist aesthetic of Lin's memorial was initially controversial, but it has come to be one of the most popular of monuments in Washington, D.C. Lin's piece demonstrated the affective power of the reductive object, and its influence can be seen today in the many pared-down memorial forms across the world. Serra's work incited the opposite reaction. Installed in 1981, Serra created a site-specific sculpture for the Federal Plaza in New York City. Almost immediately, workers in the surrounding buildings began to criticize this 120-foot-long arc of steel. Ultimately, a public hearing was held in 1985, and the work was destroyed in 1989 by its removal from its dedicated site (Serra, 1994). The contrast between the public reaction to these two, not formally dissimilar, works is revealing. Lin achieved popular accessibility, whereas Serra's work was widely seen as an aggressive imposition into a social space. What separates the two is an attitude toward the user and viewer of the works. While Serra's sculpture did afford a perceptual reframing of the otherwise ignored plaza, the everyday lives of workers and passersby were impacted negatively by its blockage of their movement. Serra's *Tilted Arc* was often seen as a contrast to the new mode of public art that emerged in the 1980s by artists such as Lin, Athena Tacha, Scott Burton, and Siah Armajani. These artists emphasized the participatory relationship to landscape and its physical uses, deliberately creating works that were integrated into their sites and that facilitated the inhabitations of their users.

Participation and Proliferation. Perhaps the most influential sculptor of the last decade of the twentieth century was Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Beginning in the late 1980s,

Gonzalez-Torres pioneered a poetic and evocative appropriation of Minimalist forms and tactics rooted in an activist stance toward cultural memory and democratic participation. His work drew from the anti-assimilationist politics of visibility of AIDS activism, but recast it in objects that offered nuanced imperatives for survival, resisting erasure, and community. One of the most important innovations he made was to open his sculptures to participation through the act of gift giving. Whether stacks of paper or piles of candy, his works were meant to be touched and taken from. The museum or collector assumed the responsibility for renewing the sculptures and restoring their wholeness in perpetuity. Thus, they were not static objects of perception. Rather, they become virally diffused into the lives of those who take away their component parts. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres made the experience of sculpture one of connection, mutual responsibility, and community rather than an isolated aesthetic encounter that stayed within the walls of the museum. Gonzalez-Torres catalyzed a generation of subsequent artists who understood such questions of social relations and participation as paramount. He was singled out by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) as a forebear of "relational aesthetics" and public practices for this reason.

While sculpture's demise was predicted as a result of the proliferation of new modes of artistic practice, this has not come to pass. To the contrary, there are multiple viable modes of the sculptural in contemporary art. Appropriated objects and assemblage both continue to be a main focus for sculptors. In conjunction, fiber and textile work has become increasingly central, from the earlier work of Harmony Hammond to artists such as Shinique Smith and Allyson Mitchell. Interfaces between fashion and figuration have drawn on and contributed to the discourse of statuary, as has been the case with Yinka Shonibare and Nick Cave. A number of performative practices continue to link themselves to a history of sculpture. Some new media artists have found in the history of sculpture a more apt set of precedents and challenges for their practices of three-dimensional representation in virtual and digital spaces, as with the work of Claudia Hart. Figuration, in many forms, continues as a main arena of investigation, for instance in the work of Charlie Ray, Marc Quinn, Rona Pondick, and Rebecca Warren. The architectural is reframed as the participatory in the work of an artist like Oscar Tuazon, with his sculptures that hover between useful structures and sculptural representations of the built environment. As was observed in a major 2007 exhibition about some of these diverse practices (Hoptman, 2007), sculpture has reemerged as central to contemporary art—even as the contours of that category are being constantly redrawn.

[See also Beuys, Joseph; Bourgeois, Louise; Contemporary Art; Embodiment; Installation Art; Minimal Art; Performance Art; Postmodernism; Public Art; and Relational Aesthetics.]

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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
AESTHETICS

SECOND EDITION

MICHAEL KELLY

Editor in Chief

Volume 5

Obscenity–Simulacrum

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press is a department of the
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With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016
www.oup.com

The first edition was published in 1998.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Encyclopedia of aesthetics / Michael Kelly, editor in chief.—Second edition.
volumes cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-974710-8 (set : hardback)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937030-6 (v. 1 : acid-free paper)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937031-3 (v. 2 : acid-free paper)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937032-0 (v. 3 : acid-free paper)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937033-7 (v. 4 : acid-free paper)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937034-4 (v. 5 : acid-free paper)—
ISBN 978-0-19-937035-1 (v. 6 : acid-free paper)

1. Aesthetics—Encyclopedias. I. Kelly, Michael, 1953— editor of compilation.

BH56.E53 2014

111'.8503—dc23 2013038055

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper