

SAN ROCCO - MONKS AND MONKEYS 2A+P/A on grey furniture * Michael Abrahamson on sculpture * Andrea Balestrero on Francesco Lo Savio * Erin Besler and Ian Besler on scale models * Marco Biraghi on Mies van der Rohe's recent fortunes * Filippo Cattapan on Pieter Jansz. Saenredam * Benedict Clouette and Marlisa Wise discover hyperminimalism * Lorenzo De Chiffre visits Herzog & de Meuron's Stone House in Tavole * Francisco Díaz on an island of Catholic monks * Christian Dimmer and Erez Golani Solomon on Muji * Fabrizio Gallanti composes a list of materials * Kersten Geers on Stirling's minimalism * Beth Hughes on the Blue House * Diogo Seixas Lopes on Siza at Novartis * Sophie Nys visits Heidegger's hut * Freek Persyn on spaces for people who are not your friends * Valter Scelsi on Bruno Zevi, Theo van Doesburg and their followers * David Tudor Munteanu goes to Simon Ungers's house in Wilton, New York * Simon Walker on Sol LeWitt * William Watson on Ed Ruscha * Andrea Zanderigo on Sol, Jon and Costantino * With photos by Giulio Boem and video stills by Sophie Nys

SAN ROCCO - MONKS AND MONKEYS

9 - SPRING 2014



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EDITORIAL

Minimal Art seemed harmless: just a few hard-edged, greyish pieces of metal laid on the ground, some bricks aligned a certain way, heaps of logs. Minimal Art looked unnecessarily stubborn and a bit stupid, but nobody would ever have thought it could do any harm. Perhaps it didn't. And in the end Minimal Art is not our business, at least not directly.

But eventually the sad rhetoric of Minimal Art turned into the grimly asocial monumentality of Minimalist architecture. The silence of the monkeys became the silence of the monks.

Minimalist architecture turned the (to a certain extent sympathetic) dumbness of Minimal Art into a slick, perverted religion. And if the monkeys maintained a sure instinct that protected them from ridicule and still had some fun while they did it, the monks were not as smart: they actively took *the chamber pot as an urn* and dared to fabricate a new religion of authenticity. The ingredients of this crude intellectual construction are not difficult to list: Minimal Art, a few of Louis Kahn's pathetic aphorisms and a bit of skimmed-through Heidegger. Minimal Art provided a suave aesthetic of polished volumes that were somehow still compatible with the tradition of modernism. Kahn provided an unbelievably generic and deliberately confused notion of "history" that was instrumental to the quick production of authenticity (in a manner similar to ageing wine in *barriques*). Heidegger (even without cool French reinterpretations and still wearing his *lederhosen*) provided some strange words that helped to create the right atmosphere and legitimated the masochistic adoration of craftsmen that corresponded to the stubborn anti-intellectualism of Minimal Art.

Armed with this unbelievably limited intellectual background (and supported by an army of critics who could not believe their eyes as they watched architects abandon their intellectual ambitions and leave the field entirely open to the critics' lazy efforts), Minimalist architects reached these amazing conclusions: "In a time of minor narrations: minor architecture!", "Let's skip complicated things and do some handiwork", "The more ridiculous a way of producing something is, the closer it gets to the essence of making", "A box is always good, particularly if you can spend fifteen years designing it". This idolatry of the object became the springboard for the reinvention of the craft in a post-industrial world. Architects started pouring concrete with a colander, making bridges out of toothpicks and burning mountains of timber in the middle of rooms in order to smoke the walls. A new kind of arrogant humbleness surfaced. The architectural press of the 1990s started to be filled with a sort of mineral pornography: stones covered with moss, *Untitled* things on museum floors, cow stables in Uri, dozens of shots of a hand massaging the same door handle . . . No arguments, no jokes, just very expensive paper and a single quote, repeated over and over as a new all-encompassing mantra: *Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde.*

A new age of experimentation with construction materials started. It seemed like a new beginning, and in a few cases it actually yielded something good. But then the rediscovery of the forgotten essence of materials became a sort of bizarre alchemy aiming at the brickness of bricks, the concreteness of concrete, the woodness of wood, the rustiness of rust. Buildings began to look like samples of construction materials – boxes covered with asphalt, boxes covered with stone-filled gabions, boxes covered with plush, boxes covered with leather (it was still a bit too early for boxes covered with greenery; that would come later).

At a certain point Minimalist architecture won, becoming mainstream: ice-cream shops, cafés, fashion outlets, with each table an altar, each coffee machine a tabernacle, each file folder a shrine. Maybe Minimalist Architecture won simply because, in the end, it was cheap and reasonable (at least compared to contemporary alternatives like Deconstructionism, Minimalist architecture had the great advantage of always being square) or maybe it won precisely because, more than anything else, it was the perfect fit for the universal polish of junk-space: a seamless extension of shop windows that was easy to clean and to substitute. The lack of any sense of scale in Minimalist archi-

tecture was not a coincidence but rather the consequence of the global slickness requested by contemporary capitalism. In this respect, it is quite comical that this perfect smoothness was announced by the raw artefacts of Minimal Art, and it is even more comical that this complete loss of any notion of detail, of any dialectic between part and whole, was promoted as a fanatical obsession with hard edges. Carl Andre's pile of logs ended up being the *Prologue in Heaven* to the perfectly arranged pile of white Armani shirts in Mickey Rourke's wardrobe in *9½ Weeks*.

As a totem of money, Minimalist architecture is deliberately – and visibly – non-inclusive. It maintains a puritan disdain for luxury and operates as a device that does not admit its own economic lavishness. As such, Minimalist architecture ends up producing hyper-expensive yet pseudo-monastic universes for the new bourgeoisie, reminding us that we *must make money*, but we *should not spend it*. In this respect the poverty of Minimalism is completely different from that of the modern movement. There is really no economic reason for the ostentatious misery of John Pawson's toilets. Poverty here is all about forgetting the poor. Society is banned from the discourse and replaced by a myriad of individual consumers, each trapped in a nightmare of authenticity.

In the end, your life is meaningful only when you sip your Jamaican mountain coffee sitting on the bench carved from the sacred wood of the Black Forest.

The critique of Minimalist architecture (and of Minimalism in general) cannot be limited to a critique of its philistine poverty, which, in the end, is quite easy to carry out. In fact, concentrating on the eye-catching “minimum form” side of the story is counterproductive, for in the end the “minimum form” is quite irrelevant. What really needs to be understood is the implicit “maximum intention”, the theatrical pose that accompanies and resonates through the “minimum form”. Indeed, the banal pieces of metal and the naked squarish rooms only acquire meaning because they echo their creator's “maximum intention”. Behind each brick laid on a pavement we must presume the most extreme authenticity, the purest purity. The obscurity of Minimalism boils down to this: the sacred objects on display are imbued with nothing less than the life of the author, his/her most intimate world. This is the meaning of the famous formula “attitude *becomes form*”.

However, very simply, attitude *does not become anything*.

Attitude is not enough. Attitude is just a wish or a frustration, and in both of these cases it is irrelevant. (Art is not therapy. If you are sad, we are sorry, but your suffering does not make you an artist.) Attitude is just the indiscrete and endlessly repeated spectacle of the Ego assaulting the stage of the world and standing there waiting for nobody to come. (And of course nobody would ever come, given that any possible other has already been declared an enemy by the very conflictual posture implicit in this attitude.) Attitude is just aggressive solitude, abusive sentimentalism, a Darwinian/Hobbesian brutality operating *in vacuo*.

When attitude is the starting point, there is no way to ever take the world into consideration, no way to ever accept others. Attitude is egoism as much as form is generosity. Attitude can be nothing more than private, whereas form must have the ambition of being shared. In architecture, this unspecified yet all-encompassing attitude, this desire of the author that is not transferred into the polite objectivity and calm generosity of form, ends up occupying all spaces, filling them with an obscure presence. Attitude does not want to abandon or loosen its hold on the objects it produces. As a consequence, the spaces of Minimalist architecture seem inhabited by ghosts. You are never sure if you can sit on the bench because it already seems full up with intentions. Indeed, perhaps the ghosts are already there and you should avoid hurting them. (Or, to use the appropriate jargon, you forgot to check if you are open to the invitation to sit, or you did not prepare for the seated-ness that has to correspond to the openness of the bench for your being-seated.)