

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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# *Minimalism: Empirical and Contextual, Aesthetic and Artistic*

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a critical discussion of the philosophical discussion of minimal artworks: Initially it's suggested that there are two basic ways in which art has been said to be minimal: It can be *minimally made* (absence of effort) or it can be a *minimal object* (undifferentiated in content). The *minimally made* and the *minimal object* are not logically connected categories, giving four possible permutations:

1. A non-minimally made non-minimal object;
2. A minimally made minimal object;
3. A minimally made non-minimal object; and
4. A non-minimally made minimal object.

The paper suggests that philosophy has treated some such minimal works as 'hard-cases' in classificatory questions about art. However, it's suggested that art itself regards such works as problematising *how* to engage with them, but *not* about their status.

The paper considers this mismatch. It's argued that the traditional characterisations of minimal artworks are not hard cases for *art* but are however, hard-cases for *aesthetics*. This analysis suggests a new consideration of these minimal artworks as *aesthetically problematic yet artistically central*.

It's suggested that a different characterisation of 'minimal art' might be needed given the widespread acceptance of contextualist theorise of art of

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some kind. They might be *aesthetically* unproblematic yet, may be, for contextualist accounts of art, *artistically* problematic – and, as far as they are artworks, are *contextually minimal* artworks.

The paper concludes with an outline of *contextual minimalism*: These are practises that produce objects which have the form of art within practices which ape the persona of art, but made at the edges, or outside, of any artistic context. They only minimally possess any of the relational properties that make them artworks, and/or these relational properties are of marginal value and relevance to them in respect of their artwork status.

The artists involved with 'Minimalism' as an artistic movement were described by the critic Hilton Kramer as self-consciously “involved with finding out how little one can do and still make art” (Cramer 1968). The art produced was characterised by stylistic commonalities such as avoiding ornament; paring down elements; repeating single motifs; or material commonalities of using or designating found or ephemeral objects, media or activities; or curatorial commonalities of placing artworks so that they appear somehow contiguous with non-art reality and production commonalities such as using mechanical or standardised production techniques. So, although we are generally able to classify an artwork as minimal or not, we are not always able to make explicit the basis for that classification.

For philosophy, minimal artworks have often been of interest as they have involved ways of working which tested previously accepted norms of art-making and stretched previously accepted notions of artefactuality. This is a treatment of these works that goes beyond labelling them as items

within an artistic movement of Minimalism.

Wollheim's 1968 article "Minimal Art" (Battock 1995,.387-400) actually chimes with Cramer's characterisation somewhat and provides a good example of this classical philosophical approach to the minimal artwork - and of why minimal artworks might cause problems for philosophy (and indeed some art audiences) Wollheim discusses actual and imagined artworks and contends that minimal artworks are either (a) undifferentiated in themselves from other artworks or non-artworks, or (b) differentiated by factors external to the work, or art in general, and not attributable to the artist's work. Wollheim ascribes minimalism to an artwork both on the basis of its manufacture (the minimal effort of the artist) and on the basis of its aesthetic content (its displayed variety and aesthetic distinctiveness).

Wollheim argues on the basis that art is traditionally produced by uniting two elements – (i) work to actually form something, and (ii) the decision when it is right to stop this working to form something. These together constitute art-making. For Wollheim, minimal artworks are ones in which these two elements of artistic work are, or appear to be, divorced from one another so that the decision making element is the sum total of the work employed. Hence the audience's discomfort - the unease comes from holding both that artworks are artefacts made by artists and that these things purport to be artworks but show so little sign of having been made. Seen thus, making minimal art is a direct challenge to the necessity of an artist physically artefacing an object in order to make art. Also, of course, for Wollheim some kinds of painting within Minimalism – monochromes –



caused a problem because they do not admit of 'seeing-in.'"<sup>2</sup>

Wollheim's analysis can act as a launch pad for a critical discussion of the use and characterisation of minimal artworks within philosophical discussions. Following Wollheim, there are two basic ways in which art be minimal: It can be *minimally made* (absence of effort) or it can be a *minimal object* (undifferentiated in content).

An artwork is minimally made if the object which is the artwork is materially unaltered, or has been barely altered, from the state in which it was in its pre-artwork state. These are usually cases in which an artwork is made from a pre-existing object: In extremis, the artwork *is* just a designated or indicated one of a mass produced object, where the designation of that one object as an artwork is the total work invested in the object by the artist. So, for the plastic arts at least, if an artwork is produced without the artist's work entailing physically altering an object then an instance of minimal making has occurred.

A minimal object, on the other hand, can be a new physical artefact and can be made through physical work. A minimal art object is one that displays little, if any, distinct aesthetic or perceptual content as an artwork either in terms of its own internal aesthetic differentiation (as in monochrome white canvas) or in terms of its differentiation from other artworks (two different white monochromes) or a non-artwork (as in a

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<sup>2</sup> For the idea of 'seeing-in' see Wollheim *Art & Its Objects* (1968) 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

readymade).<sup>3</sup>

The minimally made and the minimal object are not logically connected categories. It is possible that each can be exemplified separately, or in different combinations, in different artworks. So, there can be particular artworks which exemplify the four possible permutations afforded us by these categories.

The four permutations are:

1. A non-minimally made non-minimal object - an example would be Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*.
2. A minimally made minimal object - an example would be Carl Andre's *Lever*.
3. A minimally made non-minimal object - an example would be Tracey Emin's *My Bed*.
4. A non-minimally made minimal object - an example would be Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing*.

The *Mona Lisa* is a non-minimally made non-minimal object. Such works are the standard against which minimal objects and minimal making are judged on this kind of analysis. It took a lot of obvious work to make and it

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<sup>3</sup> But see Herwitz (1993) "The Journal of Aesthetics and Danto's Philosophical Claim", JAAC v.51 261-270 for a list of perceptual differences between Warhol's work and commercial Brillo boxes.

displays a lot of internal and comparative aesthetic variation: It was obviously made and is visually complex and unique.

*Lever* is a minimally made minimal object. Andre's work has minimal content as far as the object experienced is concerned – as an audience in a gallery experiences the work as a line of regular house bricks all alike, arranged on the floor. Yet the work is also an example of the arrangement of material to occupy three dimensional space, just as every other marble bust, bronze heroic figure and or wooden crucifixion throughout the history of Western sculpture has done. It differs from most others in terms of the re-fabricated nature of the materials used and the repetition, rather than variation of their deployment within the work and as the sole component of the work. That is, they differ in terms of their respective semantic content they put to use within the medium and form conventions of sculpture. There *is* however, undoubtedly a presumption that Andre's piece and, for instance, Michelangelo's *Pieta* were *made* differently. For the Andre piece the presumption is that it was conceived of at once in a conceptual realisation, and then articulated at once through a gesture of placement, rather than realised through a sustained process of working on a particular material to discover and articulated forms in that material, There is a presumption (perhaps not wholly well-founded) that Michelangelo's work contained a series of accumulative decisions and work towards a finished piece, whereas Andre's was articulated in a single decision.

However, style can be a deceiver and the presumption of arguing from an audience's minimal experience to a minimally made object is not always correct. Consider, Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing*. The

genesis of this work was that Rauschenberg arranged with Willem De Kooning that he would erase one of De Kooning's drawings to leave a blank piece of paper – as if virgin but obviously not – as his resulting artwork. De Kooning provided Rauschenberg with a very heavily worked drawing on paper. It apparently took Rauschenberg weeks of assiduous rubbing to erase De Kooning's marks. The resulting artwork, as it appears to be a white sheet of paper, displays minimal aesthetic content. It thereby hints at being the result of a minimal making process. However, this artwork required physical artefactualisation to achieve its look and was the result of considerable craft-like making skills – skills of the sort that pare down content, rather than work it up. As Wollheim, (1970) among others points out, erasing an unwanted line has been a core practice of art making throughout the history of drawing and the decision that a work was complete was not made until this paring down had been achieved. Arguably then, Rauschenberg's physical work in making the artwork was at least the equal of, if not more intensive, laborious and skilful, than De Kooning's, although as an object of experience, De Kooning's original drawing was much less minimal than Rauschenberg's. So, Rauschenberg's minimal artwork object was the result of his non-minimal making and Erased De Kooning Drawing is a non-minimally made minimal object.

The presumption of a link between a minimal object and a minimal way of making may also brake when a richly detailed non-minimal work is the result of minimal making by an artist. Examples include any aesthetically complex ready-made, such as (supposedly) Tracy Emin's *My*

*Bed*<sup>4</sup>, or indeed many installation pieces. The point is that if the prevailing conditions are right the most aesthetically complex of works can result from the most minimal of making effort. Because this characterisation of minimalism relates solely to how an artwork was *made* these works are not obviously identifiable as minimal by an audience that does not know *how* they were made.

In terms of philosophy's discussion of minimalism in art, each variety of minimal art has been used to test substantive theories of art and to provide classificatory worries for philosophical theories or definitions of art. Critics of theories that require artworks to be artefacts resulting from physical work by an artist,<sup>5</sup> will use *minimally made* artworks for this purpose, whilst those that require artworks to have some degree of aesthetic or material sophistication,<sup>6</sup> will use *minimal objects* as their counter-

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<sup>4</sup> *My Bed* was supposedly Emin's real bed and surrounding artefacts in her home which was recorded and then re-assembled, as was in a gallery space. The moving of this work from one place to another was not work of creating the piece, but rather of re-locating an already made piece in a particular location. It was made, through an act of pure designation of the scene in Emin's home as that artwork.

<sup>5</sup> An example of such a theory might be that put defended by Monroe Beardsley in "Redefining Art" in Wreen & Callen eds. *From An Aesthetic Point of View*, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1982), pp.298-315. There he writes, (p.312): '... I think it is a mistake to confer artistic status on found objects untouched by human hands or arrangements, however aesthetically interesting, in the genesis of which no human intentions played a part.'

<sup>6</sup> An example of such a theory might be that offered by Nick Zangwill in "The Creative Theory of Art", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 32, (1995), pp.123-148.

examples. However, the most extreme challenges have been seen to come from artworks that are *both* minimally made *and* a minimal object. Their status for philosophy has been therefore to act as markers of the extreme fringe of legitimate artistic creation. As they can provide worried for a range of different philosophical positions.

However, this is not the case for how they are regarded art itself, which accepts such works within its canon as central instances of mid-to-late Twentieth Century art. Such works are also among the examples that those seeking to understand art or art history, have to encounter in order to understand what was going on in visual art at this time. Moreover, these works were made by artists deliberately and self-consciously exploring the possibilities that art afforded them at that time – and that exploration included the investigation into minimal ways of making and minimal objects – it was an avowedly *artistic* project. Within art itself moreover, minimal artworks did not (for long) raise concerns which called their *status as art* in question, but instead raised points about *how* they were to be engaged with and how they related to the art of past (as per Fried's "Art & Objecthood" in Fried(1998)). That is, the questions were what was one supposed *to do* with them, how one was supposed to *appreciate* them, what problematics (such as Fried's 'theatricality') did they throw into view – all of which was predicated on the view that they were indeed artworks, *and not* on the question of whether they qualified as art at all.

This suggests a mismatch between the philosophical discussion of minimal art and how minimal artworks (in this philosophical sense) are regarded from within art history and artistic practise.

My question now is what can be made of this mismatch? Well, I'm suggesting that it points to a deeper problem with the philosophical characterisation of minimal art. Timothy Binkley's classic analysis in "Piece: Contra Aesthetics", (Binkley, 1977) can help here. There, Binkley argues there that the philosophical discussion of artworks was still entangled within the historical legacy of aesthetics so that artworks were viewed through the prism that their aesthetic properties were basic to them and that they were fundamentally and primarily *aesthetic objects*. However, Binkley observed that some artworks were such that their aesthetic properties were irrelevant to their status and/or appreciation as artworks and indeed to their achievement as such. Consequently, viewing these works through the prism of aesthetics was misleading and restricting. The solution was to separate clearly discussions of aesthetics and discussions of artworks, in order to remove the presumed link and treat each case on its merits, as a 'piece'.

I think that a similar legacy is at work here in respect of minimal art. Using a similar approach, we might say that the traditional characterisations of minimal artworks are not hard cases for *art* but are however, hard-cases for *aesthetics* – hence the mismatch.

The cure for the mismatch is then a different consideration of these traditional kinds of minimal artworks, as *aesthetically problematic* yet *artistically central*. Considering them thus aligns their treatment by philosophy with that of art history and artistic practise. This different consideration actually recognises their status and purpose within the history of visual art without robbing them of their precise philosophical problem generating role. It allows monochromes to be problematic for 'seeing-in'

without preventing from nevertheless being very important art – and important art because the aesthetic is non-foundational for them.

This leaves questions hanging. If the discussion of minimal art thus far provides only a partial, aesthetically or materially based account, how might we construct new accounts of minimal art that reflect the consensus that, at least from Danto's "The Artworld" (Danto, 1964) onwards, artworks necessarily possess, as well as perceptual and aesthetic properties, non-perceptual relational properties as a result of the historical and cultural context within which they are made and which they acquire as a result of being *artworks* as opposed to some other thing.<sup>7</sup>

I think that this demands a different analysis of what it means to be a minimal artwork, applying contextual, historical and cultural concerns to how an artwork might be minimal. If we could construct such an account it would enable minimal artworks to continue to play their role of providing hard cases at the limits of artistic activity but now within the framework of what might be called “post-empirical theories or definitions of art”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of relational artistic properties see Stephen Davies 1991 *Definitions of Art*, Ithaca, (NY, Cornell University Press 1991, pp. 67-70. He cites there Danto's discussion of such properties in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

<sup>8</sup> Any roll call of the main post-empirical definitions would include: T.J. Diffey "On Defining Art", Jerrold Levinson "Defining Art Historically: *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 19 (1979), pp. 232-50; Arthur C. Danto *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981); George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*, (New York, Haven Publications 1984); James Carney "Defining Art Externally" *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 34 (1984) pp. 114-123; Robert Stecker



Since these definitions or theories of art locate an object's status (generally) as an artwork in its relational properties – arguing between themselves which features are necessary and/or sufficient (or indeed, if you're a cluster theorist, that none are individually) – we can look to these relational properties for ways of potentially being minimal art. This would mean looking for instance, to parse some well known positions, to such things (i) as the precise circumstances of an artefacts manufacture, or (ii) its relation to the body of already existing artworks, or to the 'artworld' as validating institutional framework or (iii) to the narrative history a piece provides to justify its status as an artwork, or (iv) how something exemplifies one of the things that art does at the time of its manufacture, etc. to generate accounts of what might constitute minimal art in *these* terms.

The overarching claim for this kind of minimal art is that they are artefacts that only minimally possess any of the various relational properties needed or claimed to be make them artworks, and/or those relational properties that they do possess are of marginal value and relevance to them in respect of their status *as* an artwork. Additionally, certain artefacts might potentially fall foul of limits imposed from this kind of minimalism because they possess insufficient or inappropriate relational properties, and so might be too minimally related to existing or current art, (however intensionally or extensionally constituted) to be artworks. These are the kinds of artefacts that can provide the hard and borderline cases for post-empirical theories or

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*Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*; David Davies *Art as Performance*, (Blackwell, Oxford 2004). This is by no-means an exhaustive list.

definitions of art. I suggest that this kind of minimal art can be called '*contextual minimalism*' and that such artefacts, in as much as they are artworks, can be called *contextually minimal* artworks.

It should be noted that there are various 'hard-cases' for these post-empirical positions already existing within the literature: For instance, there's the "romantic artist's" work for institutional theories or "alien" or "first artworks" for historical/recursive theories. However, these are postulated hypothetical categories of works generated from the commitments of the theories themselves, and not real world examples. What I'm arguing here is that there *are* real artefacts that could create hard cases for these accounts of art, because they are, in my terms contextually minimal artworks or artefacts. Contextually minimal artworks might be *aesthetically* unproblematic, (in that they have been obviously made through the labour of an agent and display comparative and internal aesthetic variation) and so not meet Wollheim's criteria of how to be a minimal artwork, yet be *artistically* problematic artefacts. They thus sooth the tension between philosophy and artistic practice by aligning a way of discussing these objects within philosophy that mirrors their regard within art.

What this different characterisation of minimal artworks reflects is a move within philosophy from definitions or theories of art that take art to be a collection of objects that have some kind of conditions attached to how or whether they are made (a so-called 'artefactuality condition')<sup>9</sup> to definitions

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this term and its use see Davies *Definitions of Art* (1993)

or theories of art that take art to be those things (however construed) that fall within a cultural practise (however constituted). If, alongside this, minimal artworks per se, play a role of providing potential hard or limiting cases for classificatory questions, then the cause of the mis-match becomes clear. Object-based accounts cannot provide limiting or borderline cases of contextually constructed concepts, since for such concepts items fall within them not because of the kind of object they are, but because of the cultural context of that object. An account of minimal art based on the uncontextualised properties of physical objects cannot provide borderline cases for post-Danto theories of art. Similarly, borderline cases for contextually constructed concepts can be found, at least in theory, from any kind of object – its properties as a physical object will always be less relevant than its context of presentation. We are used to and easily accept there being no-art photographs and that some photographs qualify as artworks, but this position has the implication that there will (or could) be non-art instances of every current art form or medium: There can be a non-art instance or an 'art' instance of any thing in the world because art is not a materially grounded or restricted activity, it's a socially constructed practise.

To conclude I shall provide a brief overview of how this idea of contextual minimalism might work and provide some (non-exhaustive) examples of what may now be contextually minimal art and/or artefacts.

One strand of art making activity in relatively recent art history has been to investigate the possibilities of the minimal making and minimal content of the empirical art object – these are the works that were the subject of Wollheim's investigations. At *this* art historical moment, given the

ongoing centrality to understanding contemporary art of that investigation, it is almost inconceivable that a minimally made object with minimal content, but which, was rich in relational properties that located it centrally and specifically within an artistic practise could also be contextually minimal.<sup>10</sup> This is, however, an historically contingent fact and one, that is perhaps already a *fading* presumption since the presumptive artistic value of such experiments alone is already openly questioned within art. However, it demonstrates at least two things about contextual minimalism: Firstly, unsurprisingly, that it's not a property that can be grasped perceptually.<sup>11</sup> And Secondly, that the criteria for its application are historically sensitive and contingent, since they form in relation to the prevalent ways in which

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<sup>10</sup> As Glickman (1976) "Creativity in the Arts" in " Culture and Art eds. Aagaard-Mogensen, 131-146 p.146) states: "Just as some artworks of great technical skill embody the most banal conceptions and other brilliant conceptions, is there not a range of conceptual skill exhibited in readymades, object trouves, and works of conceptual art? Such art does exclude 'ability or cleverness of the hand' but it doesn't on that account preclude artistic creation"

<sup>11</sup> Goldman (1990)"Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Values" Journal of Philosophy 87, 23-37: "Works may be aesthetically valuable solely because of the way in which they continue, modify, overthrow, or extend a particular tradition within a particular genre." Goldman holds that relations between artworks are of aesthetic relevance in regard to their evaluation, and although relations themselves are non-perceptual, the basis for the relations are the perceptual properties of the artworks and knowing these relations means we come to perceive these works differently. In (1993)"Art Historical Value" BJA, 33, 17-28 he also argues that individual artworks can possess positive value properties deriving from their art-historical importance. Stecker (1997, 263-264) agrees but cites these properties as functional.

art is made at any historical moment. Different kinds of artefacts and ways of making will therefore be contextually minimal at different times, but my contention is that there will always be artworks that are more contextually minimal than others and always be artefacts at the contextual borderline of art.

So, given this, what might be contextually minimal artworks now? Here are some suggestions: These might be (i) artefacts within folk craft or creative practices, (ii) illustrations, or representations where the *sole* criterion of value is faithfulness in depiction as a prescriptive constraint on value, or (iii) practices which no longer *presumptively* issue in artworks, or (iv) artefacts within practices that *presumptively* produce art forms but which are made in contexts of manufacture only minimally connected to the current concerns of artistic practice and/or (v) which consciously *refuse* the choices available to artists using those forms given that it's such choices which generate the ongoing artistic interest in those forms and its ongoing use by artistic practitioners.

These are each forms of productions that produce objects which have the form of art within practices which ape the persona of art, but which are made on the edges of, or outside, an artistic context – either social, historical, cultural or personal – they are artefacts made with the flimsiest atmosphere of theory or made in happy ignorance (or even knowing scorn) of the relevance to their value as potential artworks of their place within the ongoing history of art and how they contribute to the ongoing articulation of

the use of their materials and/or form.<sup>12</sup>

They force the question that lurked under the mismatch highlighted earlier – why are there these artefacts that are irrelevant to art, that are not problematic to a theory or definition of art? How can that be? And force the thought that given definition or theories of art that recognise an artefacts' context as essential to its status, that this kind of contextual minimalism is more fundamental to an artefacts status as an artwork than anything it lacks in how it was physically made or what kind of object it is, or its differentiation from other works or non-artworks or any aesthetic or material forms.

The real-world 'hard-cases' of contextually minimal art will come from those happily and self-righteously creating on their own terms, in ignorance, denial or defiance of why and how what they are doing might matter to art at this historical moment; or from those using art or practises that have been, or are, used to make artworks, for alternative ends or in different contexts. They may even run the danger of making things that are *not* art, since the context in which they make is *so* removed from the contexts and concerns in which art is made at that time. That being the case, we as philosophers are looking in the wrong place for our borderline cases of art. Instead of the experiments in artists co-ops, guerrilla practises and

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<sup>12</sup> Note that this characterisation is the opposite of 'outsider art'. The case made for any item of outsider art is that it is actually doing the sort of work that established insider art was doing at the time – materially, thematically, etc. – this is a claim that contextually minimal artefacts would explicitly not be able to have claimed of them (if they were outside art) or only be able to claim weakly (if they were contextually minimal artworks).

pop-up galleries (all of which are thoroughly and self-consciously contextually enmeshed within art) we should be focusing on the garden watercolourists, sunset snapshots, pet portraits and creative therapy courses or those for whom delight comes from whittling battleships from discarded driftwood for our borderline examples of art. These are all things that are omitted and ignored as irrelevant by those seeking to understand contemporary art and by contemporary critical discussion in art. In this world of so many choices about how to make art, and so many contexts in which you can paint or carve or draw, it is with the rejection of possibility and the absence of context, rather than its experimental contextual acceptance that the limits of art may be most fruitfully explored.

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