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The Persistence of Minimalism

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THE PERSISTENCE OF MINIMALISM

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ACP	Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*
AF	Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*
AGM	M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*
BE	Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*
BN	Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*
CC	Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*
CDW	Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*
CG	John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz
CPIA	Stephen Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology*
CRAC	Eugene Wildman, ed., *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concrete Poetry*
CSP	Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose*
DS	Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism*
DSCMA	Dawn Ades, "Dada and Surrealism," *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos
EE	Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*

EVC	K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker, eds., *Experimental – Visual – Concrete*
GO	Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus* (book)
HS	Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*
IH	Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*
IRB	Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be?*, ed. Jill Robbins
LD	Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death*
LRD	Maurice Blanchot, *Literature and the Right to Death*
MA	Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*
MAP	James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*
MFMR	Kim A. Herzinger, ed., *Minimalist Fiction*, special issue of *Mississippi Review*
MP	Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*
NN	Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*
PMV1	Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, *Poems for the Millennium*, Volume 1
PP	Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*
SE	Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*
SMP	Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*
SP/PS	Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, eds., *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*
SRB	Ray Brassier, contribution to "Speculative Realism," *Collapse* III
SRH	Graham Harman, contribution to "Speculative Realism," *Collapse* III
SRM	Quentin Meillassoux, contribution to "Speculative Realism," *Collapse* III
TO	Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*
TW	Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano

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Entia non sunt multiplicande praetor necessitate
(Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity)

– attributed to William of Ockham (1287-1347)

PART ONE: MINIMALISM AS DYNAMIC MOVEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

a) Principal thesis and structural overview

The thesis of the present work is that *minimalism exemplifies the facticity and persistence of the Real*. Grounding this assertion is the fundamental distinction between Being[1] or pure multiplicity, and existence, which involves the subtraction of contingent unities from such multiplicity without reducing the latter.[2] Accepting this distinction, it becomes possible to recognize that, from both an ontological and an existential perspective, minimalism discovers distinctive articulations. From the perspective of ontology, minimalism expresses its *poietic* in the terms of quantity – a quantity from which are drawn its existential qualities. From an existential perspective, minimalism emerges by a logic of *transumption* – "a poetics involving transference from one part or place to another, and marking that transference in a material way."[3]

In the case of minimalism, this *transumption* is from the material place of the work to its *poietic taking-place*.[4] If this taking-place manifests in terms of a radical reconsideration of the spatial and temporal aspects of objecthood, its principal predication is *atopian* – the manifestation of a *poietic* non-space upon which the rehearsal of generativity itself is maximally visible. Such minimalist transumption manifests in three principal ways: in terms of *containment* or *convergence*, in which the restriction or unification of properties defines the parameters of the work; *distension*, which results from the redefinition of minimalist materialism in terms of process; and *distribution*, which is marked by the transformation of the

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[1] Here the upper-case *B*eing is used to designate the ontological field as a whole – that which Badiou refers to as being *qua* being – whereas the lower-case *b*eing is more or less co-extensive with existen*ts* – those things which are subtracted from pure Being and which Badiou refers to in terms of being *qua* existence. The preference of specific writers has been followed for the most part – Badiou's *being qua being* and *being qua existence*, and Agamben's *whatever being* foremost amongst these.

[2] Alain Badiou, "The Question of Being Today," *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 46-8. Collection hereafter *TW*.

[3] Stephen Bann, "A Poetics of Transumption," *Cosmopoetics*, St. John's College, Durham University, 8 September 2010.

[4] The significance of the term *taking-place* is explained below.

constituent medium of the work or its exposition *qua* medium. In this context, the Real reaches across the ontological and the existential in order to clarify the relation between these two.

The discussion investigates these claims in three parts. The first part, including the present introductory section, offers a brief overview of the argument and its structure by presenting the primary thesis upon which the argument hinges (stated above), then laying out a number of sub-theses required to confirm and demonstrate the validity of the thesis. The opening section includes concise accounts of the two terms at the heart of this thesis: minimalism and the Real.

Regarding minimalism, a brief examination is offered of that which is delimited by this term. Minimalism offers a dynamic field upon which to reappraise the notion of an *aesthetic*[5] *movement*. Rapidly tracing its origins, development and criticism from several distinct perspectives, the introductory account argues that minimalism identifies itself by a peculiar reflexivity, at once concerned with the formal – indeed formalist – aspects of its emergence, and the ontological and existential material from which its objects take their shape. These ontological and existential modalities by which minimalism is recognized – quantity and transumption – are inextricable from a type of realism, neither naive nor dogmatic, which is marked by the actual taking-place[6] of entities. Briefly, such taking-place recognizes that "the pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing...[B]eing irreparably in the world is what transcends and exposes every worldly entity."[7] In its taking-place the facticity of minimalism is also defined. The Real, in turn, names the quantitative ontological ground to which minimalism attests: that which is Real conjoins the contingency of every entity in any existential situation and the irreversible temporal passage within which such entities manifest; what is Real is a contingent entity taking-place in time.

The second section explores the *quantitative ontology* by which minimalism expresses itself in relation to the Real. Challenging the predominantly qualitative understanding of phenomena, the argument takes its initial direction from the manner in which minimalist aesthetic objects reflect the quantitative basis of Being, exemplifying the *ateleological* immanence of their own taking-place. Illustrated by diverse examples, minimalist art renders maximally visible this quantitative dimension of Being and its relation to

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[5] The terms *art* and *aesthetic* are employed in their broadest sense in the following work. *Art* is used to encompass all creative disciplines – their objects, properties and processes – irrespective of the medium or media through which they are expressed. Similarly, the term aesthetic is used in relation to art, and so, unless otherwise specified, is applied in its broadest sense.

[6] *Taking-place* – a central term in the following study – is developed from the commentary of Giorgio Agamben on the philosophy of Amalric of Bena, and is discussed in some detail subsequently (Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 13-5. Hereafter *CC*.

[7] *CC*, 15.

ontological realism. To claim that minimalism is primarily concerned with an exposition of quantity is not to deny that its objects have qualities, or that these qualities lack significance or meaning. Rather, the possibility of the latter is predicated on the coherence of the former. Returning to the Parmenidean axiom of the One and the Multiple as the point of departure for any ontology, the present work favours the view, elaborated by Alain Badiou, that Being is multiple. Upon this understanding, every existential situation in which a Real entity is subtracted from pure multiplicity, involves a process by which multiplicity is *counted-as-One*.[8] Minimalism clarifies in its objects both the Count and the Real – the contingent stability and the contingent taking-place of entities. The tension between contingency and stability is reflected in the manner in which minimalism embraces simultaneously an aesthetic of eschewal and negation, and one of production or *poiesis*. Regarding the former, minimalism offers a potent account of the sublation – a *lessness* which, pressed further towards the Void, touches the very heart of the questions of death, disappearance and nothingness.

Closely tracing the negative aspect of minimalism paradoxically returns us to the positivity of process: a *poietic* – that is, productive – impasse between the minimalist object on the one hand as absolutely independent and on the other as the product of perception. To examine this problem, the discussion traces the several intersection of the trajectories of nihilism, existentialism and the minimalist aesthetic. In particular, it sets about re-examining Levinas' proposition of the *il y a* – an important ontological precept which is habitually misinterpreted or oversimplified – as the negative approximation of the Real. Negation and the philosophical discourse on nothingness finally point back to the sheer facticity of the Real to which minimalism attests.

Having established that the ontological modality of minimalism is quantitative, and briefly evaluated the claims of pure quantity against those of a qualitative phenomenology, the third section turns with greater vigour to the manner in which minimalism manifests in existential terms by a logic of *transumption* – the subtraction of *poietic* force from pure quantity, so that it might be predicated in aesthetic terms. That such *transumption* is exemplified with particular clarity by minimalism and its objects is a central tenet of the argument. Minimalism, in fact, constitutes an aesthetic field occupied by theoretical objects – objects in search of a theory, one might say, which by their very taking-place obviate any simple distinction of theory from praxis by posing at their heart a question of considerable significance to the present study: can a theory of minimalism confirm the sheer facticity of its taking-place solely by the instantiation of its

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[8] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 23. Hereafter *BE*. When *O*ne is presented in the upper-case it is to identify the function of ontological *unicity* from the commonplace numerical use.

objects? In fact, minimalism effects a curious tension between its objects, their theoretical constitution, and a meta-theoretical understanding of the force of *poietic* instantiation itself. The present study suggests that this tension is explicable in terms of the aesthetic of concretism.

Concretism is examined as a transhistorical[9] and transmediary phenomenon – at many points parallel in emphasis yet distinct from minimalism; at others, furnishing minimalism with of its most significant examples. From its theurgical origins in the visual and sonic genres and forms of classical antiquity, through to its extensive presence in the historical avant-gardes of the twentieth century – Futurism, Dadaism, Concrete poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and various experiments in new and hypermedia – concretism constitutes a significant position against which many of minimalism's most significant characteristics might be measured. A patient examination of the concrete aesthetic is undertaken, exposing the points of contact between concretism and minimalism, and illustrating the conditions under which *poietic atopia* becomes evident – a non-space between matter and concept in which we glimpse *poiesis* itself. Here the distinction of art from non-art is crucial, a distinction which minimalists, echoing the Dadaists, habitually question, and occasionally refine.

Visually, sonically, conceptually and linguistically navigated forms of concretism open significant avenues to minimalist objecthood – respectively in terms of the image, the pursuit of an *ur*sound, the concept and the interplay of text and language. In all cases, the questions of medium and mediation reflect the difficulties which attend the subtraction of existence from Being. Is any medium sufficient ground for distinguishing existential from superficial consonances; is it plausible to reconsider the concreteness of minimalism in this seemingly abstract manner? Attending to these questions exposes with greater precision the considerable stakes of concretism – the intensity with which *poietic* material coheres in a maximally self-reflexive manner while presenting a minimal distance between form and content – which significantly reshapes our understanding of minimalism and its reach. The argument is made that the overarching concern of concretism is with the force of the example itself. Exemplarity is investigated as a measure of the intensity with which an entity renders itself knowable. Such knowability does not manifest in simple material terms, however, but, rather, constitutes an ontological field adjacent to the exemplary entity – a para-ontology.

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[9] Except for the sake of consistency between sources in the cases of trans-ontology and trans-Being, non-hyphenated form have been preferred when using the prefix *trans*.

Our attention is turned to the recognition that the exemplary force which establishes a minimalist para-ontology is, finally, nothing other than an approximation of the force of production itself, or the means by which *poietic* effort is tied to, and exemplifies, the Real. The provocative situation arises in which the minimalist example is not only a meta-example – an example of exemplarity – but a presentation of the manner in which structural homology or isomorphism constitutes the basis of exemplary knowability, and possesses a genuine *poietic* or productive capacity. Having examined the terms of its principal thesis – that minimalism exemplifies the facticity and persistence of the Real – the work concludes by confirming the manner in which transumption is minimalism's proper existential logic. Throughout, three principal modalities have been emphasized: containment, distension and distribution. These are now offered as a typology of minimalism – one which encompasses well the principal concerns of the work as a whole, while drawing attention to the increasing significance which the minimalist aesthetic harbours in light of its progressive delineation.

b) Sub-theses in support of the principal thesis

It is now possible to offer in support of the primary thesis – that minimalism exemplifies the facticity and persistence of the Real – a number of sub-theses:

i) Being and existence are nonidentical – the latter is subtracted from, but without reducing, the former.

ii) Being is essentially quantitative.

iii) From this quantity is drawn all that can be considered Real.

iv) The Real, in turn, is what guarantees the persistence of entities – a persistence defined by the capacity of entities to continue in some existential situation over a period of time; persistent entities, conversely, guarantee the facticity of the Real.

v) Such entities – which simultaneously exemplify existential persistence, the Real, and ontological quantity – can be most reliably discovered in the situations in which they are produced.

vi) Such production is apprehended most clearly when it is an end in itself – in other words, in terms of *poiesis*, which habitually generates as its products entities which belong to the various fields of *art*.

vii) Within art, the persistent quantity of the Real is exemplified with great force in works which admit minimal impediments to apprehending the facticity of the taking-place of the Real.

viii) The existential modality within which such *poietic* activity takes place might be defined by various types of minimalism, affirming which requires us to revisit and extend the theoretical, historical and aesthetic definition of minimalism.

ix) The existential modality of minimalism is transumptive, exemplifying *poietic* activity in terms of a displacement which manifests by three principal types of minimalism: containment, distension, and distribution.

In summary, we might say that minimalism, by the *poietic* production of aesthetic entities which persist within the Real, exemplifies the fact *that* the Real exists. Existing as it does, minimalism revivifies realist ontological concerns alongside its radical re-examination of the media, forms and structure through which aesthetic expression, perception and exemplarity take place.

2. MINIMALISM AS A DYNAMIC AESTHETIC MOVEMENT

a) Minimalism as an existential modality

The present work is not an historical study. The genealogy it offers is incomplete, with no final delineation of a period to which its claims apply. Nor is it a critical catalogue of minimalist works, although woven into its propositions is a range of examples drawn from every minimalist genre and style. Its principal claims are for the most part not causal, and contextual information is at no point mistaken or substituted for the emergence and persistence of entities themselves. Instead, it attempts to grasp minimalism as a dynamic aesthetic movement, directed by a theoretical reflexivity capable of recognizing that *what* minimalism is and *how* it is are inextricable: its content and modes of Being and existing are thoroughly interwoven. In the present work, *existential modality* is employed to describe the manner in which an entity exists. Having already drawn attention to the distinction of Being and existence, the present investigation of minimalism's ontological and existential modalities marks in its works a manner of Being capable of penetrating many different situations of existing; a manner of Being that marks in certain entities their intrinsic processes of existing and of becoming. To claim that minimalism is revealed

in existence by the transformative logic of *transumption*, is to recognize the manner in which numerous distinct minimalist phenomena, models and theories can be articulated simultaneously. Thus, minimalism's historical poignancy arrives precisely inasmuch as it exemplifies a *distributed history*, which proceeds obliquely through, and by its relation to, essentially transhistorical processes.

Minimalism names an existential orientation towards fundamental ontological quantity: *minimum* is, after all, a quantitative marker – the least possible; the superlative form of that which is small or essential and, by extension, uncomplicated, direct or immanent, either in conception, as process, or as the product of such conception or process. Minimalism is used to designate forms, structures, systems and actual entities. Indeed, it has been and continues to be investigated in fields as diverse as computer programming, systems design, linguistics, sociology, theology, philosophy, law and art (including architecture and various types of design) as an orientation towards discovering and constructing the most essential, direct, simple and unambiguous access to the contents of these fields. As contemporary existence in a complex, network society increasingly migrates from an abstract theoretical frame to everyday praxis, is it not possible that minimalism will increasingly be offered not only as a utopian rhetorical counter to this situation, but, moreover, as a disciplined and systematic means of rendering such complexity intelligible?[10]

b) The tension between stasis and dynamis in the concept of an aesthetic movement

If minimalism marks simultaneously a quantitative logic of Being and the transumptive existential modality of its objects, there is compelling reason to suppose that it should be restricted neither to a single epoch nor to any particular medium, genre, style or type of expression. To retain the dynamic potential of minimalism compels us to challenge the idea that it might be understood in any simple sense as an aesthetic *movement*. Establishing the parameters of an aesthetic movement involves the construction of a unified field upon which is demonstrated, projected, or forced a relation of similarity between a number of entities, physical or conceptual.

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[10] In this sense, minimalism would offer an alternative explanatory strategy to those configurations which attempt to model themselves in a manner not dissimilar to the phenomenon they seek to describe – autopoietic systems theory for example, as opposed to the minimalist account of multiplicity and complexity developed by set theory and translated into contemporary philosophical terms by Alain Badiou.

The advantages of classifying art in terms of distinct movements are several. The movement offers epistemological stability to entities often as diverse as they are similar. Thus comparison is rendered simpler: aesthetic works reveal their similarities and differences with greater transparency; processes of change – whether the gradual formation of trends or sudden shifts in aesthetic attitudes, means of production and theoretical understanding – are rendered more comprehensible, lending credence to the proposition of the causes and effects of such transformations. In this light, movements also appear to serve a weak predictive function regarding that which is likely to be produced, classified or reclassified with reference to a specific movement. Indeed, every movement has an ideological component which is deployed to foster certain attitudes, allegiances and opposition to a particular set of artworks.[11]

Convenient as it may be, the paradox at the heart of the concept *movement* is a significant one: the point which promises to apprehend the relational dynamism of a situation prescribes not only stability, but often also imposes a type of stasis. Movements become problematic when boundaries which were intended to elucidate the manner in which entities belong to one another become confines encouraging oversimplification in order retrospectively to impose unity of purpose, or projectively to prevent dissent. In the case of minimalism, disproportionate critical energy has been expended on debating which chronological limits are most appropriate, which minimalist canon is least objectionable, and how to manoeuvre past aesthetic practitioners of every discipline who, for the most part, eschew the minimalist label.[12] The cost has been the possibility of interpreting minimalism as a dynamic existential modality with radical ontological significance. In this light, the present discussion adopts the term *canonical minimalism* to describe the works most closely associable with a consciously minimalist aesthetic – works produced principally from the mid-1950s onward – while insisting that this very loosely defined canon in no sense constitutes the horizon of a minimalist movement *per se*.

Giorgio Agamben insightfully encapsulates this problem by suggesting that "when the movement is there pretend it is not there and when it's not there pretend it is."[13] Yet, if this captures the dynamic by which a

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[11] Following Danto, the non-hyphenated *artwork* has been preferred to *art-work* and *art work* except where it would alter quotations.

[12] David Batchelor, *Minimalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 6-7. Strickland reports that sculptors Robert Morris and Donald Judd, as well as composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass in music, objected vigorously to the term (Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993), 23), which is similarly rejected by writers Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel (Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1999), 8-9). Admittedly, this position derives as much from significant conceptual and aesthetic differences as it does from the negative journalistic attention the term initially garnered (ibid.).

[13] Giorgio Agamben, "Movement," *Uni.Nomade.* Seminar War and Democracy, trans. Arianna Bove. 20 September 2011 <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/movement/>.

movement applies, it fails to apprehend precisely what a movement *means*, "a word everyone seems to understand but no one defines," at the risk of "compromising our choices and strategies."[14] If, as Agamben suggests, "terminology is the poetic, hence productive moment of thought," then to name a movement – for "evidently in certain historical moments, certain codewords irresistibly impose themselves and become adopted by antagonistic positions"[15] – is an act of considerable significance which permeates philosophy, science and politics as well as the aesthetic field.[16] Agamben's central observation[17] is that every movement claims for itself an exceptional status in relation to that which it organizes – a particular autonomy which necessitates that "the excluded elements from the movement come[...] back as what must be decided upon,"[18] and hence that objects of a movement become subject to a certain stasis imposed by the movement itself.[19] Thus we might understand the quasi-prophetic tone which in Danto's writing asserts "the end of the movement in the movement's beginning, the end of a period inscribed in its beginning."[20] The style of a particular movement is at once immanent and essential to that movement – exempt from the ordinary flow from cause to *telos* – yet, when interpreted diachronically, it gives the very shape that we conventionally term a linear history.[21] In such a history, "art is killed by art"[22] as we find "movements stopping but not ending, ending but not stopping, ending and stopping, and neither ending nor stopping."[23] The depth of consciousness of this situation as exemplified by minimalism[24] places it in the singular position both of suspending the progressive vision of aesthetic movement and of reinvesting a dynamism within the notion of movement which is of considerable importance to the present work.[25]

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] It should be noted cursorily that Agamben's discussion centres on political questions which arise from the work of Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt who distinguishes between state, movement and people – the last depoliticized so that the movement is compelled to divide (repoliticize) and thus direct them according to the valences required to maintain or impose the state as sovereign entity (ibid.) – exposed, in turn, to an Aristotelian reconceptualization of movement (ibid).

[18] Ibid.

[19] "[T]he movement can only find its own being political by assigning to the unpolitical body of the people [an] internal caesura that allows for its politicization" (ibid.).

[20] Arthur C. Danto, "Style and Narrative," *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 243.

[21] Ibid., 246.

[22] Ibid., 247.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Here I focus on Danto's argument in a manner with which he would doubtless be uncomfortable. To begin with, Pop Art and minimalism are for him symmetrical expressions of the same Hegelian consciousness of art historical termination.

[25] See Gregory Battcock, Introduction, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 26. Collection hereafter *MA*.

For Agamben, preserving the dynamic potential of a movement resides in a return to a radical reappraisal of the Aristotelian understanding of *dynamis* and *kinesis* as charged by their relation to potentiality: "the act of a *potenza* as *potenza* [potentiality as potentiality], rather than the passage to act…[and as] an imperfect act, without an end."[26] This ateleological understanding of the movement returns us to a sense of immanent force in the present, oriented towards futurity, but which does not foreclose on the changing valences which entities may demonstrate in belonging to a particular movement. The present formulation – that an aesthetic movement unifies within a field of immanence the dynamic force of collectivity or belonging and a progression from the finitude of the past towards an indefinite futurity, a progression which renders identification possible without imposing any final identity – recalls that which Alain Badiou understands in terms of truth procedure. Like a movement, a truth "makes it possible to group the elements of a situation so that they *all* count in the same way."[27] "[T]ruths, and truths, alone, unify worlds," Badiou claims. "They transfix the disparate composites of bodies and language in such a way that…these are, as it were, welded together…Only a truth opens…the world-to-come."[28]

c) Naming minimalism

The name of a movement is of considerable significance to the force it signifies or exercises in its relation of, and to, a truth procedure, operating as a type of ontological paradigm within which the understanding of the entity which it denominates unfolds. In Caputo's estimation, "[n]ames belong to natural languages and are historically constituted or constructed."[29] Accepting this argument, it is no surprise to discover the significance of a nominal logic operating in all regions of philosophical history, from the pre-Socratic naming of substance in terms of elements, through the Platonic *eidos* – indicated ideal, independent form which is subsequently interpreted by Aristotle in terms of abstract universals. These pass through the theological significance of the name of God into the high nominalism of medieval scholasticism and into the Kantian *a priori* – perhaps the most powerful mark of that which the name lacks. One need look no further than Husserlian *nominal acts*, through which the intentional content of consciousness is confirmed, to witness the significance of names to phenomenologists. Indeed, the name is also placed at the centre of analytical theoretical counterpoints, expressed in Russell's idea of *definite definitions* or

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[26] Agamben, *Movement*.

[27] Peter Hallward, Introduction, *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 9.

[28] Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 24. Hereafter *SMP*.

[29] John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

Kripke's *rigid designators* – a hermeneutically informed recapitulation of medieval nominalism[30] in which the rigid designator "designates the same object in all possible worlds."[31] Contemporary continental philosophy frequently pauses on the significance of the name: it is central in Derrida's work, to Agamben's analysis of Aristotle, and, for Badiou, is a point of access between pure Being and existence.

The present concern lies not with determining precisely *how* a name functions as it does, nor precisely *what* these functions are, but instead with recognizing that wherever a name is given, is applied, or applies itself, it reflects a frequently unarticulated ontological and existential commitment. This is precisely what is asserted in affirming that a name and entity coincide, that the name exceeds the possibility of its accurate application, or that reality cannot be equated with any act or process of nomination. In the case of minimalism, the pull between dynamic and static categorization is mirrored with surprising precision in the distinction of common from proper name, and in the designation of the movement by the lower-case *m*inimalism or the upper-case *M*inimalism.

The question of capitalization proves of considerable significance. Examining the manner in which each is deployed by minimalist critics, it becomes evident that the proper sphere of identity – specific location, stability, fixity – from which historical judgments and stylistic generalizations might be offered is indicated by the use of the upper-case *M*inimalism. By contrast, the lower-case *m*inimalism indicates fluctuation, contingency, inclusiveness, but also a degree of vagueness.[32] We might say that *M*inimalism is primarily concerned with asserting the stable *being* of an artefact-driven poetics, empowering the identification of a minimalist canon, while *m*inimalism is concerned with an artefact-driven *becoming* – an immersion of concept and praxis within dynamic *poietic* modalities. In this light, we do well to recognize how readily the capitalized *M*inimalism converts *poietic* product into cultural capital. Studies of *M*inimalism tend to take relative chronological or historical stability as their point of departure. This is especially true of accounts contemporary with the widespread inception of the term,[33] first applied to the aesthetic context in 1937 by John Graham,[34] but more famously used in 1965 in the slight variation,

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[30] John P. Burgess, "Why I am not a Nominalist," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 24:1 (1983), 96-7, 100.

[31] Joseph LaPorte, "Rigid Designator," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 20 September 2011 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rigid-designators/#NamOrdDesIdeSta>.

[32] See Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005), 19-21.

[33] Edward Strickland offers an excellent overview of the development of minimalism as a critical and journalistic term, and the chronologies which discover their limits in relation to the several canonical understandings of minimalism which prevail in the majority of criticism (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 17-20).

[34] Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance* (New York: Abbeville, 1988), 17.

Minimal Art, by philosopher Richard Wollheim.[35] *Minimalism* is similarly recognized as the appropriate and proper denomination[36] for the abstract, direct and austere work of certain artists from the late 1950s into the 1960s by Gregory Battcock,[37] Clement Greenberg,[38] Barbara Rose[39] and, perhaps most memorably, by John Perreault, who asserts that "[w]hat is minimal about Minimal Art...is the *means*, not the end."[40] Kenneth Baker's injunction to "[t]hink of 'Minimalism' as the name not of an artistic style but of a historical moment, a brief outbreak of critical thought and invention in the cavalcade of postwar American art,"[41] is emblematic of the symmetry between clear historical delimitation and the proper name, reflected also in the criticism of Marzona,[42] Gablik,[43] Batchelor[44] and McDermott.[45]

The converse trend – the use of the lower-case *m*inimalism – is observable in criticism which identifies its objects primarily in terms of a conceptual orientation, an aesthetic sensibility, or existential modality. Several of these studies are transhistorical and transdisciplinary – Edward Strickland's *Minimalism: Origins*[46] most notable amongst them,[47] a model followed by Cheviakoff [48] and Bonet,[49] and, more narrowly, in Schwartz's account of musical minimalism.[50] More focused are the enquiries of Colpitt[51] and Potter,[52] both shaped by formalist analytical concerns, yet which retain dynamism in their approaches. While Colpitt stresses of her study that "Minimalism is not used here with a lowercase *m*...[but] restricted to those artists who shared a philosophical commitment to the abstract, anticompositional, material

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[35] Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," *MA*, 388.

[36] See Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Icon, 1989), 4.

[37] Battcock, "Introduction," 19.

[38] Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," *MA*, 182.

[39] Barbara Rose, "A B C Art," *MA*, 278.

[40] John Perreault, "Minimal Abstracts," *MA*, 260.

[41] Baker, *Minimalism*, 9.

[42] Daniel Marzona, *Minimal Art*, ed. Ute Grosenick (Köln: Taschen, 2004).

[43] Suzi Gablik, "Minimalism," *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 244-55.

[44] Cited above.

[45] James Dishon McDermott, *Austere Style in Twentieth Century Literature: Literary Minimalism* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2006). McDermott stresses precisely this distinction of upper-case *M*inimalism from lower-case *m*inimalism, albeit in somewhat different terms (ibid., 1-4).

[46] As mentioned, Strickland's discussion of the emergence of minimalism as a movement is both detailed and concise (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 1-25).

[47] It should be mentioned that both Rose and Baker make significant observations regarding minimalism's transhistorical dimension (Rose, "ABC," 275, 278-9; Baker, *Minimalism*, 9-14, 27-32).

[48] Sofía Cheviakoff, "Minimal Art," *Minimalism, Minimalist* , ed. Sofía Cheviakoff (Köneman: Cologne, 2006), 35-114.

[49] Pilar Bonet, "Minimalism: A Historical Reflection," *Minimalism, Minimalist*, ed. Sofía Cheviakoff (Köneman: Cologne, 2006), 24-33.

[50] K. Robert Schwartz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaedon, 1996).

[51] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*.

[52] Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalist: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

object,"[53] her notion of movement remains dynamic inasmuch as it is informed by the properties of the entities in question rather than by the means through which they are stabilized. Similar on account of its subtlety regarding formal question, is Potter's study, drawing specific attention to his preference for the lower-case *m*inimalism on account of what he perceives as the rather more liberal application of the term in music.[54]

The analyses of minimalism offered by Hal Foster,[55] Walter Benn Michaels[56] and Christopher Lasch[57] are directed by broader theoretical questions so that minimalism is itself understood as part of a conceptual complex with an expansive shape. Similarly, Mertens,[58] Meyer[59] and Fink[60] all place an emphasis on *m*inimalism as a dynamic system in which art interacts, often polemically, with a nexus of ideological, economic and socio-political markers. It is no coincidence that the critically sanctioned *M*inimalism of the visual arts and music should be capitalized more frequently than the somewhat ambiguous and tentative identification of *m*inimalism in literary criticism. Motte,[61] Hallett,[62] Herzinger,[63] Verhoeven,[64] Stevenson,[65] Bellamy[66] and, perhaps most acutely, John Barth,[67] all prefer *m*inimalism – albeit for different reasons, and admitting that several of these expend significant energy bemoaning its nomenclatural inadequacy.[68] If, however, the *m*inimalist sensibility is extended indefinitely it loses its

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[53] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 1.

[54] Potter, *Four*, 1.

[55] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1996).

[56] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004).

[57] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Picador, 1984).

[58] Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, trans. J. Hautekeit (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983).

[59] James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001). Hereafter *MAP*; James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London and New York: Phaedon, 2000).

[60] Fink, *Repeating*.

[61] Warren Motte, *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1999).

[62] Hallett, *Minimalism*.

[63] Kim A. Herzinger "Introduction: On The New Fiction," *Minimalist Fiction* , ed. Kim A. Herzinger, spec. issue of *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (1985): 7-22. This special issue is hereafter abbreviated *MFMR*.

[64] W. M. Verhoeven, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado About Minimalism," *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, ed. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995), 41-60.

[65] Diane Stevenson, "Minimalist Fiction and Critical Doctrine," *MFMR*: 83-9.

[66] Joe David Bellamy, "A Downpour of Literary Republicanism," *MFMR*: 31-9.

[67] John Barth, "A Few Words About Minimalism," *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction 1984-94* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995), 64-74.

[68] For Verhoeven, the classification of Carver as a minimalist is problematic (Verhoeven, *What We Talk About*, 43-6, 57-8), and Herzinger is equally vociferous about the problems inherent to the term (Herzinger, *Introduction*, 7-10).

currency, a situation which applies equally to its historical over-generalization as to the *P*ostminimalist situation indicated by Robert Pincus-Witten's eponymous publication.[69]

Between an astringent historicism and the paradoxical stasis imposed by an absolute unboundedness, the present work avoids such extremes by asserting that the modalities within which minimalism emerges are fundamentally non-categorical[70] and essentially indifferent to the *poietic* or aesthetic situations they ground. Thus, minimalism is able at once to be thoroughly historical – the "coherent"[71] Minimalism which, to Fink, is "a belated journalistic construction"[72] against which Strickland also warns[73] – and dynamic, insofar as minimalism by its self-referential eschewal of reference presents the active *poietic* means by which art, in clarifying itself, sympathetically clarifies what might be understood in terms of the unfolding of reality.

In this light we grasp the continuity between Meyer's understanding of minimalism "not as a coherent movement but as practical field"[74] – "a dynamic field of specific practices"[75] upon which is conducted a "critical debate"[76] as to minimalism's nature – and Redfield's claim regarding the "violent gestures with which aesthetic systems seek to exorcise their inability to ground their claims."[77] The aesthetic movement always harbours the danger of self-determined totalitarianism which, in systemic terms, we approach by the recognition that its "identity is specified by a network of dynamic processes whose effects do not leave that network."[78] This is why it is important to keep in mind Hal Foster's suggestion that every avant-garde movement be understood as "a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts...that throw over any simple scheme of before or after,

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[69] "Postminimalism could be seen to stand in…relationship to Minimalism, as so naturally continuous with it that it may be regarded as part of the same impulse. Similarly, Postminimalism also strikes me as continuous with Maximalism; Minimalism into Postminimalism and on into Maximalism, all part of the same continuum, especially if we consider in the immense role played by a growing historicist impulse during this same period" (Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966-86* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1987), 2). Pincus-Witten seems for the most part unaware of undermining his own argument. See Strickland, *Minimalism*, 6; Stephen Melville, "What Was Postminimalism?," *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 156-73.
[70] Although Aristotle and Kant recognize quantity in categorical terms, the present work regards it as genuinely radical, hence prior to categories which remain predominantly epistemological accounts of metaphysics.
[71] Fink, *Repeating*, 19.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 22.
[74] *MAP*, 3.
[75] Ibid., 4.
[76] Ibid., 3.
[77] Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), x.
[78] Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston and London: New Science Library, 1987), 89.

cause and effect, origin and repetition."[79] In this light, following Badiou, the present work decides in favour of an ontological multiplicity which cannot readily be contained as such.[80] Here we encounter the fundamental axiom of ontology: that Being either is One or is not-One;[81] either is unified and systemic or is multiple. However, even accepting that Being is pure multiplicity, it is clear that for Being to be presented or to appear at all, there must exist situations in which multiplicity is contingently counted-as-One without sacrificing its essentially multiple character. In short, multiplicity becomes structured. However, according to Badiou, what escapes the structuring is the force of *structuration* itself; the Count escapes being counted-as-One,[82] necessitating a *metastructure*.[83] Were this not the case, the contingency at the heart of the Count would be eliminated, and the multiplicity of Being would be reasserted as unity or One. If belonging to an aesthetic movement in the first instance is deduced from the properties of particular objects and the associations which such properties prompt, then one might suggest that the notion of a dynamic movement presents a metastructuration of such properties and relations.

In short, this notion of movement refocuses the ontological conditions of what previously was held to be a predominantly epistemological exercise of recognizing resemblance – albeit such resemblances prompt recognition as much by the senses as by the intellect. In this light, *m*inimalism might further be characterized as that which, both proper to entities and to the metastructural processes by which these come to be grouped together, reveals the quantitative ontological dimension of artworks in as transparent a manner as possible.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF MINIMALISM

a) A path of austerity towards clarity

Minimalism discovers a venerable if problematic lineage in the austerities – chosen or imposed; environmental, material, psychological or spiritual – which play out in the deeply divergent existential

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[79] Foster, *Return*, 29.
[80] *BE*, 28.
[81] Ibid., 23-4.
[82] Ibid., 93.
[83] Ibid., 93-4.

courses and aims of the eremitic or cloistered religious life,[84] the melancholic sense of the isolation of the artist,[85] and supposedly corrective system of incarceration. These share the conviction that extreme simplicity, deprivation (whether imposed or by self-denial), withdrawal, solitude and discipline are to some extent confluent and, moreover, transformatory. Thus, "the epiphany of the unattainable,"[86] which inspires the melancholic artist, and the solitude and silence that "enkindles and nurtures in our hearts the fire of divine love, which is the bond of perfection,"[87] to which the solitary monk aspires, express a logic which is at once antagonistic and complementary – the suspension of the one enables the commencement of the other. In the severe ideals of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the monk sleeps ("clothed, girded with belts or cords"[88]) in order to rise to *Opus Dei* or the Work of God: an austere minimalism promises transcendence. Conventionally art is less optimistic. Where moderate sleep deprivation is a means of sanctification for the monk,[89] it is a reminder of the painful irremissibility of existence for the melancholic poet. The attractive despair of Emily Brontë's "Sleep brings no joy to me"[90] lies precisely in that sleep promises no opportunity for sanctification or transcendence, prompting only the desire for release from "[d]eepen[ing] the gloom"[91] of memory, absolvable only by the amnesia of death. Similarly, we might argue that the drive towards a sacred simplicity[92] which prompts Saint Francis' kataphatic embrace of "Sister Bodily Death"[93] in the early thirteenth century "Canticle of Brother Sun,", is embodied aesthetically not only in such austere reflections on the skull as symbol of death, as in El Greco's *Saint Francis Praying* (Figure 1)[94] and its subtle subversion of the tradition of the *vanitas* painting[95] – but also

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[84] Although specific reference is made only to forms of west European religious life here, it should be noted in passing that these in fact derive from the extremely austere practices of the third century (unless otherwise indicated, all references to centuries AD or CE) desert fathers, hermits and stylites of near eastern Christianity. These find notable parallels in the cultures and religions of the near and far east, but are largely parenthetic to the present discussion, which limits itself to the aesthetic aspirations of western Europe and its immediate spheres of influence.

[85] Agamben identifies the classical source, of what is often misdiagnosed as a predominantly Romantic phenomenon, as Aristotle (Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 12-3).

[86] Ibid., 26.

[87] *Statutes of the Carthusian Order*. 20 November 2011 < http://www.chartreux.org/en/frame.html>. The Carthusian order begins with the eleventh century revival of the eremitic tradition of the desert fathers as an alternative to the cenobitic lifestyle which came to predominate both eastern and western monasticism from the sixth century.

[88] Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 49.

[89] Ibid., 71.

[90] Emily Brontë, "Sleep brings no joy to me," *The Poems of Emily Brontë*, ed. Derek Roper and Edward Chitham (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 46.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Saint Francis of Assisi, "The Salutation of the Virtues," *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. CAP. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M. (London: SPCK, 1982), 151-2.

[93] Saint Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of Brother Sun," *Francis and Clare*, 39.

[94] El Greco, *Saint Francis Praying,* 1580-85. Joclyn Art Museum, Omaha.

in its apophatic existential manifestation. In this respect we need only look to the opening of Beckett's "For to end yet again" to discover a formulation which conforms to the best tradition of the contemporary minimalist in the stark presentness of its constituent fragments and incremental repetitions: "For to end yet again skull alone in a dark place pent bowed on a board to begin. Long thus to begin till the place fades followed by the board long after. For to end yet again skull alone in the dark the void no neck no face just the box last place of all in the dark void."[96]

Figure 1:El Greco, *Saint Francis Praying*, **1580-85.**

From an anthropocentric perspective, the skull is a marker of minimal existential intensity, making it a poignant symbol of the aesthetic logic identified in the present work in terms of *containment*. It encases the primary sensory organs[97] as well as the brain, thus grounding the consciousness[98] which is capable of

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[95] *Vanitas* paintings, which typically juxtapose images of human vitality and creativity with those of death, most notably the skull, invariably seek to draw attention to the contingency of human life and the vanity of presuming to deny or overcome this corporeal finitude.

[96] Samuel Beckett, "Fizzle 8: For to end yet again," *The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995), 243. Collection hereafter *CSP*.

[97] Although touch is distributed, it goes without saying that the skin of the face is extremely sensitive.

constituting a coherent reality, a reality which reflects in the *poietic* enterprise something other than a fatal inertia. It follows, thus, that the skull should function as a peculiar type of minimalist icon, both in the hermit's cave in which we contemplate it from an external perspective, and in Beckett's prose, in which it is almost always a symbol of the liminal point at which consciousness fails to extinguish itself. The skull intimates both the bareness of the hermit's cave from which is drawn a transcendental freedom, as well as the cell which incarcerates, rendering excedence as such implausible.

In this sense it is possible profitably to juxtapose the minimalist aesthetic of the monastic cell (Figure 2) with the prison cell. The effect of both depends on a lean, sparse intensity. In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault famously elaborates the manner in which the legislative, political and social exercise of power comes to be harboured in the prison as biopolitical apparatus. In a remarkable passage he characterizes its operation in terms of the

> distribut[ion of] individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behaviour, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge [regarding the transformation of the individual and the group] that is accumulated and centralized.[99]

Where the monastic cell[100] claims to contain the potential locus of spiritual transformation, the prison cell is concerned with the "technical transformation of individuals"[101] under the guise of reformation.[102] Both the monastic and prison cells are "complete and austere institutions"[103] – the former is occupied by voluntary penitents;[104] in the latter, the occupants of the penitentiary are bound to the place by a legally defined crime and juridically determined sentence.[105]

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[98] Neuroscience continues to discern precisely where the brain ends and the mind begins, and where precisely the strategic processing of sensation gives way to the consciousness of a world.

[99] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 231.

[100] Regarding the austerity of the medieval monastic cell, we do well to recall that the average medieval dwelling was by no means ornate or spacious. Where the cell differs most markedly is not by virtue of its architecture, but by the manner of its incorporation within or exclusion from an institutional life.

[101] Ibid., 233.

[102] Ibid. 234-5.

[103] Ibid., 235. Foucault borrows this term from writing of Baltard (ibid.).

[104] Ibid., 244.

[105] In this argument, Foucault draws several structural parallels between the monastic and penitentiary systems (ibid., 238, 243-4).

Perhaps the modern paradigm of the most stark of prison cells is that of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island (Figure 3). It is difficult to substantiate any stable causal pattern between the harsh, radically austere conditions which Mandela and his fellow prisoners faced and the personal and political patience, solidarity and perseverance they exhibited. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose that there exists some connection in this regard, and that its manifestation in terms of this haunting and uncanny species of minimalism almost certain shapes the directness of its impact.

Figure 2: The cell of St. Theresa of Avilla, Convento de la Encarnacion, Avilla, Spain.

Figure 3: Nelson Mandela's Prison Cell on Robben Island.

The continuity between the interior architectural aesthetic of the cell, the functionalist aesthetic of the modern city, and a more conventional minimalism is clearly in evidence in Martin Boyce's installation, *Our Love is like the Earth, the Sun, the Trees and the Birth* (Figure 4).[106] The work presents an urban dystopianism in which domestic and public space – the spaces of the bedroom, the gallery and the public park – are increasingly inseparable and subject to rigorous restriction. Park-bench and bed, cage and home, tree and lamp – indeed gallery and domicile – are practically interchangeable. The influence of minimalism is clear: fluorescent fixtures, made famous by Dan Flavin as sculptural material (Figure 5),[107]

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[106] Martin Boyce, *Our Love is like the Earth, the Sun, the Trees and the Birth*, 2003/2008. Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow.

[107] Dan Flavin, *Monument 1 for V. Tatlin*, 1964. Dia Art Foundation, New York.

form trees; the mesh from which beds, benches and bins are constructed recalls material used both by Robert Morris (Figure 6)[108] and Donald Judd (Figure 7).[109]

Figure 4: Martin Boyce, *Our Love is like the Earth, the Sun, the Trees and the Birth*, 2003/2008.

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[108]Robert Morris, *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*, 1967. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Mesh is also a favourite material of Antony Caro's sculpture.
[109] Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1965. Private collection.

Figure 5: Dan Flavin, *Monument 1 for V. Tatlin*, 1964.
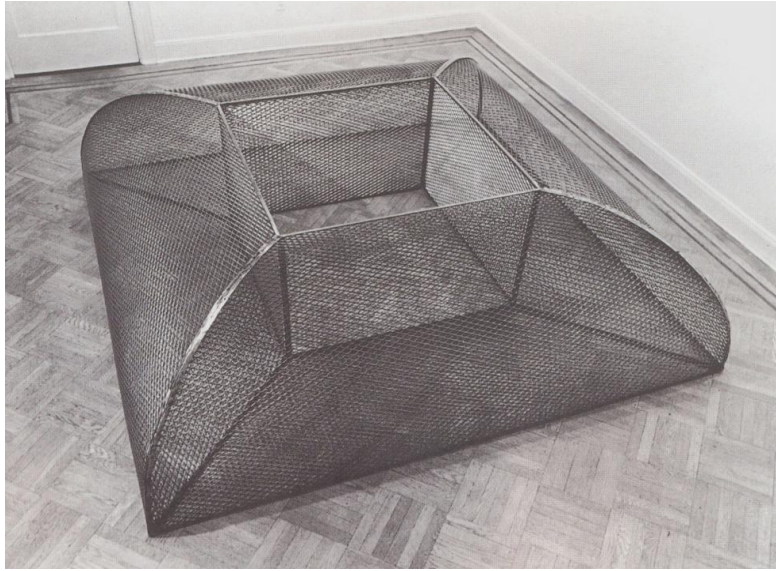
Figure 6: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*, 1967.

Figure 7: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1965.

Boyce's installation dislocates: the prepositions displayed on the *faux* ventilation shafts which are part of the installation undermine their actual placement – *behind* is in front of the viewer, *between* is actually beside, *below* is high on a wall (Figure 8). It is on account of its skeletal sparseness that the installation is able to present the elision of intimacy and extimacy. The cell is literally located on the outside, in a public exhibitionary space, by which an uncanny inversion of the monastic vision of seclusion is realized, manifesting from a minimalism of interior severity an external but austere anarchism (Figure 9).
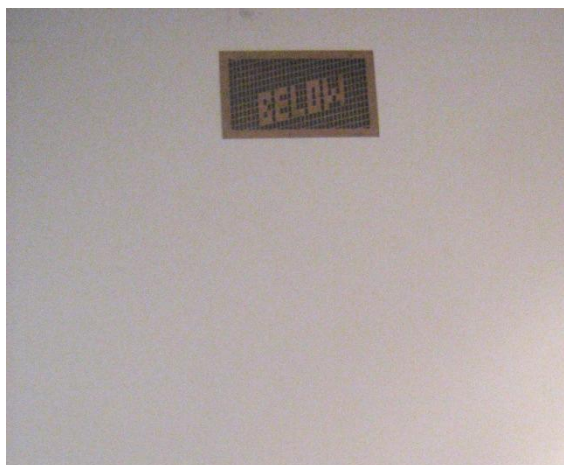
Figure 8: Martin Boyce, *Our Love is like the Earth, the Sun, the Trees and the Birth*, 2003/2008. Installation view.

Figure 9: Martin Boyce, *Our Love is like the Earth, the Sun the Trees and the Birth*, 2003/2008. Installation view.

The central point to be taken for the present argument is that the minimalist aesthetic – simultaneously concrete and conceptual, Real and symbolic – traverses the historic systems of religion, politics and law. It does this by a depoliticization, or the subtraction of its constituent elements from the patently political configurations to which they belong. The implicit, if naive, principle is that reinstating the *tabula rasa* of an unformed *polis* rekindles the potentiality from which a pure politics might arise. The content or orientation of this politics is itself undetermined. The architectural austerity of the cell, with its transhistorical appeal to the silence and featurelessness which purportedly fuel contemplation, is merely a concrete marker of the ideal of simplicity, transparency and immanence which informs not only precepts such as the parsimony of scholasticism – briefly stated, the avoidance of the unnecessary multiplication and complexification of entities – but also the puritan and quietist[110] religious ethic. These, in turn, develop into various species of pragmatism which manifest aesthetically in terms of a highly reductive and functionalist aesthetic. This is nowhere clearer than in the case of the Quakers and Shakers.

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[110] Rose, *ABC*, 296.

The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, arose in seventeenth century England as part of the protestant revival that gave rise to the various and geographically dispersed traditions which include several German Evangelical groups, Methodists and Baptists. In a significant sense, Quakerism democratizes[111] the aesthetic ideals of western monasticism, situating a reverence for silence and simplicity at the heart of its practice. Such ritualized silence is intended to enhance divine and interpersonal communion by eliminating that which impedes a patient attentiveness.[112] In the sense that it aims for progressive access to the Real by means of conceptual and experiential clarification, Quakerism legitimately describes a species of minimalism which marks itself as the container of potential universality by means of disciplined exclusion of excess. Thus it also promotes both internal and external temperance – simplicity of dress, speech and general life.

The charismatic and pentecostal revivals of the succeeding eighteenth century manifested in Quakerism a tendency to more extroverted practices.[113] Known first as Shaking Quakers, and subsequently simply as Shakers, these individuals adopted a radical form of communitarian monasticism.[114] Remarkable for its promotion of equality of the sexes without demanding their absolute segregation[115] (despite its advocacy of celibacy) established productive, self-sufficient[116] towns and communities in early nineteenth century America as an alternative to absolute retreat from the world and society as such.[117] While Shaker rituals were markedly improvisational and elaborate, their aesthetic practice is notable for its distinct minimalism. While contemporary minimalist composer, John Adams, attempts to reconcile these to some extent in his 1978 *Shaker Loops*,[118] of particular renown with regard to a minimalist sensibility is Shaker

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[111] Quakers placed significant emphasis on social and gender equality. Forrestal notes how, despite persecution and opposition, the Quakers were amongst the first actively to promote pastoral equality between women and men (Alison Forrestall, "The Church in the Tridentine and Early Modern Eras," *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 100-1. See also Jill Raitt, "European Reformations of Christian Spirituality (1450-1700)," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* , ed. Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 133.

[112] Ibid; See Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 7-9.

[113] John Corrigan, "Protestantism in the United State of America to the Present Day," *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, ed. Alistair E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 171.

[114] These "experiments typically had a religious or spiritual as well as a social animus" (Baker, *Minimalism*, 14).

[115] By viewing God as both paternal and maternal, the Shakers organized themselves into families which consisted of both brothers and sisters (Corrigan, "Protestantism," 171). These families lived in single houses although, doubtless for practical reasons of maintaining their strict celibacy, maintained a certain practical distance.

[116] Baker, *Minimalism*, 14.

[117] Corrigan, "Protestantism," 171.

[118] John Adams, *Shaker Loops*, 1978/1983. See Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 177-8.

furniture which in its simplicity and symmetry is noteworthy for its functionality[119] and the manner in which it is integrated with Shaker architecture (Figure 10).[120]

Figure 10: Great Stone Dwelling House, Enfield Village, New Hampshire, 1837-41.

Visually pleasing in its austerity, yet seldom decorative in the conventional sense (Figures 11 and 12), Shaker furniture seems to generate rather than to occupy space, and is readily portable, convertible and storable (principally, chairs were hung on walls) in a manner which anticipates the functionalist thrust of Russian Constructivism (Figure 13)[121] and Bauhaus architecture and design[122] (Figure 14).[123] Towards the

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[119] Most contemporary minimalism is functionless in an objective sense. However, it does not merely reverse functionalism, but in many cases instigates a critique of consumerism by offering itself as a parody of its own functionlessness (Lasch, *Minimal Self*, 31).

[120] "Their rejection of ornament for an elegance born of optimum economy and practicality of design has an unmistakable resonance with aspects of some Minimal art" (Baker, *Minimalism*, 14).

[121] Ivan Zvesdin, *School 518*, 1935. Moscow, Russia.

[122] Murray Roston, *Modernist Patterns in Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: New York UP, 2000), 129.

[123] Walter Gropius, *Bauhaus Dessau*, 1924-5. Dessau, Germany.

revered Bauhaus dictum – *less is more*[124] – also flows the symmetrical current of classicism, from its Hellenic origins to its eighteenth century revival. In turn, the Bauhaus and constructivist case extends almost seamlessly to the work of *De Stijl* with its minimalist grids, chromatic limitation[125] and *Gestalt* forms, is a central principle of much subsequent minimalist art and design.[126] It takes no deductive skill to recognize a related stylistic sensibility in Rietveld's *Zig-Zag Chair* of 1934 (Figure 15)[127] and the 1991 *Chair 84/85*[128] of Donald Judd – one of minimalism's canonical sculptors and critics (Figure 16).[129]

Figure 11: Shaker kitchen and furniture, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, undated.

Figure 12: Shaker wall with built-in cupboards, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, undated.

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[124] This phrase was adopted by Mies van der Rohe as the principal of minimalist design, and is exemplified in the works of other Bauhaus architects such as Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, as well as in *De Stijl* of Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld amongst others. See Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 74-5.

[125] For the most part, *De Stijl* uses only primary colours, black and white.

[126] See Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 72-7.

[127] Gerrit Rietveld, *Zig-zag Chair*, 1934. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[128] Donald Judd, *Chair 84/85*, 1991. Chinati Foundation, Marfa.

[129] See *MAP*, 7; Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 110.

Figure 13: Ivan Zvesdin, *School 518*, **1935.**

Figure 14: Walter Gropius, *Bauhaus Dessau*, **1924-5.**

Figure 15:Gerrit Rietveld, *Zig-zag Chair*, 1934. **Figure 16: Donald Judd, *Chair 84/85*, 1991.**

Tracing a reductive line from the "rudimentary, utilitarian elements introduced by the early settlers,"[130] through the austerity of Shaker design, to more contemporary expressions of this minimalist imbrication of locus and *Geist*, several critics draw attention to minimalism as a socio-cultural path of austerity towards the clarification of the Real.[131] Kenneth Baker considers minimalism a "distinctly American tradition of respect for plain facts and plain speaking, manifested in Shaker furniture and the pragmatist philosophy of Charles Sanders Pierce."[132] Indeed, it should be clear that the pragmatic functionalism[133] of such austere design is no small part of minimalism's origin or legacy. However, if the case is most persuasively made with reference to the American context,[134] I remain convinced that the logic of *containment* which moves through minimalism cannot contain minimalism itself. From the perspective of style, the reverse may readily be asserted: that "minimal artists and their work are indebted to the European modern tradition in the areas of neoplasticism, suprematism and constructivism."[135]

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[130] Roston, *Modernist Patterns*, 129.

[131] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 20; Foster, *Return*, 52;

[132] Baker, *Minimalism*, 13.

[133] Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 80.

[134] Like Baker, Strickland regards minimalism as "an indigenous American style" (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 3). Similar argument are forwarded by Colpitt (Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 1), Schwartz (Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 10) and Meyer (Meyer, *Minimalism*, 34). Mertens offers a useful description of the manner in which early American minimalism, relying most often on repetition, is related to various types of European minimalism and exhibits the clear influence of Indian, Balinese and West African music (Mertens, *American*, 12, 32, 44, 56, 67, 91-2).

[135] Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 68.

Minimalism may well draw a significant part of itself from the same point of transcendence to which mystical experience alludes. Barbara Rose makes this connection explicit in terms of "the state of blankness and stagnation preceding illumination."[136] The minimalist dimension of aesthetics and of spiritual interrogation share an attempt to approximate in minimally positive terms that which escapes positive presentation altogether. Few critics, however, recognize the numerous points of confluence between minimalism and religious asceticism. There can be little doubt that the sociological analysis of religion rests on an understanding of its ideological dimension; nor that the more adventurous studies of minimalism[137] attend to its ideological implications over its aesthetic concerns. However, few recognize that the latter expresses in relation to the former what is itself quite patently an ideology of sacred or holy minimalism:[138] that an encounter with material minimalism is transformed by a sacred transcendence. That here exists a force of transformation – one which is clearly in force, but without clear parameters – offers what we legitimately recognize as the empty paradigm of ideological operation.[139]

This is evident in the work of leading minimalists, regardless of how we choose to define this term. The compositional techniques of La Monte Young and Terry Riley – the respective progenitors of minimalist soundscapes of extreme duration, and the use of modular repetition – considered their music fundamentally spiritual.[140] Glass' early composition reflects the influence of Indian classical music (which often has an explicitly religious dimension)[141] and he is a practising Tibetan Vasjaryana Buddhist,[142] which has and continues to fuel both the subjects and substance of much of his music.[143]

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[136] Rose, "ABC," 296. She evokes in relation to minimalism the "semihypnotic state of blank consciousness, of meaningless tranquillity and anonymity that both Eastern monks and yogis and Western mystics" (ibid.), making specific mention of John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Miguel de Molinos and Evelyn Underhill (ibid.).

[137] I think particularly of Meyer, Fink and Foster in this regard.

[138] We should note cursorily that the term *holy minimalism* has been deployed – albeit in a rather vague sense – to distinguish those postminimalist composers whose thematic concerns are principally religious.

[139] Agamben (following Benjamin) recognizes this as the dangerous situation in which laws – while no longer effective with regard to that which they legislate – are nonetheless implemented in such a way that there is no longer any real distinction between law and life (Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2005), 63-4). Hereafter *SE*.

[140] Potter, *Four*, 19, 79-80, 103-4, 137. According to Rose, "[t]he 'continuum' of La Monte Young's *Dream music* is analogous in its endlessness to the Maya of Hindu cosmology" (Rose, *ABC*, 296).

[141] Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 114-6; Potter, *Four*, 257-8.

[142] Ibid, 259; Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 117; Fink, *Repeating*, 231.

[143] The incorporation of Tibetan chant and instruments with his characteristically minimalist technique is impressive in the soundtrack of Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, which relates the early life of the incumbent fourteenth Dalai Lama. The opera *Satyagraha* deals with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of passive resistance, while *Akhnaten* revolves around the ultimately failed monotheistic reforms of the Egyptian pharaoh of the same name and includes perhaps the most compelling example of theurgical minimalism – "The Funeral of Amenhotep III" (Philip Glass, "The Funeral of Amenhotep III," *Akhnaten*. CBS, 1987).

Steve Reich's *Different Trains*[144] and *Tehillim* (Track 1)[145] expose the composer's interest in and study of Jewish history and music (especially cantillation) and their confluence in his brand of minimalism.[146] A generation later, several of minimalism's most imposing and creative figures composed what has, not inappropriately, been called *holy minimalism*. Arvo Pärt (Track 2)[147] and John Tavener (Track 3)[148] are principal amongst these, their work reaching back not only to the musical modes of medieval Catholic Europe and the Orthodox East, but to the minimalist existential modalities which accompany the search for spiritual clarity. We might make similar, although more varied and occasional, comments regarding both the theurgical and contemplative in the music of Meredith Monk,[149] Henryk Gorecki, Gavin Bryars and Nico Muhly.[150] Neither should we disregard the remarkable creative synergy which existed between the writer and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, the painter Ad Reinhardt – who, for his relentless exploration of black monochromatic painting, is often styled the "heretical black monk of Abstract Expressionism"[151] – and the concrete poet or "conceptual Minimalist,"[152] Robert Lax.[153]

Likewise, the work of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman manifest two opposing, but equally minimalist, aesthetic responses to an overwhelmingly religious sense of awe. Attempting to "purge[...] their work of extraneous elements in order to develop an art of transcendental immediacy,"[154] Rothko seeks to draw the religious into the aesthetic realm by means of its sheer chromatic density, while Newman, bisecting

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[144] Steve Reich, *Different Trains*, 1988.

[145] Steve Reich, *Tehillim*, 1981. ECM, 1981.

[146] Potter, *Four*, 151-2; Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 83-89.

[147] Arvo Pärt, *Miserere*. ECM, 1990.

[148] John Tavener, "The Ways to Salvation," *Mary of Egypt: An Opera*. Collins, 1992.

[149] Amongst Meredith Monk's work, which seeks to "break[...] down boundaries between the disciplines, an art which in turn becomes a metaphor for opening up thought, perception and experience," (Meredith Monk, "Mission Statement, 1983, Revised 1996," *Meredith Monk* , ed. Deborah Jowitt (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 17. Within this ambitious frame, Monk's work frequently returns to a concern with ritual and religion. *Vessel: an opera epic* (1971) recasts in a symbolic order events from Joan of Arc's life (see Marcia B. Siegel, "Virgin Vessel," *Meredith Monk*, 36-9). *Dolmen Music* (Meredith Monk, *Dolmen Music*, 1979) meanwhile makes clear reference to a religious invocation (David Sterritt, "Notes: Meredith Monk, *Meredith Monk*, 108-9), and the film and music of *Book of Days* (Meredith Monk, *Book of Days*, 1985/1990) offers what one might call a prophetico-historic vision of the social conditions within which Jews existed in medieval Europe.

[150] As regards their classification as holy minimalist, Gorecki is principally known for his *Symphony No. 3* (Henryk Gorecki, *Symphony No. 3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs)*, 1976), Bryars is responsible for the remarkable *Cadman Requiem* (Gavin Bryars, *Cadman Requiem*, 1989) and Muhly, a former-chorister, the influences of Anglican anthems and canticles are audible in his some of his work.

[151] Rose, "ABC," 285-6.

[152] Karen Alexander, *Minimalism in Twentieth Century American Writing*. Diss. University College London, 2005, 184.

[153] Ibid*.*, 186-7. It is worth examining the numerous, idiomatic, stylized and often amusing letters exchanged between Merton and Lax (Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, "A Catch of Anti-Letters," *Voyages: A National Literary Magazine* II.I-II (1968), 44- 56.

[154] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 24.

massive fields of heavy colour with bright zips, attempts to generate a sense of the sublime encounter.[155] Dan Flavin – for his intermediary success perhaps minimalism's most significant innovator – was at one point a Roman Catholic seminarian, and numerous of his installations aim to draw out the relationship between luminescence and illumination. Likewise, in claiming to "paint with her back to the world,"[156] Agnes Martin embraces in the subtle girds and extremely fine chromatic rhythms of her minimalist paintings and drawings (Figures 17 and 18)[157] an overtly ascetic, even eremitic ideal.
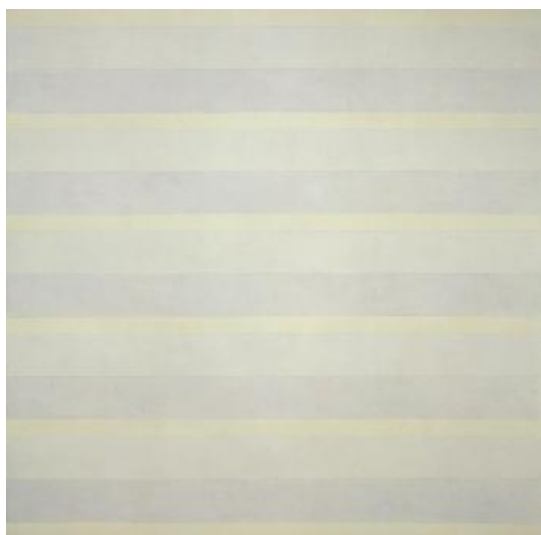
Figure 17: Agnes Martin, *Untitled #12*, (1997.   **Figure 18: Agnes Martin, *Untitled #9*, 1990.**

In writing, however, most minimalists – Raymond Carver, Joan Didion and Frederick Barthelme, for instance – reflecting a heightened concern with realism, appear either indifferent to or disillusioned with religion and spirituality. Notable exceptions, although not strictly speaking minimalists, are the polymath John Cage, who made extensive use of the *I Ching* and various techniques of Zen to produce his work, and Samuel Beckett who enjoys a productively ironic relationship with organized religion – at once scathing and deeply comical.

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[155] Although, as Meyer notes, "the Minimalists...rejected the metaphysical claims of the Abstract Expressionists...Even so, there were some artists associated with Minimalism who did not discount the expressive potential of pared-down abstraction" (Meyer, *Minimalism*, 24).

[156] Agnes Martin, Interview with Chuck Smith and Sono Kuwayama. November 2007. 20 November 2011 <http://vimeo.com/7127385>.

[157] Respectively Agnes Martin, *Untitled #12*, 1997. Private collection; Agnes Martin, *Untitled #9*, 1990. Collection unspecified.

In *One Word Poems*[158] – the twenty-fifth issue of Ian Hamilton Finlay's journal of poetry, *Poor Old Tired Horse* – we discover what should be recognized as amongst the most radical expressions of aesthetic minimalism, yet which remains virtually unknown. In a letter to Stephen Bann, Finlay suggests that "a one-word poem consists of one word and a title of any length."[159] Almost twenty-years later, in a letter to Jessie Sheeler, his aesthetic resolve remains firm: "I feel more and more that the purest poetry exists in single words or seemingly minute effects. These are what lodge in one."[160] Indeed, it is by this logic that Finlay attempts to uncover in a one-word poem nothing less than the very currency of Arcadia – the means by which *poietic* generation can be exchanged for a utopian vision; the alphabet in its infinite permutations for an experience of the infinite itself:

<u>Arcady</u>

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ[161]

By presenting itself in terms of the most fundamental constituents of every expressive medium, minimalism exhibits its determination to uncover the fundamental stuff of *poiesis*. In this sense, its ambition is to outflank any act of classification.

b) The minimalist transection of modern and postmodern

There is clearly more to minimalism than meets the senses. Reserved in the transparency, simplicity, austerity and immediacy of its objects is a remarkable capacity for transformation. This capacity has been harnessed in numerous ways by the institutions and practices of religion, but permeates other more contemporary fields of ideological disputation as well. In particular, minimalism opens into a polemical field[162] upon which the reification of value through the commodification of art is able to take place. This is perhaps clearest, though not restricted to, the works produced between 1950 and 1970 which are most regularly discussed as components of canonical *M*inimalism. If minimalism presents the apotheosis of abstraction, this presentation is offered upon the field of ruination which follows the Second World War.

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[158] Ian Hamilton Finlay, ed., "One Word Poems," *Poor Old Tired Horse* 25 (1967): 1-8.
[159] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *A Model of Order: Selected Letters On Poetry and Making*, ed. Thomas A. Clark (Glasgow: WAX366, 2009), 44.
[160] Ibid., 54.
[161] Ian Hamilton Finlay, "Arcady," *One Word Poems*, 8.
[162] *MAP*, 6.

As Adorno[163] and Lyotard[164] recognize, the history of mimesis is decisively disrupted by the horrors of this war, and of the extermination of the Jews in particular. Of Lyotard's understanding of this failure of representation, Rancière notes the following:

> [t]he absence of any common measurement [between art and life] is here called catastrophe...If modern art must preserve the purity of its separations, it is so as to inscribe the mark of this sublime catastrophe whose inscription also bears witness against the totalitarian catastrophe – that of the genocides, but also that of aestheticized (i.e., in fact anaesthetized) existence.[165]

In this situation, extreme forms of abstraction appear to take on different intensities of reflexivity which distinguish the modern from the postmodern.[166] This general field of special reflexivity Lyotard identifies with the regime of the sublime – the negative pleasure which arrives when, in the face of an aesthetic stimulus which initially overwhelms us, we are able to affirm our mastery and the final ascendency of mind over phenomena.[167] "[M]odern art...devotes [itself] to present[ing] the fact that the unpresentable exists,"[168] whereas "postmodern [art is]...that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself."[169] Modern art habitually points to a transcendental aperture, attempting to extract itself from the ordinary forms of mimetic economy by a process of careful and progressive abstraction. The art of postmodernism seals this aperture: that which in modernism is recognized in terms of abstraction appears now paradoxically immanent – incapable of transcendence, but neither associable with a formal prototype. If modernist abstraction encourages the tracing of formal processes of reduction evident in its works, postmodernism tends to present its objects in their immanence. Thus, recalling Fried, while the modernist work searches for an "instantaneousness"[170] in which "*[p]resentness*[171] is grace,"[172]

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[163] Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1* , trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 244-6, 266-7.

[164] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), 56-8.

[165] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 40-1.

[166] "[O]nly with minimalism does this understanding become self-conscious. That is, only in the early 1960s is the institutionality not only of art but also of the avant-garde first appreciated and then exploited" (Foster, *Real*, 56).

[167] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 98, 105-6; Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), 75-6; 112-4. Also see Jean- François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 98; Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 80-3; Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 165-9.

[168] Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question What Is Postmodernism?," trans. Régis Durand, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 78.

[169] Ibid., 81.

[170] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *MA*, 147.

[171] The italics here are mine.

[172] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 146. See Michaels, *Shape*, 88-9; Foster, *Return*, 52.

the same concept in postmodernism rests on a sense of immediacy or *presence*.[173] Accordingly, where modernism aims to "compel conviction...[and] to seek the essential," postmodernism tends to "cast doubt...and to reveal the conditional."[174]

Critics tend to emphasize a decisive shift: from a spatially dominated modernist vision in which the epiphanic experience of time presents the possibility of transcendence – almost an existential escape-clause within the legislation of aesthetic experience – to a stress on time as the concrete and sequential passage of moments (albeit with indeterminate content) within which an artwork is perceived.[175] However, as Patricia Waugh argues, any vigorous distinction of modern from postmodern is more likely to rest on a critical overdetermination than on the actual properties of actual artefacts. The result is a failure to recognize the "radical situatedness"[176] which has marked the aesthetic field at least since early romanticism.[177] Canonical minimalism occupies a singularly ambiguous position in this respect. Its works in every medium are as frequently concerned with autonomy (of a particular formalist species) and indifference to context and meaning[178] as they are with their status as relational objects. It is this same disposition which articulates numerous mid-twentieth century attempts to radicalize objectivity in the form of objecthood, exemplified by Robbe-Grillet in his search for an aesthetic to present a "world [which] is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply *is*. And that…is what is most remarkable about it."[179]

Modernist in its formalism, postmodern for the sheer facticity of its objecthood, minimalism exists upon the cusp between these two great contemporary epistemes. Perhaps "the last 'classic' period before the flood of artistic flotsam and jetsam termed 'post-Modernist,'"[180] minimalism presents itself "as a

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[173] Ibid., 50.

[174] Foster, *Return*, 58.

[175] The "minimalist work complicates the purity of conception with contingency of perception, of the body in a particular space and time" (ibid., 40).

[176] Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 22.

[177] Ibid., 17-8, 22.

[178] Simon Critchley's recognition in the Beckettian aesthetic of a means of "establishing the *meaning of meaninglessness*, making meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning" is applicable to much of minimalism (Simon Critchley, *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 151). On minimalism's evasion of meaning see Foster, *Return*, 40. Fink presents the alternative of a minimalism with "at least the theoretical possibility of meaning" (Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, xiii).

[179] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "A Path for the Future Novel," *Snapshots* and *Towards a New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), 53.

[180] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 3.

historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up,"[181] and is thus identifiable with the sense of dynamic aesthetic movement offered above. Through its pursuit of objecthood over objectivity,[182] minimalism at once "completed and broke with [modernist aesthetic practice]."[183] Less benign in her assessment is Anna C. Chave, who claims that "Minimalism forms the terse, but veracious last word in a narrowly framed argument about what modern art is or should be."[184] However, Chave's reading is as selective as it is polemical, and we do well to turn to the less biased understanding of Rosalind Krauss which seeks to clarify the singular position minimalism occupies upon the cusp between modernity and postmodernity. By its formal austerity, minimalist art effects a scission with "the styles that immediately precede it,"[185] yet on "another level[186] can be seen as renewing and continuing the thinking"[187] of high modernism. Minimalism draws into a single, charged *poietic* sphere both constancy and variability[188] in which "space and time cannot be separated for the purpose of analysis,"[189] gesturing towards the reconciliation of these most distinct markers of the modern from the postmodern. Krauss "projects a minimalist recognition back onto modernism so that she can then read minimalism as a modernist epitome [in which case] minimalism is an apogee of modernism, but it is no less a break with it."[190]

In this light aesthetic modernism harbours the final figure of its transfiguration by abstraction – a self-reflexive present at once sublime and unambiguously Real. Affirming in minimalism the *literalism*[191] which Fried sees as its most salient feature, painter Frank Stella claims of his work that "only what can be seen there *is* there...What you see is what you see."[192] Neither intrinsically meaningful nor nihilistic,

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[181] Foster, *Return*, 54. See Batchelor, *Minimalism*, 8.

[182] Ibid., 46.

[183] Ibid., 35. See ibid., 53-4,

[184] Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992), 27.

[185] Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking, 1977), 279.

[186] Krauss is talking here primarily of abstract, minimal abstract sculpture which retains an anthropocentric element as long as its effect is measured in relation to the human body and movement (ibid.).

[187] Ibid.

[188] Foster, *Return*, 47.

[189] Krauss decisively seeks to overturn separation of temporal from spatial arts inherited from Lessing. See page 270 of the present work.

[190] Foster, *Return*, 42. There is both risk and promise in this technique – not entirely dissimilar to the one adopted in the present work – which reopens categories often prematurely closed by adherence to various ideologies of historicizing, yet which itself clearly embodies a particular ideology.

[191] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 117.

[192] Frank Stella's celebrated statement is from a conversation recorded between himself, Donald Judd and Bruce Glaser in 1966 (Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *MA*, 158).

minimalism aims to provoke directness of affect[193] and aesthetic effect such that it is still possible, with Lyotard, that the "task of art remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to an unpresentable...which is inscribed in the infinity of the transformation of 'realities.'"[194]

The aesthetic economy of minimalism must be understood as the persistent attempt to clarify the Real,[195] and, inasmuch as the Real underpins every possible reality, minimalism offers the objectal[196] pivot upon which existential situations are potentially transformed. Such transformation touches the heart of the multiple institutions which negotiate and finally prescribe value; and in its capacity for generating maximum effect from minimal means,[197] minimalism transects, at the most radical level, the relation of art, economy and power.

c) Institution and economy

If the minimalist aesthetic is directed by a self-conscious radicalism – the desire to reveal the essential quantity of Being itself – its appearance in terms of a movement, whether canonical or a brief spasm towards simplicity and clarity, centres a revolutionary impulse to "disrupt[...] the formal categories of institutional art."[198] Like Foster, Danto recognizes that in minimalism art comes to an historical reflexivity, but also a suspension of its historicity[199] – a "self-conscious position *on* art"[200] which emerges "in the early 1960s [in the manner in which]...the institutionality not only of art but also of the avant-garde [is] first appreciated and then exploited."[201] Recognizing that the limits of any definition of art are contingent rather than absolute,[202] Danto's thought prompts a number of theories of art – not all congruent

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[193] Paolo Berdini, "Similar Emotions/Dissimilar Objects: The Pilkington Paradigm and minimalist and baroque art," *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*, ed. Clausia Swan (New York: EOS, 1997), 43.

[194] Jean-François Lyotard, "Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable," *The Inhuman*, 128.

[195] Battcock, *Introduction*, 32.

[196] The terms *objectal* and *subjectal* should be understood in the present work as distinct from *objective* and *subjective*, with the former two emphasizing the object and subject in themselves, and the latter the processes, methods and sequences related to such objects and subjects.

[197] Perhaps the most austere of minimalist sculptors, Carl Andre, remarks of minimalism that it involves "'the greatest economy in attaining the greatest ends'" (Baker, *Minimalism*, 14). See Perreault, *Minimal Abstracts*, 260, 262; Hallett, *Minimalism*, 2.

[198] Foster, *Return*, 54.

[199] Arthur C. Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1981), vii-viii, 56-7; Foster, *Return*, 51-2.

[200] Ibid., 56.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 45-7.

with his own[203] – which emphasize the *institutional* nature of defining art *qua* art. Danto does not, however, accede to the vulgar reduction of art simply to objects designated as such by an "institutionally enfranchised group."[204] Finally he affirms that art is knowable as such by its ontological properties, but that these take shape within institutional configurations in which relative value is decided by contingent yet normative social, political and economic significance.

The canonical minimalist aesthetic took firm root in an American society[205] which, despite the "slow, almost reluctant shaking off of the obedient conformity the war effort had demanded"[206] at a domestic level, had rapidly risen to a position of unrivalled economic and political dominance in the west.[207] In the 1950s and early 1960s prosperity was the prevailing condition. That America was "[n]o longer a province, but the center of the new capitalist empire"[208] resulted not only in the increased material prosperity of the 1950s, but also in a burgeoning sense of cultural confidence. "For all its apparent restrictions, minimalism opened up a new field of art,"[209] a sense of novelty to match the utopian domestic vision of the 1960s and 1970s, while "[f]or all its apparent freedoms, neo-expressionism participated in the cultural regression of the Reagan-Bush era"[210] and its chastening of American identity. In this climate, competition and excellence[211] were rapidly assimilated into a social vision which makes the force of identity and the act of identification central both to the individual and corporation, rendering these increasingly indistinguishable.[212]

The resultant "epidemic of popular narcissism"[213] complicates the distinction of subjectivity and individuality.[214] The individual is trained to objectify his or her own subjectivity[215] in terms of a

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[203] Arthur C. Danto, "The Art World Revisited: Comedies of Similarities," *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 41.

[204] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 91.

[205] However, as Baker observes, canonical minimalism would soon be an international phenomenon (Baker, *Minimalism*, 12, 14).

[206] Ibid., 15.

[207] Baker, *Minimalism*, 27-8.

[208] Ibid., 27.

[209] Foster, *Return*, 36.

[210] Ibid.

[211] Excellence mobilizes desire in a rather terrifying manner: it "has no external referent or internal content" (Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1996), 23) and misrepresents a ruthlessly quantitative logic of accumulation and acquisition as quality.

[212] Ibid., 21-2; Baker, *Minimalism*, 16.

[213] Ibid., 15; Lasch, 24-5, 29-30. As Lasch observes, "[a] culture organized around mass consumption encourages narcissism...a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one's own fears and desires" (ibid., 33).

[214] Baker, 16.

[215] Lasch, 29-30.

"boundless appetite for change,"[216] with the consequence that the markers of individuality are commodified, and the individual becomes a consumer of his or her own identity. Individuality is subsumed within a self-limiting dialectic: a constant exchange of dominant, popular and countercultural expression – progressive inasmuch as it generates the necessary difference to guarantee that every individual might still associate the right to individuality with a fundamental expression of freedom; regressive in that culture is then in a position to prescribe and distribute the amount and type of difference an individual apparently requires in order to be sufficiently substantial and free. When freedom is thus guaranteed, the individual is in fact at its most compliant with a corporate model of society which ingeniously consumes difference by reifying actual differences – both as particular values but, moreover, as specific objects which must be produced and consumed as paradoxically *necessary commodities*.

In this situation, a commodity such as art which, at first, appears to be entirely generative, finally proves intricate in the production of the very needs it claims to satisfy. As Lasch correctly observes, "[c]ommodities are produced for immediate consumption. Their value lies not in their usefulness or permanence but in their marketability. They wear out even if they are not used, since they are designed to be superseded by 'new and improved' products."[217] Art is by no means exempted from this logic. That the minimalist object "mimes the degraded world of capitalist modernity in order not to embrace but to mock it,"[218] does not bar these works from being substituted for the absence of subjective identity in the "unremitting consumption of sensation"[219] which characterizes the contemporary. "Minimalism marks the transition of twentieth-century art from its waning as an autonomous and implicit critique of mass culture to its demystification and acceptance as but another commodity,"[220] Strickland suggests.

In short "the social attitude of minimalism...is ambivalent,"[221] emerging at once in opposition to the reduction of art to product, yet unable, finally, to resist its own commodification.[222] In the visual arts, a number of seminal exhibitions took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the Guggenheim, Whitney and Jewish Museums in New York, the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles, the Hague Gemeentemuseum, and

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[216] Ibid., 29;

[217] Lasch, *Minimal Self*, 31.

[218] Foster, *Return*, 15-6.

[219] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 3.

[220] Ibid. In this respect, Potter observes that "[j]ust as Minimalist art acted as a critique of commercialized society and challenged its viewers to adopt new modes of perception, so minimalist music…required new modes of listening" (Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 14).

[221] *MAP*, 9.

[222] Ibid., 8-9.

the Tate Gallery in London amongst many others.[223] James Meyer does well to recognize the considerable polemical significance these exhibitions played in the development of a minimalist canon.[224] The epochal *Primary Structures* exhibition curated by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum in 1966,[225] confirmed not only the significance and status of canonical minimalism, but set in motion the critical machinery which would distinguish minimalism from its predecessors.[226]

"Minimalism…[is a] creation[…] not only of artists, but of ancillary art-world professionals,"[227] and is intensified by the concurrency with which artefacts and the critical literature assessing and theorizing these arose. As Colpitt notes, "a great number of [minimalist] artists took on the critical responsibility for explaining their work."[228] "[T]heories of Minimal art, whether relevant to artistic production…or the spectator/critic's apprehension of the object…are central to an understanding of that object,"[229] and in minimalism the reflexivity between theory appears so inextricable that it is often difficult to give one or the other priority.[230] In minimalism we encounter the incipient paradigm of that which Mieke Bal names the *theoretical object* – an artwork capable of stimulating, simultaneously, several contradictory responses in relation to a spectrum of theoretically grounded situations.[231]

Indeed, what minimalism reveals of the interdependence of the generative and reflexive aspects of *poiesis* is significant, and offers a dynamic and aptly minimal model for the operation of an aesthetic movement: the process by which the occurrence of criticism and artefact imply a progressive clarity in one another. There can be little doubt that the emergence of a significant and concurrent ancillary, para-aesthetic complex in relation to minimalism, facilitated its rapid canonization. A network of galleries, institutes, collectors, journalists, critics and academics quickly set the agenda for an ongoing polemic regarding, in particular, its status as art,[232] its transgressive relation to medium and genre, and its significance in formalist terms. The leading minimalists were themselves erudite, philosophically astute and articulate

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[223] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 33; Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 11.
[224] *MAP*, 7.
[225] Ibid., 12-24; Meyer, *Minimalism*, 29;
[226] Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 25.
[227] Baker, *Minimalism*, 17.
[228] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 4.
[229] Ibid., 5.
[230] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 5.
[231] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide,* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002) 185.
[232] Amongst the significant art historians and theoreticians who wrote on minimalism in its early years are Richard Wollheim, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, a group which subsequently included Arthur C. Danto, Lucy Lippard, Rosalind Krauss and Barbara Rose, almost all of whom contributed to the debate as to whether minimalism should be understood as art, non-art or anti-art.

regarding the theoretical implications of their work.[233] Minimalist music – cultivated between the university classroom,[234] the informal but hip spaces of the New York loft scene,[235] and performance art groups such as Fluxus [236] – soon migrated to these gallery settings,[237] and, finally, to concert halls.

Here is an epochal moment in the development of American cultural economy: only an art of the most radical simplicity and immanence seemed equal to the self-sacrificial task of responding to the apparently constitutive instabilities of postmodernity,[238] and this took shape in a public which was increasingly "persuaded that it was both chic and financially savvy to buy contemporary American art, until the traffic in art becomes a high-roller's game."[239] Those in the arts were unafraid to challenge professional orthodoxies: Finlay's *Poor Old Tired Horse* offered a ground-breaking platform for concrete poetry; working with revolutionary stage directors such as Robert Wilson, Glass' heavily amplified ensemble has never bound itself to the traditional concert stage;[240] minimalist painters and sculptors dispensed with both the frame and the plinth, undermining perhaps the principal means of partitioning art from the commonplace.[241] What is reshaped is not only how art is encountered, but its substance – inasmuch as the latter is distributed between the temporality of perception, locus, the effects of sensation and the essence or substance of the work. As Danto understands it, "the pedestal upon which art gets put...[which] is a political translocation as savage as that which turned women into ladies,"[242] is thus undone. In other words, the ideological undercurrent of art's physical transformation and distribution amongst formal institutions is significant. Baker grasps this problem with considerable insight:

> An activist impulse to change people's attitudes underlies much so-called Minimalist work. This activism foundered on a contradiction built into the art world: the institutional forces which make art known and meaningful to the public tacitly assert a hierarchy of values in which power and money predominate, as does the coercive authority their consolidation requires. Minimalism is a compelling and important episode in American art because it clarified the fact that artists, despite their ambitions, can only play at superseding the values by which society's ruling groups legitimize their power. At its best, Minimalist art was and is a plea for commitment to values – such as clear, contemplative vision, the recognition of illusions for what

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[233] Of the practicing minimalists to have written with subtlety on their and related work are Judd, Stella, Morris, LeWitt, Nyman, Reich and Mertens.

[234] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 121-2.

[235] Potter, *Four*, 18.

[236] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 140-1, 162; Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond* (New York: Schirmer, 1974), 85-6.

[237] Potter, *Four*, 195, 197-8.

[238] Lasch, *Minimal Self*, 131, 134.

[239] Baker, *Minimalism*, 30. See Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 25.

[240] Potter, *Four*, 260.

[241] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 35-9.

[242] Arthur C. Danto, "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art," *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 12.

they are, and a love of physical reality for its own sake – that are not, and probably cannot be, widely shared in a highly technologized, economically volatile mass society, irrespective of its form of government.[243]

Indeed, upon close analysis, canonical minimalism is at least as readily deployed in service of mass communication as it is in the indifferent realism the present work regards as it truest vocation. Its aesthetic is rapidly and effectively assimilated into the visual language and soundtrack of advertising and product design;[244] minimalism becomes synonymous with restrained style in architecture, (Figures 19 and 20)[245] interior design (Figure 21)[246] and fashion (Figure 22);[247] its influence on the course of popular music is significant, from the hypnotic riffs of much 1970s rock to Marnie Stern's recent *This Is It and I Am It and You Are It and So Is That and He Is It and She Is It and It Is It and That Is That* (Track 4),[248] and from the disco of the late 1970s[249] to the minimal electronica of IDM (Intelligent Dance Music), exemplified in the work of composers such as Plastikman (Track 5).[250]

Figure 19: Dirk Jan Postel, Glass House in Almelo.   **Figure 20: Morger & Degelo, House in Dornach.**

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[243] Baker, *Minimalism*, 30.

[244] Strickland, 2-3, 9; Fink, 13, 120-8; Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art,* 96.

[245] Respectively Dirk Jan Postel, Glass House (date unspecified). Almelo, Netherlands; Morger & Degelo, House (date unspecified). Dornach, Switzerland. See Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 72-81; 97-107.

[246] Gluckman Mayner, Helmut Lang Flagship Parfumerie, 1997. New York. See Cheviakoff, 126-55.

[247] Francisco Costa (for Calvin Klein), Dress, Pre-fall, 2011/12. *MAP*, 24-39; Strickland, 1; Schwartz, 10.

[248] Marnie Stern, "Steely," *This Is It and I Am It and You Are It and So Is That and He Is It and She Is It and It Is It and That Is That*. Kill Rock Starts, 2008.

[249] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 9, 26-30, 35-42 .

[250] Plastikman, "Psyk," *Artifakts*. Novamute, 1998.

Figure 21: Gluckman Mayner, Helmut Lang Flagship Parfumerie, New York, 1997.

Figure 22: Francisco Costa (for Calvin Klein), Pre-fall, 2011/12.

Inasmuch as there is manifested a *minimal look*[251] – a stylistic, aesthetic immediacy, as well as the marker for an existential containment and austerity which promises the most by way of the least – we ought immediately, and more cynically, also to recognize in its operation a "characteristic repetitive experience of self in mass-media consumer society...[T]he rationalized techno-world that began to take final shape in industrialized societies during the long post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s created for the first time the theoretical possibility of a strange feedback loop"[252] to which minimalism in a sense attests. Minimalism is all too easily recuperated in support of hegemonic social structures. This point is at the heart of Anna C. Chave's vehement criticism of minimalism, directed at what she interprets as its "domineering, sometimes brutal rhetoric."[253] Where Greenberg disapproves of the conceptualism of minimalism, and Fried criticizes it for its theatricality, Chave attacks it for the sheer physicality of its taking-place. In her view, "the authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used, as well as in the scale and often the weight of their objects,"[254] "effectually perpetrat[ing] violence

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[251]*MAP*, 24; Cheviakoff, *Minimal Art*, 82.

[252] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 4.

[253] Chave, *Rhetoric of Power*, 26.

[254] Ibid., 25.

through their work – violence against the conventions of art and against the viewer – rather than using their visual language to articulate a more pointed critique of particular kinds or instances of violence."[255] Chave's real target, however, is the ostensible neutrality of minimalism towards questions of political[256] and especially gendered power. She believes that it imports covertly all the trappings of patriarchal, masculinist discourse, both formally and in the terms it deploys in relation to its work.[257] That the majority of minimalist critics are women is of little interest to her,[258] and, more significantly, she seems unaware that her reading of gender is itself deeply heterosexist. In this respect, we might look to Fink's study which exhibits a more subtle understanding of the implicit relation in minimalism not merely of gender to power, but also of power and aesthetic *telos* to sexuality.

4. THE AESTHETICS AND OBJECTS OF MINIMALISM

a) Formalism and objecthood

The admirable clarity and detail of Frances Colpitt's 1990 study, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*, stems principally from her insight that a flexible, analytical formalism best exposes the qualities of minimalist objects which, by their quantitative presence, habitually render their elaboration in terms of meaning extremely difficult. Colpitt thus limits her study to the "abstract, geometric painting and sculpture executed in the United States in the 1960s."[259] Form makes itself known through the actual existential intensity of an artwork – the objecthood of an object, in which case appearance *is* reality. Minimalist sculptural forms constitute such intensities by their radicalization of ordinary sculptural space. Carl Andre's floor-pieces (Figure 23)[260] "succeed[...] in squeezing out sculptural space to the point of two dimensionality," Colpitt suggests, while Sol LeWitt's open cubic structures at once extrapolate and contain space by virtue of form (Figure 24).[261]

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[255] Ibid., 30.
[256] See Batchelor, *Minimalism*, 71.
[257] Chave, *Rhetoric of Power*, 32-3. See Batchelor, *Minimalism*, 8.
[258] Ibid., 13.
[259] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 1.
[260] Carl Andre, *Fall*, 1968. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
[261] Sol LeWitt, *Incomplete Open Cubes*, 1974. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Figure 23: Carl Andre, *Fall*, 1968.
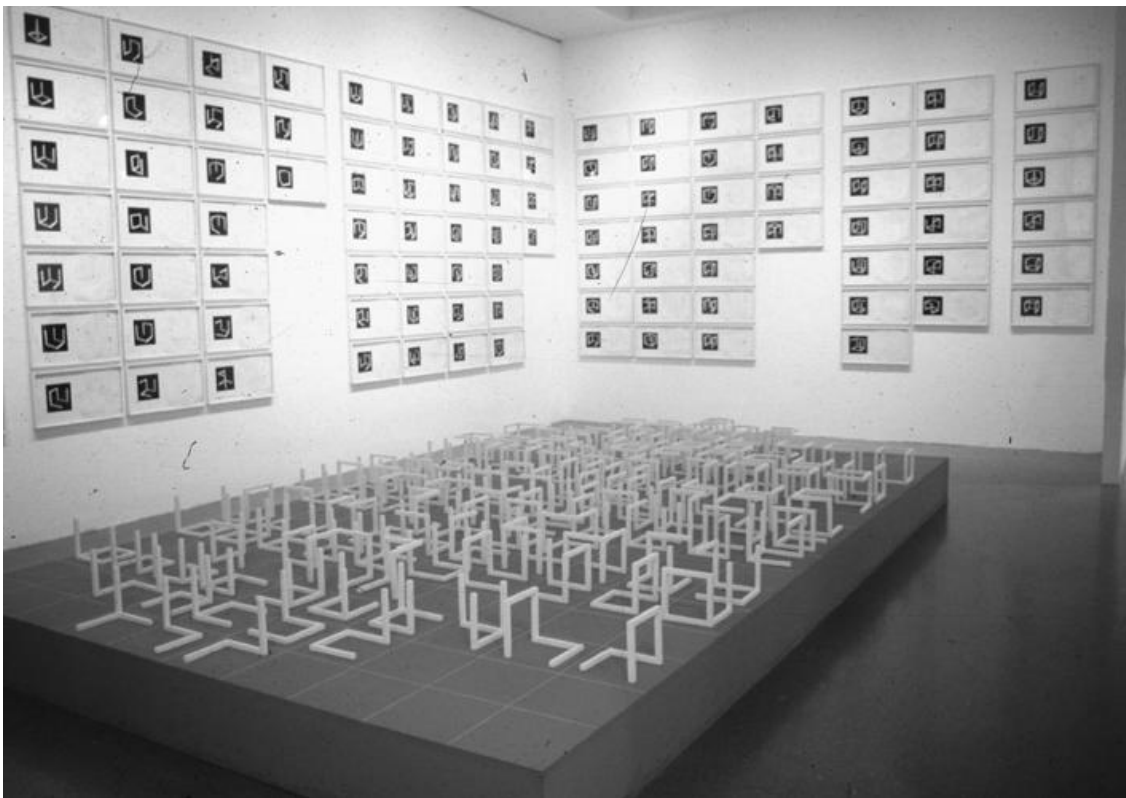
Figure 24: Sol LeWitt, *Incomplete Open Cubes*, 1974.

It is to a similar formal intensity that painter Frank Stella refers, as it is mentioned above, in claiming of his painting that "only what can be seen there *is* there…What you see is what you see."[262] Examining *Tomlinson Court Park* (Figure 25),[263] one of the *Black Paintings* produced by Frank Stella between 1958 and 1959, it becomes evident how minimalism is poised between the formalist tradition of Bauhaus, *De Stijl* and constructivism on the one hand, and the colour field monochromatic tradition of abstract expressionism[264] on the other – the latter exemplified best in the work of Newman, Rothko, Klein and Reinhardt (Figures 26-29).[265] In Stella's work, place[266] is abstracted to shape – the work *containing* itself in its most essential geometric and, moreover, chromatic qualities. The central formal concern of the work is "the relationship of [its]...internal structure and its bounding shape," which in this case is the canvas. However, as Meyer notes,[267] this relationship is itself tense. "Forc[ing] the picture (or depicted shape) into near coincidence with the picture support (or literal shape),"[268] Stella's work undertakes an uneasy negotiation of literalism – expressed in the artist's desire to "to keep the paint as good as it was in the can"[269] – and illusionism – for, when we regard the work carefully, there is considerable dynamism depending upon which area, line or space our focus falls. In the movement it exhibits from the edge of the canvas towards the elongated central rectangle, the formal properties of the painting demonstrate what Fried describes as a "deductive structure:" the shape of the canvas determines the movement of the shrinking rectangular shapes towards the centre. Equally, these rectangles race outward, pointing toward the corners of the canvas and beyond, thus perpetuating the disjunction between the pictorial plane and that of the wall, despite the absence of a frame. From certain perspectives the expansion and contraction of these rectangles also acquires depth: the central rectangle at once draws the viewer towards an unspecified depth – an objectal instantiation of infinite regress, perhaps – and also presents the apex of a pyramidal structure as viewed from above.

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[262] Frank Stella in Glaser, "Questions," 158.

[263] Frank Stella, *Tomlinson Court Park*, 1959. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[264] Baker emphasizes that much minimalism appears to be a "classicizing reaction against the Romantic exuberance and self-celebration of 1950s Abstract Expressionism" (Baker, *Minimalism*, 13). Also see ibid., 29-31; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 24; Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 1.

[265] Barnett Newman, *cathedra*, 1971. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Yves Klein, *IKB 82,* 1959. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Mark Rothko, *Black on Maroon*, 1958. Tate, London; Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting, Black (A)*, 1954-9. Virginia Dwan Collection, New York.

[266] It may be argued that *place* is already a conceptual abstraction for the purposes of presentation of an actual physical location.

[267] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 121-4.

[268] Foster, *Return*, 78.

[269] Frank Stella in Glaser, "Questions," 157.
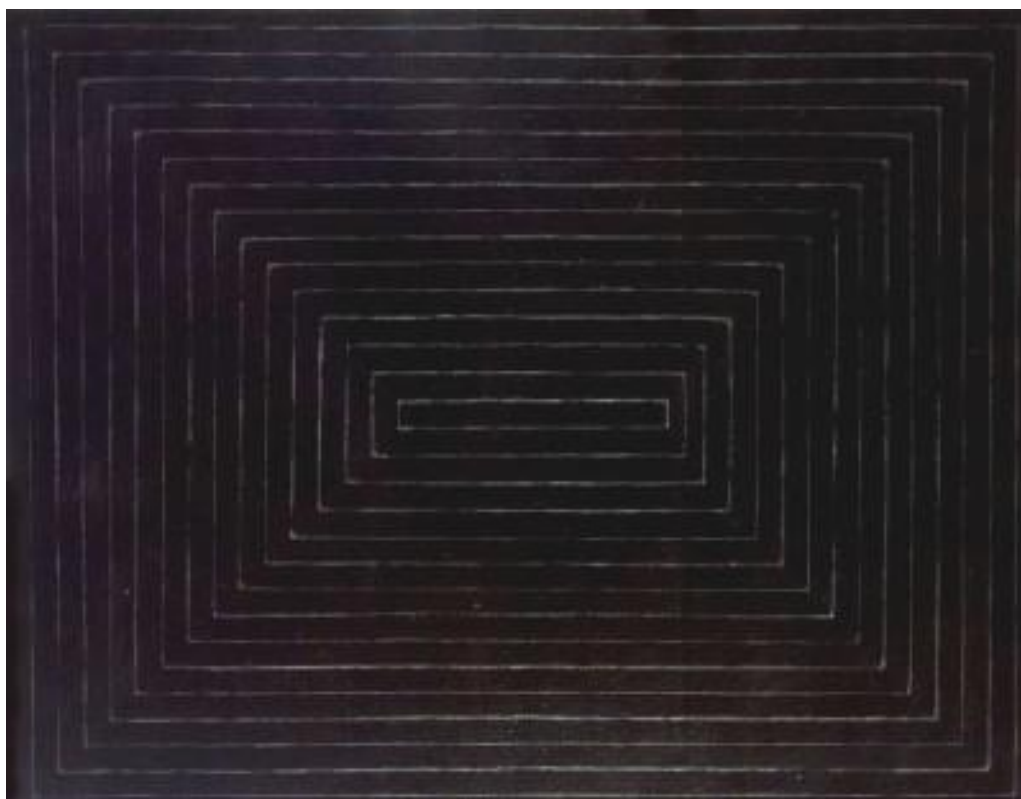
Figure 25: Frank Stella, *Tomlinson Court Park*, **1959.**

Figure 26: Barnett Newman, *cathedra*, **1971.**
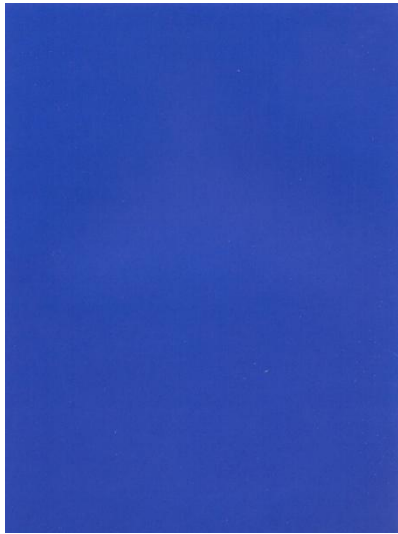
Figure 27: Yves Klein, *IKB 82***, 1959.**
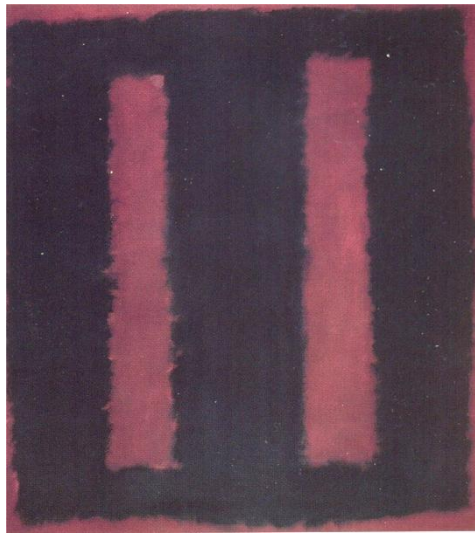
Figure 28: Mark Rothko, *Black on Maroon***, 1958.**

Figure 29: Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting Black (A)***, 1954-9.**

That we "understand the object better *on its* – the object's – *own terms*,"[270] is central to the minimalist vision. It is the aesthetic commitment to *objecthood* which encompasses considerations of form and abstraction in minimalism. "The rejection of mimesis and reference, and concomitant emphasis on materiality, led artists and critics to the notion of objecthood,"[271] observes Colpitt. "To refer to the work of art as an object…meant that it was a nonrepresentational, concrete, and real thing existing in the world, without illusion or formal prototype."[272] My contention is that the emergence of minimalist objects *qua* their objecthood can finally only be apprehended in an existential self-relation which emerges by the immanent, transformatory logic of transumption. Nonetheless, it is profitable to examine the most notable of the numerous and imperfect techniques employed in the pursuit of objecthood.

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[270] Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 8. As Bal recognizes, "by selecting an object, you question a field...[T]ogether, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated field" (ibid., 4).
[271] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 107.
[272] Ibid.

b) Minimal forms and internal relation

For visual artists, principal amongst the techniques by which objecthood is pursued is the reduction of external and internal relations within the artwork in question. The internal relational elements[273] of art "specify the ordering of pictorial or sculptural parts"[274] within the work itself. In minimalism, the emphasis on nonrelational internal composition stipulates that "individual parts and elements[275] play a subordinate role to the overall form of the work. It is not that elements are necessarily eliminated, but rather that the idiosyncratic or dynamic relationships between them are expended."[276] In visual terms, the clearest instantiation of this principle arrives in monochromatic canvases, exemplified most obviously in the invariant colour fields of painters such as Brice Marden (Figure 30),[277] Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman and Jo Baer, or, indeed, the earlier generation of Yves Klein, Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman. Such fields of colour contain no parts as such,[278] and demonstrate the capacity for unified fields of colour to reinforce the sense of objecthood for which the minimalist work strives. Yet, we might also consider a far busier minimalism with respect to nonrelational composition, exhibited in paintings such as Stella's *Delaware Crossing* (Figure 31).[279] The work is composed of a chevron design which, because it is deployed in perfect symmetry and pointing inwards, serves not to complicate the painting, but to focus the perceiver's attention onto the centre of the canvas, reinforcing, indeed containing, the work in its singularity.

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[273] In particular, such internal relations encompass the relation of figure to ground, of the image to the shape of the canvas or other type of support for the work in question, such as the plinth or base for sculpture, of unity to unity in sculpture (Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 43).

[274] Ibid., 41.

[275] In the visual arts such parts include the relation of figure to ground, image to shape or type of support of the work, and of unit to unit in sculpture; in music these might include the structuring forms within which pitches or voices occur within a specific timeframe to constitute melody, rhythm, harmony and harmonic rhythm.

[276] Ibid., 43.

[277] Brice Marden, *Grove Group I*, 1972-3. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[278] Some monochromatic painters do vary the hues of the pigment they use, retaining thus a sense of tonal movement.

[279] Frank Stella, *Delaware Crossing*, 1961. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Figure 30: Brice Marden, *Grove Group I*, 1972-3.

Donald Judd explicitly claimed that in his sculpture "the parts are unrelational…[W]hen you start relating parts…you're assuming you have a vague whole…and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few" [280] (Figure 32).[281] That with which canonical minimalist sculptors concerned themselves, then, was the creation of autonomous, self-contained objects.[282] In work consisting of more than one part – here we might consider Judd's serial sculptures (Figure 33)[283] which consist of identical forms, mostly uniform in colour and material, but occasionally with variations – the object remains nonrelational in the sense that the relation of unit to unit is one of a duplication emphasizing quantity rather than any particular qualitative dynamism.

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[280] Donald Judd in Glaser, *Questions*, 153-154.

[281] Donald Judd, *Untitled,* 1970. Morton Neumann Collection, Chicago.

[282] This view is expressed by sculptor Robert Morris (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 267).

[283] Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1990. Collection unspecified.
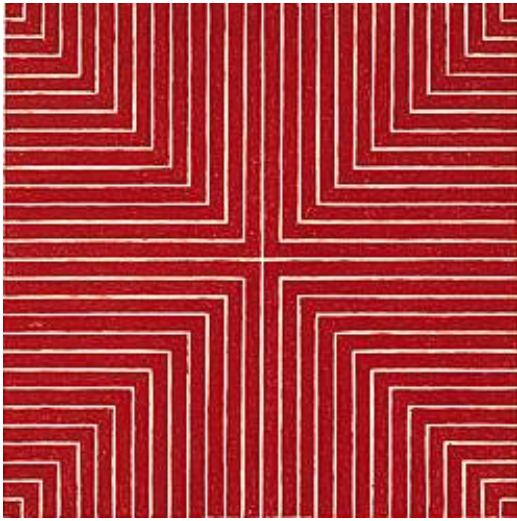
Figure 31: Frank Stella, *Delaware Crossing*, **1961.**

Figure 32: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, **1970.**
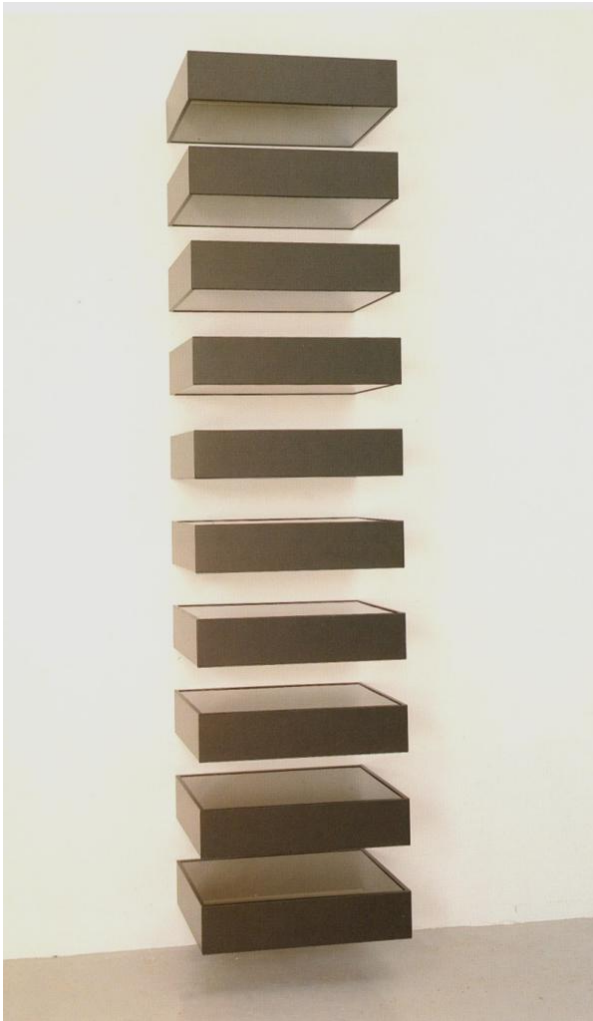
Figure 33: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, **1990; first type 1965.**

Equivalent techniques are observable in minimalist music. La Monte Young's *Trio*[284] – a wonderful exemplar of minimalist containment – is structured by a miniature arch-form[285] which is conceived in such a way as to assure the minimum differentiation between its parts, using the smallest possible number of notes for its particular structure, thus evidencing the strictest musical symmetry imaginable. A similar observation can be made of Steve Reich's phasing technique (first-used by Terry Riley): two (or more) instruments/channels begin an identical melody in unison, then gradually shift out of phase at specific intervals, creating a series of unexpected and gripping melodic and pulse variations. Phasing operates by a logic of distension rather than containment. Internal parts move against each other, exposing the active, processual dimension of the work – a cyclical, internal torsion – but finally affirm rather than undermine the integrity of the composition.

The question of literary nonrelation might be approached from the two rather traditional formal channels of poetry and of prose. The case for relational containment or convergence is well-made by much concrete poetry. Aram Saroyan's untitled poster-poem (Figure 34),[286] which consists solely of an experimental *poietic* grapheme, offers a paradigm for a generative act of *writing* which is significant without being meaningful. Hansjörg Gappmayr's "ver" (Figure 35)[287] offers a negative but equally compelling alternative to this *poietic* position: that in the top left corner we encounter the prefix *ver*, "an inseparable prefix added to German verbs, and nouns and adjectives derived from them, with the idea of removal, loss, untoward action, using up, change, reversal, etc."[288] suggests that the black block simultaneously limits and conceals the potentiality of the poem. Behind its impassive bulk it conceals text, the faintest outlines of which are visible upon close inspection, while itself constituting a rather intimidating *poietic* body in response to the injunction of the negative prefix.

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[284] La Monte Young, *Trio for Strings*, 1958.

[285] Arch-form involves the gradual and symmetrical addition and then subsequent subtraction of parts, so that the apex of the arch, the half-way point of the composition, presents the maximum simultaneous number of parts sounding together. Strickland provides a useful account of the form, performance and reception of the *Trio* (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 119-121).

[286] Aram Saroyan, "Untitled poster-poem," *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, ed. Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else, 1967), 281. Collection hereafter *ACP*. As Alexander points out, this poem is formally recognized as the shortest existing poem (Alexander, *Minimalism*, 6).

[287] Heinz Gappmayr, "ver," *ACP*, ed. Williams, 112.

[288] Emmett Williams, Editorial note, ibid.
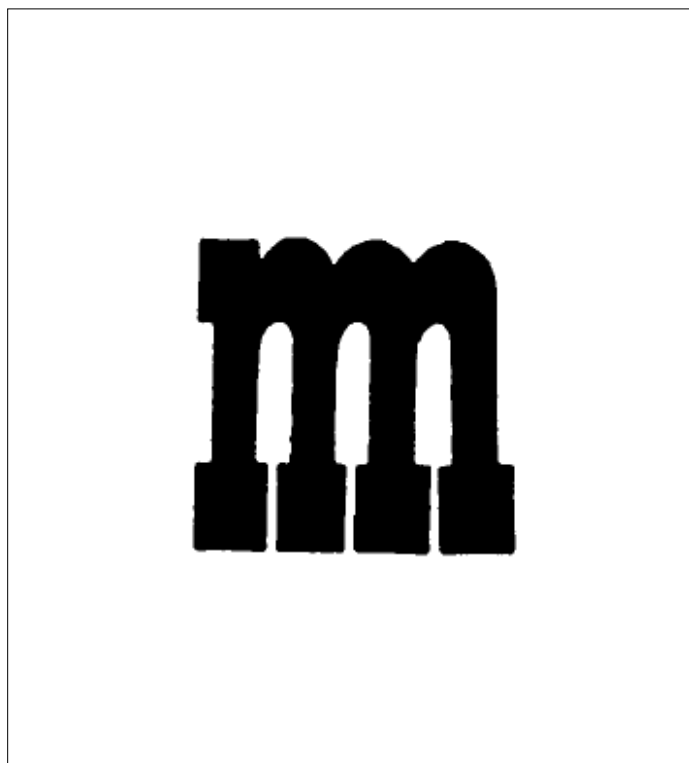
Figure 34: Aram Saroyan, *Untitled poster-poem*, 1965-6.
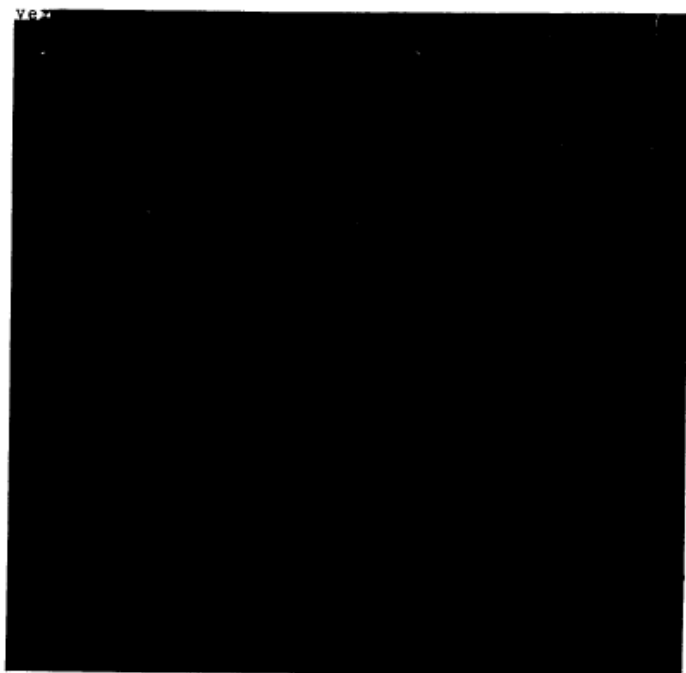
Figure 35: Heinz Gappmayr, *ver*, 1966.

Regarding prose, Hallett suggest that minimalist writing for the most part employs a "blunt, uncomplicated prose…[and] lack of editorial commentary."[289] The writers to which this might apply are numerous and diverse: amongst the earliest we might count the realism of Chekhov and, subsequently, that of Hemingway, but equally we could look to the radical work of the *nouveaux romanciers* – the plait of objectivist, generative and self-conscious fictions which mark much of the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Ricardou, Georges Perec and, in a different sense, that of Maurice Blanchot and Samuel Beckett, both of whom resist easy categorization. In the Anglo-American context, this aesthetic parsimony is expressed variously in the work of the Beat writers Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thomson and Charles Bukowski, and in the combinations of blue collar realism, neo-naturalism, blank fiction and compulsive bourgeois self-consciousness which constitute a minimalist engagement of recent fiction with the Real. The latter, although eclectic and certainly not a group, might include many works of writers as diverse as Raymond Carver, Joan Didion, Frederick Barthelme, Gabriel Josipovici, Paul Auster, Amy Hempel, Mary Robison, Bobby Ann Mason, Richard Kostelanetz, Richard Brautigan, Jay McInerney, Tobias Wolf, Jerzy Kozinsky, Anne Beattie, Brett Easton Ellis, Dave Eggers, David Markson and Tao Lin.[290]

Prose at its sparest undoubtedly suggests a definite reduction in the elaborate structures which govern earlier fiction. As Foster emphasizes, minimalist reduction should not carelessly be conflated with "the quotidian, the utilitarian, and the non-artistic"[291] as has been the tendency of many over-zealous critics. Rather, it marks a "reorientation"[292] and a "mission of recovery,"[293] in the terms of Karen Alexander. By the manner in which the properties of the everyday manifest in a transformative relation to the internal, quantitative elements most proper to the medium within which the work is constituted, minimalist prose habitually functions by a distributive logic.

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[289] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 13.

[290] The following provide various lists of writers associable with the minimalist aesthetic: ibid., 4, 10; Herzinger, *Introduction*, 8-14, 20-1 (Herzinger's argument includes a discussion of the problems associated with considering the British realists of the 1950s such as C.P. Snow, Margaret Drabble and Kingsley Amis too closely with the aesthetic of minimalism, ibid., 11-4); Linsey Abrams, "A Maximalist Novelist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction," *MFMR*, 24-28; Stevenson, "Minimalist Fiction," 83; Bellamy, "Downpour," 34-8; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 3, 12; McDermott, *Austere Style*, 1-2. Warren Motte generates a comparable catalogue of French minimalists (Motte, *Small Worlds*, 2).

[291] Foster, *Return*, 38.

[292] Ibid.

[293] Alexander, *Minimalism*, 8.

The preference in minimalist narrative for "discontinuous devices, arbitrary and open endings, interplay of surface details,[294] narrative omissions, and anti-linear plots"[295] at once permits and complicates the pursuit of minimalism. The prose tradition is one of considerable formal and generic complexity, and although minimalism renders its structural intricacies clear on one level, the opacity it retains on another is necessary if it is to accomplish its mimetic vocation – a maximal realism pursued by minimal means.[296] Thus, there appears to be a limit to the *degree* of minimalism which one might accomplish by stylistic austerity for a work still to be recognizable as functioning in relation to the conventions of narrative fiction. Given the situation in which stylistic markers are pushed to their minimal extremes, minimalist prose accedes to a quantitative logic. Simply put, the conviction with which we assert that a work is minimalist is intimately related to its scale. Carver is more readily recognizable as a minimalist than is Alain Robbe-Grillet not primarily for reasons of style,[297] but because the prose of the former writing is characterized by a parsimony unmatched by the latter. Such condensation marks the *scale* of Carver's work as minimalist – a scale not dependent solely on its brevity, although such brevity certainly assists in our perception of these as unified works, and in this unity, in turn, resides the capacity of these works to compel our attention *qua* their minimalism. An extreme of this quantitative logic is apparent in Richard Kostelanetz's *Microstories*,[298] which, far briefer than Carver's work and usually consisting of single sentences, exceed what is ordinarily comprehensible in terms of narrative prose. This transgression is the precise consequence of their aphoristic concision: their syntax is proper neither to prose nor to poetry; radical in that they resemble narrative but, by virtue of their claim to universality, attach to none of the represented events which are its ordinary consequences.

Examining Carver's short fiction, it becomes evident how the case for objecthood in narrative prose is habitually complicated by the manner in which the internal relation of formal elements (no matter how limited) and external referentiality appear inseparable.[299] Precisely on this mimetic count, critics

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[294] In this context it is necessary to point out the potential differences between *surface* and deep structural relations between units.

[295] Ibid., 16.

[296] See Danto, *Transfiguration*, 9, 11-3, 21, 24-5.

[297] The austerity of Robbe-Grillet's short fiction is at least equal to that of Carver's.

[298] The following is one of Kostelanetz's *Microstories* in full: "Even the happiest love stories end in death" (Richard Kostelanetz, "Microstories," *Gander Press Review* 1 (2008): 93.

[299] This is modelled with particular clarity by Roland Barthes. In Barthes' model, narrative exists across three levels: the functional level – which includes the specific linguistic units from which the "narrative economy" (Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 97) of plot is constructed ("nuclei [functions proper] and catalysers, indices and informants" (ibid,. 96-7)); the actional level – the aspects of character or actants (ibid., 105) which bring about change or "major articulations of *praxis*" (ibid., 107) by coordinating functional units (ibid., 107); and the narrative – the highest level

periodically attempt to classify Carver as a realist rather than a minimalist – Verhoeven offers numerous alternatives, and Hilfer emphasises in Carver's work a "reflex to lower-class exigency"[300] above a particular aesthetic vision. As do Hallett[301] and Alexander,[302] we ought to recall that minimalism has always concerned itself with intensifying the Real, which justifies Schechner's claim that Carver's work is a catalyst for the realist revival in 1980s fiction,[303] expressing "a capacity for seeing clearly and the power to create, in prose, the illusion of a sharply visualised world."[304] Fluck characterizes realist literature as writing "intent on arresting semantic play by insisting on the need of life-likeness and verisimilitude in representation."[305] In the best of Carver's minimalism, writing presents "an effective illusion of reality,"[306] generated – as in the case of Stella's painting – within the tension which persists between illusionism and factical materiality.

In "The bath", for example, Carver's terse, dispassionate and fractured narrative captures with considerable subtlety the emotional complex and communicative disjuncture which might accompany traumatic experience. Recounting an accident in which a boy is run down by a car on the eve of his eighth birthday, and the vigil of his parents at his hospital bed, Carver reflects the full distress of the incident in the devastating obliqueness of the mothers' fractured monologue which she recites upon encountering complete strangers in a hospital waiting room:

> My son was hit by a car...But he's going to be all right. He's in shock now, but it might be some kind of a coma too. That's what worries us, the coma part. I'm going out for a little while. Maybe I'll take a bath. But my husband is with him. He's watching. There's a chance everything will change when I'm gone. My name is Ann Weiss.[307]

Although the aesthetic of minimalist prose manifests principally in terms of a radical reduction of "form, style, vocabulary, syntax, imagery, structure, plot, and characterisation,"[308] analysis reveals that the

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at which the functional and actional levels are integrated and the narrative is opened to the world for interpretation (ibid., 115).

[300] Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992), 182.

[301] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 15-7.

[302] Alexander, *Minimalism*, 136-7.

[303] Mark Schechner, "American Realisms, American Realities," *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), 40.

[304] Ibid., 43.

[305] Winfried Fluck, "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction," *Neo-Realism*, 69.

[306] Ibid.

[307] Raymond Carver, "The bath," *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), 219.

[308] Verhoeven, "Much ado," 43-4.

condensation of its internal relations is only contingent, and that the minimalist work exposes a particular set of external relations.

c) *Poietic* immanence – impassive presence, repetition, and the demands minimalism makes of its perceiver

Much as minimalism moves across the conventions of modern and postmodern aesthetics, so, too, does its concern with absolute autonomy and an increasingly active mode of aesthetic perception which such autonomy paradoxically demands. While the limited internal relations by which the minimalist artwork is most unambiguously confirmed habitually appeal to an existential logic of containment, it is not uncommon that this internality *turns upon itself* – revealing a dynamism unanticipated in the object in question, which the present work recognizes in terms of *distension* – or *turns outward* – a process of transumption, in which the dislocation of an object's most essential quantity is at once a relocation of the same.

Treating such externality in formalist terms, numerous critics recognize that a radicalization of the constructive nature of perception is minimalism's most consistent feature. Colpitt suggests that in minimalism we discover "a new focus on relationships struck across and within the space between the spectator and the object of perception."[309] The consequences of this relationship are by no means unambiguous, however. In *Art and Objecthood* Michael Fried holds that intrinsic to minimalism is its theatricality – fundamentally detrimental to the fortunes of art[310] – which derives directly from his understanding that *literalist*[311] objects deprive the perceiver of the capacity *not* to respond to them:[312] "inasmuch as the literalist work *depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been waiting for him."[313] As Michael's notes, "in Fried's account of Minimalism, the object exists on its own all right; what depends on the beholder is only the experience. But of course, the experience is everything – it is the *experience* instead of the *object* that Minimalism values."[314] Yet to the extent that the general minimalist programme asserts that the aesthetic object is *equal*, rather than superior, to the perceiver, Fried's

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[309] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 67.
[310] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 141-2.
[311] See pages 245-52 of the present work.
[312] Michaels, *Shape*, 88.
[313] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 140.
[314] Michaels, *Shape*, 89.

argument tends towards overstatement. Indeed, as Foster emphasizes, "minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power."[315]

The external relations of minimalist artwork encompass the manner in which such an artwork exists in a particular spatial and temporal complex and, moreover, in relation to the perceiver. A chief concern of minimalism is *presence* – the immanence of an object, intrinsically and in relation to its environment. The significant force of such presence arises from the concurrency of affect and effect in minimalism's most significant works. Colpitt contends that "there are no exhibited, formal clues to signal the existence of presence, since it is felt, *responded to*, rather than *recognised*."[316] Presence, in this light, offers itself as an oblique aesthetic contract between object and perceiver, at once a testimony to the radical, impassive, quantitative dimension of Being – the Real – and the manner in which the Real renders itself intelligible through minimal aesthetic objects which reach out into the experiential world.

In Fried's estimation,[317] minimalists "want[…] to achieve presence through objecthood, which requires a certain largeness of scale, rather than through size alone."[318] In minimalism, however, acknowledging the spatial and temporal particularities of perception draws us towards, rather than away from, the objecthood of the work. In musical minimalism, presence is conveyed principally by the immediacy achieved in works which use sustained drones – the work of La Monte Young, Pauline Oliveros, Brian Eno, Harold Budd and Richard Maxfield typify this approach – or various types of intense repetition – Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and John Adams for whom this technique offers an active means of structuring the music.[319] By these techniques, composers reduce to a minimum the interval between the production, reception and consequent perception and processing of, and reflection upon, the music in question. Variation takes on a far more subtle and ateleological role in this context, ensuring between the composition as sonic object, and the immanence with which the perceiver experiences the composition, a remarkable continuity.

The minimalist concern with presence relates closely to what in traditional aesthetics is marked in terms of the sublime: an immediacy of experience which commands attention precisely by threatening to overwhelm the integrity of the senses.[320] Thus, common to Robert Wilson's remarkable design for Glass'

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[315] Foster, *Return*, 43.

[316] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 70.

[317] He refers here specifically to the work of Morris, but the statement holds true for the majority of Minimalist art.

[318] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 126.

[319] Fink, *Repeating*, 5-8.

[320] Kant, *Judgment*, 115.

opera *Einstein on the Beach*[321] (Figure 36), Dan Flavin's installation at the Dan Flavin Art Institute (Figure 37),[322] Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (Figure 38)[323] and Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (Figure 39)[324] is not only a minimalist understanding of light, natural or manufactured, as sculptural medium, but of minimalist light art as evoking an experience of sublime presence.

Figure 36: Robert Wilson, Part of stage design for *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976.

[321] Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, 1975.
[322] Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Robert, Joe and Michael)*, 1975-81. Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton.
[323] Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Tate Modern, London.
[324] Walter de Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1971-7. Dia Art Foundation, Quemado, New Mexico.
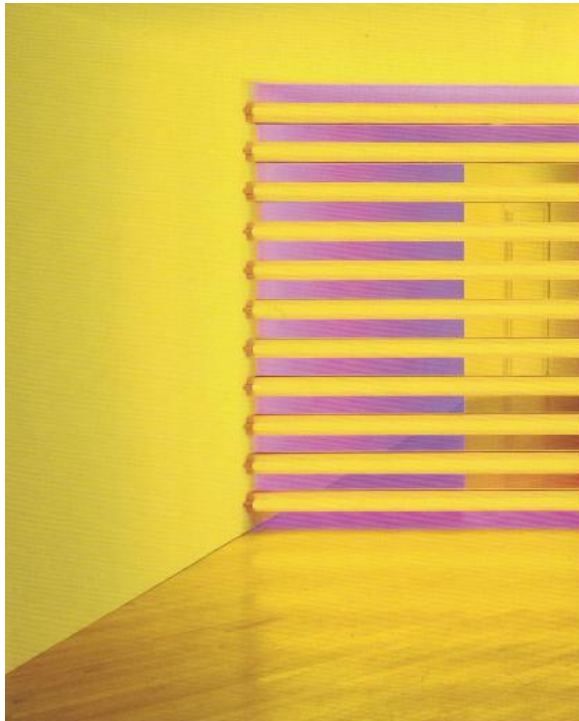
Figure 37: Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Robert, Joe and Michael)*, **1975-81.**

Figure 38: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, **2003.**

Figure 39: Walter de Maria, *The Lighting Field*, **1971-7.**

Intimately related in minimalism to the notion of *presence* is that of *scale*, or the relative quantitative relation of an artwork to the perceiver and its environment.[325] "Like presence, the ingredients of scale cannot be *pre*scribed."[326] In minimalism, the appropriate scale for a work is the one which maximises the immanence of its objecthood. In all four works of light art above, the scale is, as it were, *maximally minimal*. This is the case despite the fact that the scale of De Maria's work is enormous – four hundred steel poles, each over twenty feet tall, act as lightning conductors arranged over a mile-by-kilometre area in New Mexico, harnessing and distributing massive amounts of electrical energy[327] – whereas the scale of Flavin's work is comparably moderate, although no less aesthetically forceful, measured as it is by the room in which the fixtures are situated, and transmuting modest amounts of energy into a quite overwhelming yellow and violet luminescence.

Minimalist music generates through sustained pitches, relentless repetition or considerable duration a "sublime excess of teleology,"[328] which not only neutralizes any conventional *telos* but abandons the anthropocentric scale by which classical music is traditionally structured according to the "timescale of individual (or cumulative) arcs of tension and release."[329] Evidence of this new approach to musical scale is offered in the indefinite duration of La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* (Track 6),[330] the five hours of Philip Glass' opera *Einstein on the Beach*, or the three and a half hours of his *Music in Twelve Parts*.[331] Yet even apparently smaller works exhibit a similarly impactful distensive logic: in Steve Reich's *Four Organs* (Track 7)[332] "four electronic organs repeat the pitches of a single chord, gradually extending them so that, while the pulse remains intact, the music gives the impression of slowing down."[333] The scale of the work is distinct not so much for its pure duration, but for the manner in which it transforms the human experience of duration.

Proposing a parallel poetics between minimalism and the short story on the basis of scale, Hallett suggests that "both minimalism and the short story privilege the singular, focus on surface images, and speak sparingly…[B]oth have been subjected to the worst sort of literary bias: accused of lacking capacity and

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[325] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 75.
[326] Ibid., 77.
[327] Baker, *Minimalism*, 125-6.
[328] Fink, *Repeating*, 44.
[329] Ibid.
[330] La Monte Young, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, 1964-present. The full recorded version is five hours long.
[331] Philip Glass, *Music in Twelve Parts*, 1971-4.
[332] Steve Reich, *Four Organs*. Nonesuch, 1996.
[333] Potter, *Four*, 200.

substance."[334] Hallett claims for minimalist literature a particular clarity in its capacity for presenting "concrete details which reflect complex states of being and which correlate with elements of the universal human condition."[335] Indeed, in the attempt to grasp the quantitative dimension by which the perceiving subject belongs to a potentially universal configuration, we glimpse the considerable significance of the minimalist concern with scale.

d) Minimalism between index and indifference – nonreferentiality, nonmediation, nonanthropomorphism

Supporting the minimalist concern with presence is its preference for producing *nonreferential* objects. In the case of minimalist transumption, the centrality of displacement and transformation invariably results in a struggle for dominance between hetero- and self-reference. Thus, considering several of the manifestations of the sun-god Apollo in the environments of Ian Hamilton Finlay's concrete poetry, we discover that the god has "migrated far from his native Greece; he is the pale 'Hyperborean Apollo' visiting the northern regions, of whom Heine and Pater write. His modern avatar is the French revolutionary, Saint-Just."[336] Encountering upon a wooded path at *Little Sparta*[337] the imposing golden head of the sun-God – glowing, as it might be expected to, but upon its forehead inscribed the title *Apollon Terroriste* (Figure 40)[338] – we are subject to a remarkable experience of theoretical and historical convergence; the "disjunction of disorder and coherence,"[339] as Alec Finlay has suggested, which is yet a "model of order."[340] For here is not only Apollo, but also an architect of the French Revolution, Saint-Just, who makes frequent appearances in Finlay's work:[341] the classical and neo-classical, bucolic and political, generative and destructive, are held in a stimulating proximity.[342]

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[334] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 20-1.

[335] Ibid., 47.

[336] Stephen Bann, "The Temple," Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion, 1992), 65. See Stephen Scobie, *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997), 176-7.

[337] *Little Sparta* is the name Finlay gave to his garden at Stonypath, near Edinburgh, where he lived and worked for over 38 years, and at where the majority of his concrete and landscape poetry is rehearsed.

[338] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Apollon Terroriste*, 1988. Little Sparta, Dunsyre.

[339] Alec Finlay, "Introduction," *Wood Notes Wild: Essays on the Poetry, Art and Gardens of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, ed. Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1997), xv.

[340] Finlay, *Model*, 22.

[341] John Dixon Hunt, *Nature Over Again: The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 113.

[342] Ibid., 110, 114-5; Abrioux, *Visual Primer*, 252-3; Scobie, *Earthquakes*, 171-8.

Figure 40: Ian Hamilton Finlay with Alexander Stoddart, *Apollon Terroriste*, 1988.

Their harmony is a paradoxical one: Apollo is associated not only with light, truth, revelation, learning and creative endeavour, but also with the manner in which these dialectically contain their own antitheses. Thus also with Saint-Just: the revolutionary is at once the instrument of enlightenment and terror.[343] Revelation and revolution, intimately linked, are easily consumed by an instrumental application of terror; truth slips back into dogma, and art only scarcely contains the savage, sublime[344] forces and violence by which it is generated. It is not by chance that Saint-Just's golden head should be disembodied, as the promise of the revolution succumbs all too rapidly to the extremities of its own logic, and its progenitors meet the same fate at the foot of the guillotine which they expedited for so many others. Thus it is stylistic and historical discontinuity, rather than thematic disunity, which strikes us in the statuette of Apollo/Saint-Just (Figure 41)[345] carrying a machine-gun,[346] as well as in the inscription which appears on the facade of Finlay's *Garden Temple* (Figure 42):[347] "TO APOLLO, HIS MUSIC, HIS MISSILES, HIS MUSES."[348] Finlay's concrete poetry offers minimal, yet potent, markers of historical, spatial and cultural transposition,[349] indeed, transumption. In the singularity of their location, these objects act as indices: minimalist *poietic* markers which render deeply problematic the understanding that intense self-reflexivity passes most readily into non-referentiality.

Nonetheless, it is still accurate that in much minimalism, self-reflexivity is of so intense an order that, *contra* the processes observable in much of Finlay's concrete poetry, the aesthetic object does in fact eschew all external and mimetic reference. "[R]eleased from representation, they further remove themselves from allusion by their being new and unique objects, referring to nothing (except, some might argue, to the theories upon which they are based)."[350] Despite numerous superficial resemblances, minimalists habitually reject the principles of traditional abstraction – of an "art whose forms have a basis in the real world."[351] Identifying in its objects the persistence and indifference of the Real, minimalism pursues its unmediated *realness* by a vigorous eschewal of mimesis.[352] Shape and form are means of conceptual and formal deduction rather than the imitation of something pre-existent. Similarly,

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[343] Abrioux, *Visual Primer*, 251-2, 255-7, 260, 265; Hunt, *Nature* 109-10, 113-4, 117-8; Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta: The Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2003), 65-9; See Finlay, *Model*, 35.
[344] Abrioux, *Visual Primer*, 250-1; Hunt, *Nature*; 117-8.
[345] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Apollo/Saint-Just,* 1986. Little Sparta, Dunsyre.
[346] Abrioux, *Visual Primer*, 116; Sheeler, *Little Sparta*, 69.
[347] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Garden Temple (To Apollo, His Music, His Missiles, His Muses)*, 1982. Little Sparta, Dunsyre.
[348] See Sheeler, *Little Sparta*, 65.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 102.
[351] Ibid., 101.
[352] Ibid., 71.

anthropomorphism – the comprehension of parts, properties and the relation between these with reference to that which is manifestly human – is "displaced in this art (Minimalism) by the nonanthropomorphic quality of 'presence,'"[353] discussed above.

Figure 41: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Apollo/Saint-Just* **(after Bernini), 1986.**
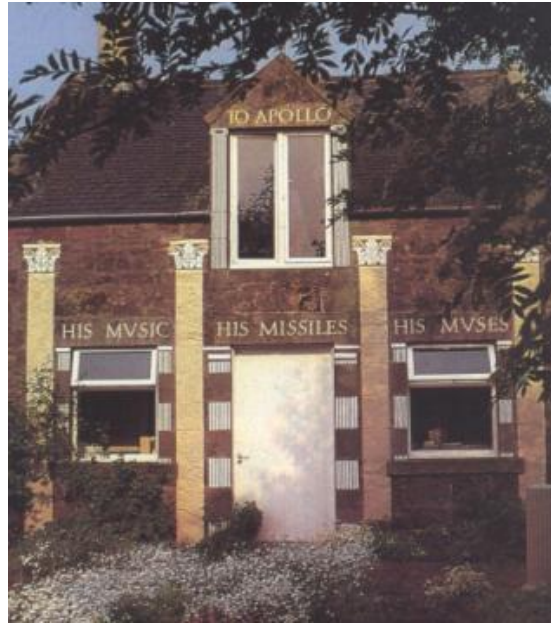
Figure 42: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Garden Temple* *(To Apollo, His Music, His Missiles, His Muses),* **1982.**

The condition implied by an ideal and dynamic combination of appropriate scale, presence and nonanthropomorphism is *nonreferentiality* – the artwork is free to exist in relation to its own *objecthood* or, otherwise, in terms of its essential *quantity*. Critics and artists disagree on the extent and desirability of minimalism's nonreferentiality, yet habitually acknowledge its significance: Fried proposes a deductive logic in minimalism according to which "the shape *is* the object;"[354] Wollheim asserts that "the identity of a work…resides in the actual stuff in which it consists;"[355] Robert Morris' *unitary forms* and Donald Judd's *specific objects* offer integral visions of nonreferentiality from the perspective of the object itself.[356] The unity and wholeness of such objects is pursued by various techniques of construction. In music, for example, both drones and repetitive modules draw attention to limitation in order to render the

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[353] Ibid., 70.
[354] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 119.
[355] Wollheim, "Minimal Art," 391.
[356] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 110.

work more perceivable and thus effective in terms of its integrity and structural unity (Track 8).[357]
Analogical techniques of repetition are observable in the serial (Figure 43)[358] and modular sculpture
(Figure 44)[359] of such artists as Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Mel Bochner, and in the *hard edge* painting
of Ellsworth Kelly (Figure 45)[360] or series of Brice Marden and Paul Mogensen (Figure 46).[361] Kelly's
work consists of repeated (usually) vertical bands or panels of highly contrasted colour, to which Judd
ascribes "some…earlier purity, idealism, and oblique but directly descriptive reference to nature."[362]
Strickland highlights the unifying function of Kelly's repetition, which he associates with the immediacy
evoked by the formal and chromatic interruption between these panels,[363] and their significance in
exploiting the effectiveness of replication within modular patterns of structural uniformity.[364]
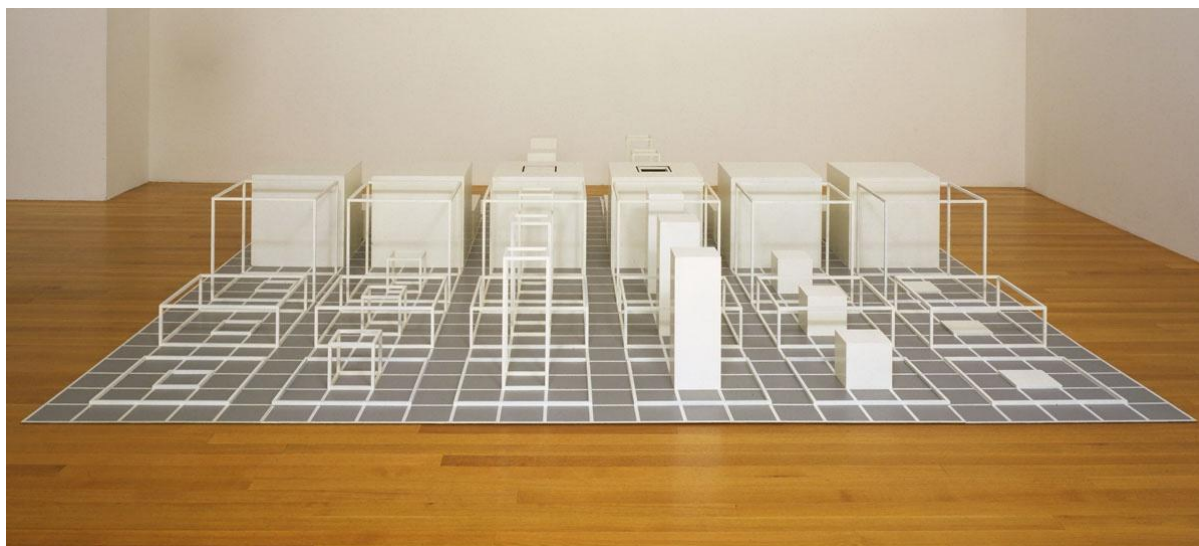
Figure 43: Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)***, 1966.**

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[357] Philip Glass, "Rubric," *Glassworks*. CBS, 1982. Glass skilfully exposes the manner in which a composition's
form and the audible process of its formation render one another increasingly transparent.

[358] Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)*, 1966. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[359] Donald Judd, *Untitled series*, 1982-6. Chinati Foundation, Marfa.

[360] Ellsworth Kelly, *Spectrum IV* (1967). Here is a concise presentation of several of minimalism's key concerns.
Kelly's work is a serial painting composed of thirteen vertical panels, each of a different colour, which together
constitute a displaced by nonetheless legitimate chromatic series – the panels do not run from red to blue, the usual
order of the spectrum. In horizontal sequence, revealing an unexpected symmetry, the vertical bands of the work
demonstrates the minimalist proclivity for formal repetition as well as an emphasis on process, both in the use of the
spectrum – a progressive sequence in the scientific sense of chromatic frequency – and in the manner in which
horizontal sequencing suggest temporal process.

[361] Paul Mogensen, *Copperopolis*, 1966. Collection unspecified.

[362] Donald Judd, "Young Artists at the Fair and at Lincoln Centre," *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax and New
York: Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, 1975), 130.

[363] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 73.

[364] Ibid., 70-71.

Figure 44: Donald Judd, *Untitled series (North Artillery Shed, Marfa)***, 1982-6.**
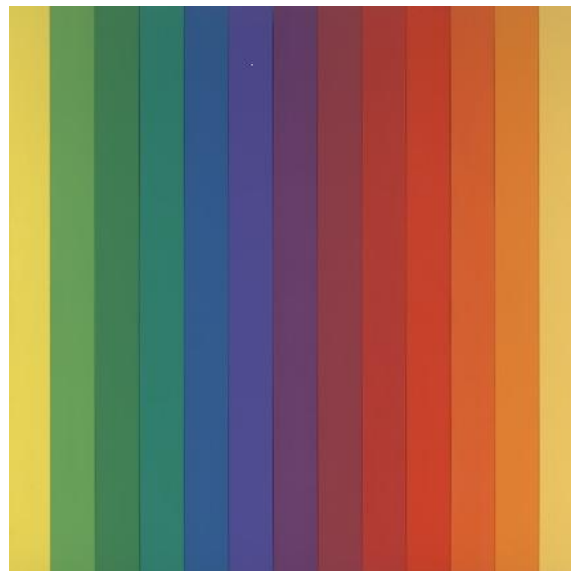
Figure 45:Ellsworth Kelly, *Spectrum IV***, 1967.**
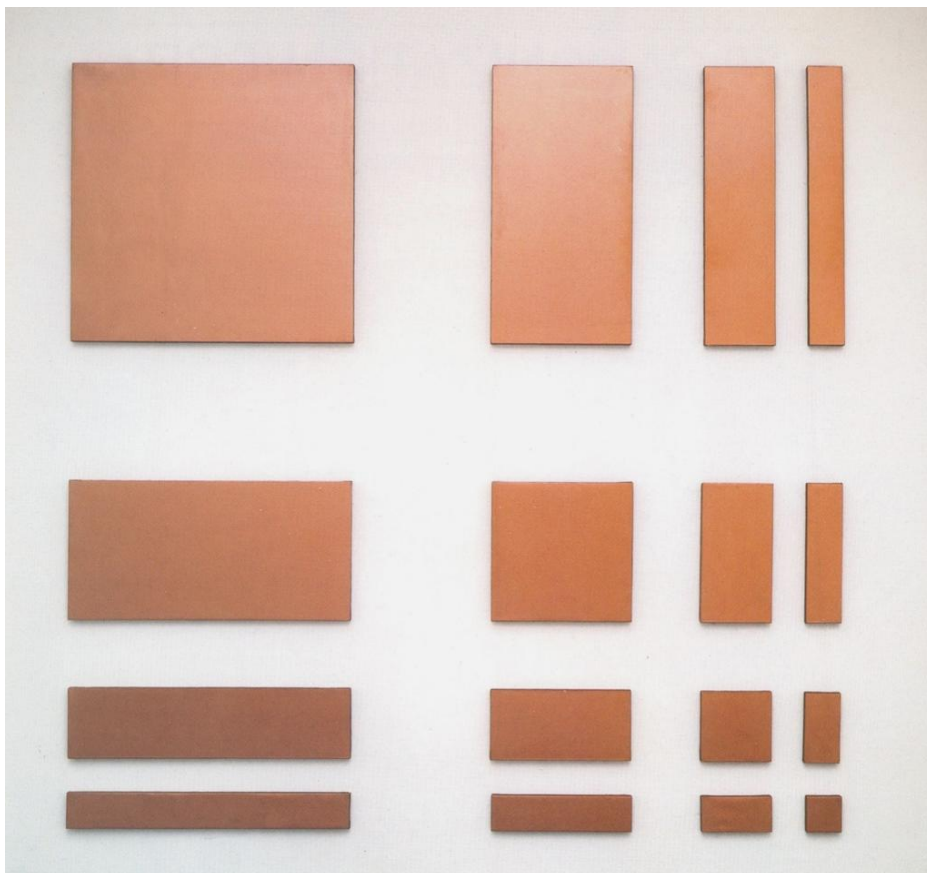
Figure 46: Paul Mogensen, *Copperopolis***, 1966.**

Repetition is similarly pivotal to the pursuit of a minimalist literary aesthetic. It finds of its most intense expressions in Gertrude Stein's circuitous and cyclical writing with its emphasis on *wordness* – the "satisfaction in language made present, contemporary; the pleasure/plenitude in the immersion in language, where language is not understood as a code for something else or a representation of somewhere else."[365] Equally we might look to the example of Beckett whose "work, with its asymptotic approaches to zero, enacts this complex play between reduction and addition, in which to repeat oneself, and therefore to say progressively less, seems, uncannily always to involve saying more."[366] Modular repetition – often replete with incremental additions and subtractions, and constructed from phrases making use of various techniques of contraction, elaboration, reversal, inversion or displacement – is central to the writing of Beckett and such other writers as Robbe-Grillet and Josipovici. The "voice...in the dark"[367] provides a central module in Beckett's "Company," the permutations of which allow one to trace a vigorous play of existential limits within the work – between internality and externality; active and passive voice; first, second and third person narrative[368] – as well as the recollection of largely traumatic childhood memories. In Josipovici's *The Inventory* entire passages are repeated,[369] reflecting on the manner in which conceptual chunking and repetitive narrative units often implicate one another. Similar use of repetition is recognizable in Didion's prose,[370] and in the writing of that "stylistic genitor of contemporary minimalist prose,"[371] Ernest Hemingway.

Repetition is more clearly integral to the structure and coherence of much traditional as well as avant-garde poetry. Nonetheless, a particularly minimalist conception of repetition is most convincingly exhibited in some of the finest Concrete and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. By its repetition, Eugen Gomringer's "silence" evokes the symmetry which exists between textual, semantic and material presence and absence:

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[365] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1992), 143.

[366] Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1988), 11.

[367] Samuel Beckett, "Company," *Nohow On* (New York: Grove, 1996), 3.

[368] Ibid., 7.

[369] We might consider the *You're early* (Gabriel Josipovici, *The Inventory* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968), 27-8, 35) and *the old man in the rocking-chair* sequences in this regard (ibid., 45, 55, 57, 58).

[370] Didion's repetition reflects the compulsive element of social interaction and dogma, as well as a notable destitution in contemporary communication (Joan Didion, *A Book of Common Prayer* (London: Penguin, 1979), 30; Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 28-30).

[371] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 37.

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silence   silence   silence
silence   silence   silence
silence             silence
silence   silence   silence
silence   silence   silence[372]
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If the word *silence* were not repeated as relentlessly as it is in Gomringer's poem – admitting that every iteration effectively negates the immanence of the word's meaning – then it is unlikely that its absence at the poem's physical centre could match the absence which is its semantic heart, that is, silence.

Fluctuating between the genres of prose poem and artist's book,[373] the work of Steve McCaffery is equally significant with respect to repetition. At the close of the third part of *Panopticon*[374] we encounter the phrase "and on" repeated no less than four hundred and forty times (Figure 47). The visual effect is as startling as the manner in which this repetition elicits from us a recognition of the materiality of text. Whether reading these lines, which for their sheer quantity dissolve the semantic element which precedes them, or apprehending them in purely visual terms, we encounter text in increasingly preconceptual, independent and objectal terms.

again. And again. In the phrase. Repeated endlessly. Just imagine. In the phrase. In as much as. In the phrase. Repeated endlessly. Just imagine. Without ceasing. Just imagine. And so on. Time and again. And so on. Time in and time out. And so on. And on and on. Time after time. The phrase repeated. And again. The phrase repeated beginning "iterations of her fecal memories." Just imagine. That had no place. Imagine. Had no time. Had no register. No effect. Time and again. No means to gather. Time and again. No fact behind it. Endlessly. No frame. Utterly. Just imagine. Utterly. Repetition of the phrase "the voluntary doings of a victim." Time and again. Day after day. The phrase repeated. Time in and time out. The light from the hill. Just imagine. The church in the movie. That had no place. No sentence. The phrase repeated. That had no sentence. Endlessly. That had no fact behind it. The phrase repeated. Just imagine. On and on. Just imagine. The description. Inasmuch as. The victim. In as much as. Description. In as much as. The victim. And the phrase "the way she gave confession." And the phrase "yes, i guess we have to admit." And on and on

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[372] Eugen Gomringer, "silence," *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology*, ed. Stephen Bann (London: London Magazine Editions, 1967), 31. This poem has been anthologized elsewhere as *silencio*. Anthology hereafter *CPIA*.
[373] Marjorie Perloff, *Inner Tension/In Attention: Steve McCaffery's Book Art*. 20 November 2011. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/ mccaf.html>.
[374] Steve McCaffery, "From Panopticon," *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*, ed. Douglas Messerli (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1994), 1024-1025.

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Figure 47: Steve McCaffery, *from Panopticon*, 1984.

The writing of Robert Lax is also notably innovative for the manner in which, by repetition, it aims to return to the *poietic* constituents of a given work a sense of radical immanence:

is
is
is
is
is
is
is

is
is
is

is
is
is

is
is
is
is
is
is
is[375]

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[375] Robert Lax, "is," *New Poems 1962/1985* (London: Coracle, 1986), 13.

Lax's poem exemplifies the manner in which repetition and presence are often confluent in minimalism, emphasizing a *poietic taking-place* as the very heart of the work – that *transcendental immanence* is most proper to every entity by virtue simply of its occurrence. Such is the "innermost exteriority"[376] by which aesthetic objects reflect the minimal displacement from themselves by which they acquire a *poietic* existential valence:

> things
> into
> words
>
> words
> into
> things
>
> things
> into
> words
>
> words
> into
> things
>
> words
> into
> things
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> words
> into
> things
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> things
> into
> words
>
> words
> into
> things[377]

e) The problem of reduction and the questions of facture and process

As noted, critical models attempting to conflate minimalism and reductivism remain problematic inasmuch as they fail to distinguish with suitable clarity radical simplicity from one arrived at as the *telos*

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[376] *CC*, 15.
[377] Robert Lax, "things into words," *New Poems*, 42.

of a reductive process. In recognizing minimalisms of unit, form, scale, style and material,[378] John Barth offers a sufficiently open typology of minimalism, but one which rests heavily upon this conflation. This is also true of the nine principal characteristics of minimalist literature[379] which Hallett identifies, concluding that minimalism offers "containers of condensed meaning"[380] in which we are obliged to "infer from the part exposed exactly what has been omitted, what lies beneath."[381] Where the part is metonymic in minimalist literature, in the visual arts it is independent. Colpitt contends that "while simplicity *implies* an intentionally reductive process…it does not demand it. For many artists there is a difference between the conception of a work of art as simple and the process of reducing from complexity to arrive at that simplicity."[382] In light of this important recognition, the extremity of reduction which seems evident in minimalism *sui generis* is as much the product of hermeneutic expectations and analytical processes traceable to the perceiver, as to the preference for "using materials as they...[are], without adulteration."[383] According to Colpitt, "simplification or reduction are conceptual…[I]f elements were to be eliminated, they were done so in the artist's mind."[384] Tracing minimalism *qua* reduction is thus a manner of regenerating in the aesthetic work an *act of* and *active* perception – constructively paying attention, in the spirit noted by Merleau-Ponty.[385]

The questions of where, of what and how an artwork is constituted – in short, questions of *facture* – are of considerable significance to the development of canonical minimalism. By abandoning the fetishization of the generative ritual, minimalism also forgoes numerous of the outward signs of artistic facture – its technical irregularities, expressiveness and gestures. Minimalists seek maximally stable and impersonal techniques through which to produce their works. This is particularly evident in minimalist sculpture which, along with the mechanical, anonymous reproduction of Pop art, "rejected personal facture."[386] Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Anne Truitt all used media unconventional for their art – sheet metal and plywood for example – which benefited from the expertise of industrial fabrication, providing works with

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[378] Barth, "Few Words," 68. See Alexander, *Minimalism*, 9-11.

[379] These are, in brief: uncomplicated prose; compactness which encompasses universal concerns; dialogical over auctorial or narrational exposition; non-heroic, everyday characters; absence of narrative climax; a sense of impotence regarding intentional action and communication; recognition of the inadequacy of language; passivity with regard to the passage of time and event; relativism (Hallett, *Minimalism*, 25).

[380] Ibid., 11.

[381] Ibid., 9.

[382] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 114.

[383] Ibid., 114.

[384] Ibid., 115.

[385] See page 251 of the present.

[386] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 17.

an increased "sharpness and clarity of edge and surface."[387] Thus at least some minimalism appears to move towards an aesthetic situation which "evince[s] a 'minimum' of artistic labour…purging...authorial feeling and demonstrable intention."[388] The reasons for abandoning the physical labour of sculptural construction, preferring industrial fabrication and assemblage, thus seem quite as practical as they are aesthetic.[389]

For many minimalist sculptors, the sheer scale of work (Figure 48),[390] the incredible heaviness of material,[391] and the use of premanufactured objects[392] required an unprecedented cooperation between artists, manufacturers and various specialists in industrial construction and installation. That "the artist functioned as conceptualizer; the factory as the actualizer"[393] provoked some dissent amongst critics.[394] Fried and Greenberg were less than hospitable to the idea, although as Colpitt emphasizes, it was principally *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, who, in deeply Romantic rather than anti-minimalist terms, lamented the sacrifice of "the energy and genius of [the artist's] own hand"[395] to various technologies of reproduction, a position immediately and effectively countered by Dore Ashton.[396]

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[387] Ibid., 18.

[388] *MAP*, 3.

[389] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 16-8; 20-2; *MAP*, 8.

[390] Ronald Bladen, *The X*, 1967. Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. The sculpture measures 22 by 24 by 14 feet.

[391] Richard Serra uses lead for many of his sculptures.

[392] Dan Flavin's light art is almost all constructed from prefabricated fluorescent tubes.

[393] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 16.

[394] Colpitt and Meyer agree that critics quickly accepted and assimilated the precepts of minimalism (ibid., 21-2; *MAP*, 3), although Meyer suggests that the purchase histories of various works suggests that the hostility of the general public was more long-lasting (ibid., 271).

[395] Hilton Kramer, qtd. in Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 21-2.

[396] Ibid.

Figure 48: Ronald Bladen, *The X*, 1967.

It is simply naive to imagine any form of artistic expression as entirely disconnected from technology, be it in terms of the means or the medium of production.[397] Minimalism's reliance on fabrication over artistic facture might, by some, be interpreted cynically as the point at which the utopianism of modernity tips into the dystopianism of postmodernity: creative force appears to be displaced, first from genius to technique, then from technique to technology, generating a rupture in which the potential for true novelty collapses into a void of simulacra. Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, minimalism in fact resists this collapse: its simultaneously radical and materialist approach offers clarity on the manner in which various techniques of fabrication cross into art. The manner of its complication of simulacra, and its accompanying problematization of the Real, extends well beyond the concerns exposed above in terms of sculpture, and into other aesthetic pursuits. In minimalist painting, a similar interest in the withdrawal of facture is

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[397] Consider in this respect the technological advances which were necessary for the modern pianoforte to develop from its predecessors – the Medieval hurdy-gurdy, the Renaissance and Baroque harpsichord and clavichord, the Classical fortepiano – and the exponentially accelerating and interactive effects on the development of formal structures, techniques, proficiency and stylistic idiosyncrasies, in terms of both composition and performance engendered by such technology (and which music and performance, in turn, demand more advanced instruments).

discernible.[398] Brush strokes, suggestive of human action, give way to instruments and techniques which ensure the even application of paint. Rauschenberg used a roller and housepaint[399] for his "prototypical…series of six works composed of from one to seven panels of rolled white enamel paint,"[400] while Robert Mangold famously used a spray gun to maximize the evenness of application (Figure 49).[401] Even though these works remain dependent on the effort of artists, "the 'look' of fabrication was evident in most paintings."[402] Neutrality, impersonality and anonymity quickly became one of the understated yet striking hallmarks of minimalist painting.
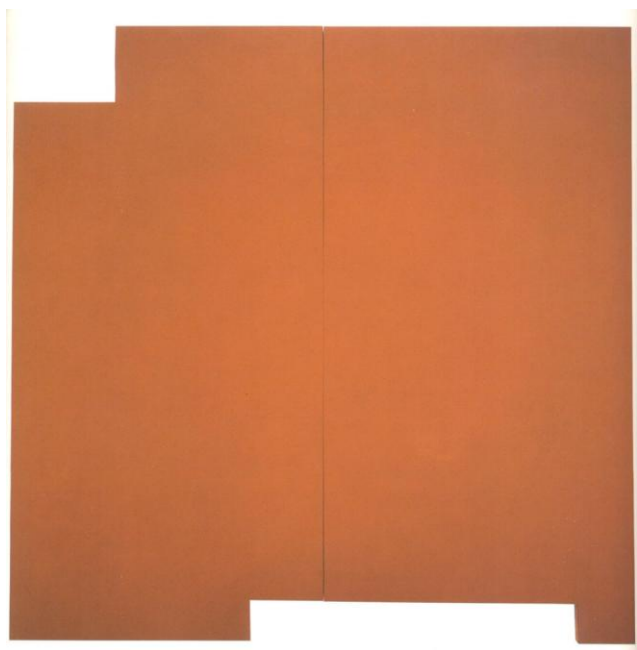
Figure 49: Robert Mangold, *Red Wall*, 1965.

Minimalist composers were similarly concerned with investigating the manner in which technology might intensify their aesthetic aims. Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music*, for example, is a process work which

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[398] It is important to emphasize that minimalism retains a remarkable technical heterogeneity within and between its various media (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 7; Baker, *Minimalism*, 9, 13, 20).

[399] Frank Stella would later use black housepaint on unprimed canvas, generating a depth of blackness that remains a touchstone of minimalist painting (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 26).

[400] Ibid.

[401] Ibid., 52, 75, 113-4; Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 23; Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 70; Benedikt refers to Mangold's "disarming...pastel, matt-surfaced wall-slabs" (Michael Benedikt, "Sculpture as Architecture: New York Letter, 1966-67," *MA*, 74.

[402] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 23.

derives its content from "allowing four microphones to swing above four upturned speakers" (Track 9).[403] Like many of the conceptual compositions of John Cage, La Monte Young, and various of the latter's Fluxus contemporaries, the musical process is notated entirely in regular language:

> 2, 3, 4 or more microphones are suspended from the ceiling by their cables, that they all hang the same distance from floor and are all free to swing with a pendular motion. Each microphone's cable is plugged into an amplifier which is connected to a speaker. Each microphone hangs a few inches directly above or next to it's [*sic*] speaker…The performance begins with the performers taking each mike, pulling it back like a swing, and then in unison releasing all of them together. Performers then carefully turn up each amplifier just to the point where feedback occurs when a mike swings directly over or next to it's [sic] speaker. Thus, a series of feedback pulses are heard which will either be all in unison or not depending on the gradually changing phase relations of the different mike pendulums. Performers then sit down to watch and listen to the process along with the audience…The piece is ended sometime after all mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone.[404]

Unique in Reich's compositional output for its conceptual focus, the composition incorporates in a technologically progressive manner, a distinctly Dadaist transgression of artistic convention and medium with an aleatory processual element which clearly recalls the endeavours of John Cage.[405] Simultaneously, the work has an austerity which is characteristically minimalist. It incorporates drone and repeated sound in a singular manner: the latter gives way to the former; the *telos* of the composition proves distinctly *ateleological* – the work loses momentum, moves away from a sense of its own finitude even as it progresses, and gives way to a continuum rather than a consummation of *poietic* effort. Here, repetition simultaneously dissolves, transforms, and reforms the work. As the energy of the swinging microphones dissipates, pulsing sound is transformed into stable drone. The potential relationship of minimalism to the logic of transumption is once again reinforced. As the swaying microphone comes to rest, we witness a *process* through which force, work and movement reconstitute themselves, through their dissipation, as sound. Technology, originally designed to mediate (amplify) sound for aesthetic effect, becomes the source of sound *qua* aesthetic work.

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[403] Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 68. See Steve Reich, *Pendulum Music*, 1973/ Steve Reich, "Pendulum Music," *Writings on Music*: *1965-2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 31-2.

[404] Steve Reich, *Pendulum Music* (London: Universal Edition, 1980).

[405] In a celebrated interview, Reich draws out these connections to Cage's work: "where [Cage] was willing to keep his musical sensibility out of his own music, I was not." (Steve Reich, "Excerpts from an Interview in Art Forum," *Writings on Music,* 33). Reich, instead, sought "music…that was completely personal…but that was arrived at by impersonal means" (ibid.).

The displacement of *poiesis* from individual genius to the impersonal processes of *Pendulum Music* accentuates minimalism's concern with the conjunction of the singularity of personal facture and the generic, impersonal techniques and technologies and processes of fabrication. It also clarifies how the minimalist proclivity for impersonal, physical or perceptual process[406] facilitates the objectal appeals of minimalism both to aesthetic distension and transumption. "[O]f all my pieces [*Pendulum Music*] was *the* most impersonal, and was the most emblematic and the most didactic in terms of the process idea [that process is impersonal and independent of its objects[407]] and also most sculptural,"[408] claims Reich. "In many ways, you could describe *Pendulum Music* as audible sculpture, with the objects being the swinging microphones and the loudspeakers. I always set them up quite clearly as sculpture."[409]

Here is exhibited the manner in which, by attempting to expose the radix of its medium, the minimalist work habitually transgresses generic limits, is transmediated, or even produces the radix of something entirely new. Minimalism expresses a singular responsibility with regard to *poiesis* and the new, rendering maximally visible the processes by which novelty asserts itself – not merely differentially, but positively, by the instantiation of a rarity entirely unanticipated. It offers minimal impediment both to an accurate sensory and conceptual retracing of the art-object itself, since the generation or exposition of such an objecthood is, perhaps, minimalism's most universal aim. Minimalism allows us to delineate, with a singular closeness, the processes through which such novel objects emerge within and sustain their status as art. Because its objects habitually eschew reference to meaning or contexts outside of themselves, minimalism also affords a great clarification of the minimal displacement required for an object – apparently neutral, objective, and indifferent – to become incorporated into the subjective processes of individual or group agents. Such displacement might best be understood by considering the manner in which explanatory analysis easily becomes causal in itself; how various ideological valences regarding the importance and place of objects in the contemporary world come to be exercised, and how the significance of context comes to be principally of causal rather than explanatory significance. Objects, exposed through minimalism in their blunt, objectal facticity, might easily become agents to validate and often ossify certain cultural sequences which require objects as their principal capital. In short, it is in minimalism that we discover the tools which allow us to understand how objects speak: speak themselves in their absolute independence; speak in relation to other objects and subjects, conceptual and existential

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[406] Foster, *Return*, 36-42; Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 157; *MAP*, 178-83.
[407] "I compose the material, decide the process it's going to be run through – but once these initial choices have been made, it runs by itself." (ibid).
[408] Steve Reich, "Second Interview with Michael Nyman," *Writings on Music*, 95 (91-6).
[409] Ibid.

sequences; speak as examples of specific cultural situations; speak as examples of the force of generation itself, or *poiesis*. Sometimes such speech might be clearly located in the objectal status of the object *qua* object, while at other times it emerges in the temporal and interactive complexity of processes of production, reception, and interpretation. I contend that both ultimately depend on the recognition that what persists in the object – what conditions the persistence of minimalism in whatever manifestation – is something akin to a *poietic* space. However, the difficulty of demarcating this evasive space increasingly leads us to the position that we urgently require not an aesthetic space, as such, but an aesthetic non-space or *atopos* – a *poietic atopia*. This atopia is nothing other than the proper place of exemplarity, which Agamben perspicuously defines in terms of a *para-ontology*.

It is such an *atopian* poetics – not unique to minimalism, but uniquely decipherable through minimalism, on account of the latter's proclivity for an objecthood unhampered by self-conscious complexity – that accounts for the persistence of minimalism. The persistence of minimalism, in turn, is what renders it a potent vehicle in understanding the difficult but vital field of exemplarity, of how things come to be known through something intrinsic to their constitution, and how this radiation of intrinsic knowability comes to be effective in the world. I argue that this knowability of objects must ultimately be tied to their Being, rather than any epistemological rendering of their being. More subtly still, minimalism clarifies what might be termed quite precisely the minimal distance between an object in-itself and its self-reflexive capacity, which is required for it to be knowable as such without external reference. In this light, what minimalism affords is a particularly potent mechanism for understanding the way in which objects render themselves exemplary in the first place, how such exemplarity has an agency of its own prior to any so-called subjective intervention, and how such objects promise a better understanding of the way in which objects and subjects become intricated in the first place, a consideration with implications as far-reaching for the contemporary understanding of law, ethics, politics and economics, as for art, aesthetics or cultural production.

5. A MINIMALIST TOPOLOGY OF THE REAL

a) The pursuit of the Real as a transection of Being and existence

Numerous conceptions of realism fail to grasp with cogency the distinction between Being and existence, and thus between ontology and existentialism.[410] The present work differs sharply in this respect. Following Badiou's understanding, at its heart is the assertion that being *qua* being – generally rendered as *B*eing[411] – must be regarded in terms of pure multiplicity. Such pure multiplicity[412] can be mathematically demonstrated by the proofs of axiomatic set theory.[413] While existence occurs within such Being, it in no senses reduces,[414] nor can it be understood properly as identical with, this Being. Pure Being is necessarily indifferent to existence, but existence is not indifferent to pure Being. Existence is subtracted from, and hence in a significant sense dependent upon, Being.[415] In light of the insistence that Being and existence ought at all times to be distinguished most carefully from one another, the following is offered: the Real is that which traverses both Being and existence, as the potentiality of an *entity* which *persists* within the subtraction of an existential field from pure multiplicity; which has consistency in existing simultaneously in terms of multiplicity and unity – multiplicity which is counted-as-one by "a system of conditions through which the multiple can be recognized as multiple"[416]

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[410] Iikka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 1.

[411] As with the terms the *R*eal and the *C*ount, the upper-case of *B*eing should not be mistaken for a transcendental claim on behalf of either term, but as a means of differentiating the present from general uses of these terms.

[412] The "axiomatization" (*BE*, 43) through which a "pure doctrine of the multiple is presented" (ibid.) occurs "[b]etween 1908 and 1940...[begun] by Zermelo and completed by Fraenkel, von Neumann and Gödel" (ibid.).

[413] Ibid., 43-8.

[414] *BE*, 90-1, 128-9, 142-6; *SMP*, 76-9. See Sam Gillespie, *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou's Minimalist Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 48-9; Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto, 2002), 66-9; Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 163. This position may be usefully compared to Hilary Lawson's proposition that every reality is defined by *closure* – "[t]he process...[of] holding that which is different as the same through the realization of material" (Hilary Lawson, *Closure: A Story of Everything* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 9) – but that closure "is unlimited in the sense that there are no bounds to the number of possible closures that can be realized" (ibid., 17). See also ibid., 10-3; 16-20.

[415] Christopher Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 226-7.

[416] *BE*, 29. Elsewhere Badiou refers to this process in terms of a metastructure, the Count and the State. Because of its appropriateness to our present concern with quantitative ontology and its instantiation in minimalism, I have usually preferred the term *Count*.

b) Species of realism

Derived from the Latin *res – thing*, in both its abstract and concrete dimensions – the *real* leads to an understanding of reality as "the totality of all real things,"[417] and realism as "a philosophical doctrine about the reality [of real things]."[418] All realisms share a radical, if minimal, positivity: for an entity to be real it must, first, exist, and, second, exist independently.[419] Thus, for a realist, "at least part of reality is ontologically independent of human minds."[420] The rejection of realism must first of all replace this autonomy with an understanding that reality is limited by some form of *access* to the real.[421] The misapprehension upon which this activity coheres is its insistence that some sort of symmetry pertains between the real, the unreal, the non-real and the irreal[422] – the various degrees of accepting or subverting realism, in other words. Hence the circularity of Lawson's argument is far from convincing: "realism even as a hypothetical goal, of whatever form or however limited, is not an option, for the destructive self-reference that has been identified in non-realism, and which typifies the contemporary predicament, has its roots in the project of uncovering a true picture of an independent reality."[423]

From the perspective of the present argument, Lawson's errors are several. The extreme model of self-reference which he develops too gratuitously conflates *cause* and *telos*, suggesting that apparent stability is always subject to epistemological circularity. Thus Lawson justifies inserting into his argument a conceptual, stabilizing mechanism,[424] *closure*: "the means by which our experience is constructed;"[425] the

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[417] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 1.

[418] Ibid.

[419] Robert Noal and Gürol Irzik, *Philosophy, Science, Education and Culture* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 286.

[420] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 10.

[421] Brassier, Ray, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism," *Collapse* III (2007): 375-6, 412. The former page reference is a contribution of Graham Harman (hereafter SRH), the latter of Quentin Meillassoux (hereafter *SRM*). Also see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London and New York, Continuum, 2008), 5, 19-20. Hereafter *AF*.

[422] Philosophical irrealism is most closely associated with Nelson Goodman, who claims that "[n]either by logic nor by any other means can we prove something from nothing. We have to start with some premises and principles; and there are no absolute and incontrovertible certainties available" (Nelson Goodman, "On Starmaking," *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism, and Irrealism*, ed. Peter J. McCormick (Cambridge, Mass. And London: MIT, 1996), 144).

[423] Lawson, *Closure*, xxvii. Lawson leans rather too heavily on semantic realism, and consequently maintains an argument which is sometimes simplistic rather than elegantly simple: "a complete and true account of the universe is not possible because if it is complete it will be self-referential, and if it is self-referential it cannot also be true" (ibid., xxix).

[424] Ibid., xxxvii. Ironically, this supposedly anti-realist mechanism is not unlike those theoretical entities abstract or conceptual entities (Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 8, 12) by which various types of scientific realism habitually forward their arguments (ibid., 12).

[425] Lawson, *Closure*, 2.

imposition of "fixity on openness,"[426] "hold[ing] that which is different as the same...realiz[ing] material which is in addition to that which preceded it."[427] By a convenient conjunction of self-reference and necessity, Lawson contends that closures produce the effect of contingent reality in the absence of *real* reality: "[i]t is through the provision of a reality which is relatively stable that we are able to maintain our system of closures even though that system is constantly changing."[428] In this manner, and by failing sufficiently to distinguish semantic, epistemological and ontological realism,[429] Lawson's anti-realism is blunted; dispersed into a quasi-pragmatic field. The implicit maxim here – *whatever does the job of the real, is sure not to be real*[430] – seems to be more dogmatically than it is logically derived, resting on rhetorical refutation of realism, but addressing only obliquely even its most minimal claim regarding the existence of ontologically autonomous and mind-independent entities (entity realism).[431] Lawson is perhaps correct in many of the details of his argument. Indeed, his identification of an ontological *plenum* – fundamentally multiple and unpredictable, unmarked rather than marked – from which must be subtracted contingent stability, is close to what Badiou argues in terms of subtraction, and which is central to the present work.

In brief, Lawson's anti-realism moves in a complex but essentially epistemological orbit which fails, from the perspective of the present argument, either to account for or to counter the radical ontological claim which realism makes when it asserts that at least some part of Being is autonomous, independent and coherent. A similar case can be made against any anti-realism[432] which fails to address convincingly either this minimal criterion of the Real, or the particularities of the species of realism against which it

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[426] Ibid., 4.

[427] Ibid., 10. "It is because the material is 'in addition' to that which preceded it, and not merely a manipulation of the which preceded it, that closure does not eradicate or exhaust openness, but instead provides a means of holding openness as something" (ibid.).

[428] Ibid., 99. See ibid., 93, 98-9.

[429] See Jerold L. Aronson, Rom Harré and Eileen Cornell Way, *Realism Rescued: How Scientific Progress is Possible* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1995), 1-2; Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 2-4.

[430] Here we might recall Goodman's view that it is "[s]urely not...any sort of resemblance to reality" (Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merill, 1968), 34) that "constitutes a realism of representation" (ibid.), but an adherence to a similar means of presentation (ibid., 39).

[431] See Niiniluoto, *Critical* , 2-3, 12; John Losee, *A Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 254-6.

[432] Christopher Norris is justifiably critical of several species of anti-realism: "trivial semantic variety" (that an intrinsic instability in signification is sufficient decisively to undermine reality); " 'strong' sociological or cultural-relativist approaches" (which have a "large investment in the idea of scientific 'truth' or 'reality' as relative to…some culture-specific discourse" (Christopher Norris, *New idols of the cave: On the limits of anti-realism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997), 117)), and formal arguments which assert that the loss of "recognition-transcendent truths" amounts to the loss of the Real (Christopher Norris, "Reply to Jeff Malpas: On Truth, Realism, Changing one's Mind about Davidson (not Heidegger), and Related Topics," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 12.3 (2004): 358-9. Also see Norris, *New idols*, 117-20.

sets itself.[433] Thus, metaphysical realism – variously the crux of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy which echoes into medieval scholasticism – must be countered not only by a *destruction of metaphysics*, to paraphrase Heidegger,[434] but by a process by which the Real is decisively uncoupled from metaphysics. Likewise, once it has been recognized that various routes travelled by the Enlightenment tradition rest on the imbrication of the Real – either as radix or *telos* – with such methodological concerns as deduction or induction, rationalism or empiricism, it is impossible to ignore, or negate by a weak anti-realism (relativism or pragmatism), the minimal yet immanent positivity to which they attest. The Kantian position – which is contested and adapted by various types of phenomenology, perhaps most notably that of Husserl – does not dismiss the Real so much as suspend it between mind and perception. Indeed, a dialectic of presence and absence to a significant extent informs the Hegelian, Marxist, Freudian, Lacanian and Derridean understanding of reality and the Real.

It is true that the venerable metaphysical lineage of realism is in fact not as easily separable from its scientific manifestation as one might suppose. Russell argues that the early classical forms of philosophy and science were practically indistinguishable,[435] and we do not overstate the case to recognize amongst the earliest realists the Presocratic atomists. It is therefore not surprising that anti-realism is a "prevailing trend"[436] which in a significant sense is as alien to common sense[437] as it is to positivist science. The broadest distinction with regard to the Real is between a metaphysical and a non-metaphysical realism. Modern (post-Enlightenment) philosophy has tended to view the latter as more susceptible to analysis than the former, although the present argument regards the Real as a radical term with a trajectory of its own.[438] Hilary Putnam follows the distinction of scientific from pre-scientific, or common sense, realism.[439] The decisive shift from an intuitively derived metaphysics to scientific realism occurs in the Galilean claim that the world operates by a mathematical physics and can be translated by mathematical

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[433] Norris reports on several of the extremes at which realist and anti-realist arguments unwittingly support one another (Norris, "Reply to Jeff Malpas," 362, 370).

[434] See pages 207-9 of the present work. In Norris' estimation an "authentic truth" from which the coordinates of reality might be taken, is, for Heidegger, "vouchsafed in certain fragments of the Presocratics but thereafter progressively obscured by the accretions of 'Western metaphysics' and latter-day technoscience" (Norris, *New idols*, 119). See Norris, "Reply to Jeff Malpas," 369.

[435] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

[436] Norris, *New Idols*, 117.

[437] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 8.

[438] There has been a notable, if sometimes hyperbolic, resurgence in realist thought in these early years of the twenty-first century, most notably under the banner of *speculative realism*, closely associated with the journal *Collapse*, and a recent collection of essays, *The Speculative Turn* (Eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011)).

[439] Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism: The Paul Carus Lectures* (La Salle: Open Court, 1987), 3-4.

formulae.[440] For Putnam,[441] "[t]he kind of scientific realism we have inherited from the seventeenth century has not lost all its prestige even yet, but it has saddled us with a disastrous picture of the world"[442] "that denies precisely the common man's kind of realism, his realism about tables and chairs."[443] The world as it is, is thus reduced to a world as it is given – one in which truth is sovereign marker, but only insofar as it marks a transcendental *alethic*[444] point, or, alternately, a strong correspondence or convergence[445] between cause and effect.[446] While transcendental models of truth originate from metaphysics, convergent models – which (following Tarski) can be either deflationary or minimal,[447] or inflationary,[448] in which case they seek "some extra correspondence, or coherentist, or pragmatist condition"[449] – ground themselves in immanent correspondences. Such correspondences may themselves be conceptualized in numerous ways: most significantly, for the present purpose, in terms of *verisimilitude* – that one proposition can be more true than others, without approaching absolute truth[450] – and *veridicality* – that propositions can be absolutely true given the hypothetical completeness of a situation, but, that since the completeness of a situation is itself only contingent, truth, in fact, is always in the process of being completed.[451] The central proposition here, however, is simply that the majority of realist models are "charted in terms of their attitudes towards truth."[452]

Niiniluoto usefully distinguishes six realist species: *ontological* realism, which addresses the possibility of a mind-independent world; *semantical* realism, which attempts to establish reality in terms of an objective correlation between language or thought and world; *epistemological* realism, which formulates such correlation in terms of knowledge; *axiological* realism, which stipulates that at the heart of real being or knowledge is an axiom binding these to truth or non-truth; *methodological* realism which determines the most reliable means of arriving at knowledge regarding reality; and *ethical* realism which

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[440] Ibid., 5.

[441] Norris notes of this view a "retreat...from a robust realism to an 'internalist' perspective on issues of knowledge and truth" (Norris, *Idols*, 1-2).

[442] Putnam, *Faces*, 8.

[443] Ibid., 7.

[444] See Norris, "Reply to Jeff Malpas," 362.

[445] Aronson, Harré and Way, *Realism Rescued*, 123.

[446] Ibid., 359.

[447] Nola and Irzik, *Philosophy, Science*, 65.

[448] Ibid.

[449] Ibid.

[450] Ibid.; See W.H. Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), 54-6; Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How science tracks truth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 252-3.

[451] Alain Badiou, "Truth: Forcing and the Unnameable," *TW*, 130-1.

[452] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 10. See ibid., 3-4; Losee, *Historical Introduction*, 253-6; B.K. Ridley, *On Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 43.

sets as its task the exposition of moral values.[453] Accepting that arguments regarding realism almost invariably return to evidentiary cases for the existence of reality, science or quasi-science retain a considerable significance, in which light Niiniluoto's typology[454] is particularly stimulating. Beginning with the question of truth, a triple distinction is made – between anarchists, who altogether reject truth as a basis of reality; those who substitute a suitable equivalent concept to that of truth; and those who favour some sort of model in which reality, fact and truth correspond. Amongst truth equivalents we might consider the offerings of pragmatists and neopragmatists, from Dewey and James to Rorty;[455] "semantic anti-realists"[456] such as Dummett, who seek systematically to decouple reality from truth; internal realists such as Putnam, who resists the slide into relativism by promoting a limited degree of internal consistency;[457] and sociological relativists and constructivists such as Stengers or Latour.[458] For Niniiluoto, however, the most scientifically and philosophically convincing realist models accept truth as a point of convergence for the Real, in which case it is possible to proceed either descriptively or theoretically.

The inductive tradition in the sciences endorses a broadly descriptive model of truth while embracing a type of methodological realism. Amongst these are empiricists such as Bacon, Berkeley, Locke and Hume, positivists from Comte to the more radical logical positivism of the Vienna circle (Neurath, Schlick and Carnap) and logical atomist precursors, Russell and Wittgenstein, and, more latterly, instrumentalists such as Nagel, Stegmüller[459] and van Fraasen.[460] However, since descriptive language can only approximate reality, every programme of transcendental realism which attempts to "give an adequate account of...the sciences, in all their differences and specificities as well as their unity"[461] is at best contingent – "merely that of the best account currently available."[462] The result is progressive doubt as to the completeness of any theoretical account of reality, in which sphere we encounter numerous "half-

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[453] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 2. Niiniluoto's exposition is limited to formal models of realism. Questions of creative realism are incorporated below.
[454] Ibid., 11.
[455] Ibid., 12.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Ibid.; Roy Bhasksar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 155.
[458] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 12.
[459] This thought also has a strongly constructivist leaning.
[460] Losee, *Historical Introduction*, 257-8.
[461] Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, 183.
[462] Ibid., 143.

realism[s],"[463] most notably the entity realism of Cartwright, Hacking, Harré and Giere which recognizes that "theoretical entities...play a role in causal explanation, but denies realism about theoretical laws."[464]

Half-realism emphasizes the dispute as to whether the realist vocation lies in the faithful transcription through theory of existing relationships between entities, or whether it resides in the production of new entities themselves.[465] In this sense, as well as by the manner in which either proposition finally is compelled to deal with its axiological basis – its acceptance of reality as a predicate of truth at the expense of an apophatic realism – we are enjoined to recognize that "truth, realism and verisimilitude are all part of a single [and, ultimately, metaphysical] picture."[466] Thus it is that such an axiology draws realism back to its most fundamental ground – that upon which the conflict between realism and anti-realism plays out, as well as upon which is posited the distinction of pre-scientific or so-called naive realism[467] from scientific realism. Sceptics such as Feyerabend and irrealists such as Goodman maintain their positions on methodological rather than rhetorical grounds,[468] as opposed to common sense realism which, though probably correct, does not habitually represent itself in the most convincing light. Mediating extreme scepticism and naivety is critical realism. If critical realism is perhaps a term too general to be applied with consistency, it nonetheless includes various robust contestations of absolute reality or lack of reality (some axiomatic and entity realists amongst them) and extends even to the political programme of Bhaskar's meta-theory: "[c]ritical realism embraces a coherent account of the nature of nature, society, science, human agency and philosophy (including itself). Its intent is to underlabour for science, conceived as a necessary but insufficient agency of human emancipation."[469]

The aims of the present work are far humbler, tentatively returning to the most minimal claim of ontological realism from the perspective of aesthetic objects – that there are autonomous entities which persist within the existential field called reality. The claim is that minimalism attempts to clarify – in minimal, objectal terms – the very generative acts and transformative processes broadly describable in

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[463] Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 12.
[464] Ibid.
[465] Paul K. Feyerabend, *Realism, rationalism and scientific method: Philosophical papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 6.
[466] Aronson, Harré and Way, *Realism Rescued*, 123.
[467] What is naive about naive realism is not the contention that reality is defined by the existence of autonomous entities, but that that "certified truth [regarding such entities] is easily accessible" (Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 13). However, the assumption that everyday realism simply "takes the world to be precisely as it appears to us" (Niiniluoto, *Critical*, 8), which view is then supplemented by science or metaphysics, is inaccurate to the extent that no perception is entirely neutral and unaffected by practical and theoretical assumptions (ibid.) Consequently there can be no universal reality that is not also entirely indifferent to whether or not it is *real* as such.
[468] Ibid., 13. Norris, *New idols*, 2, 207-8.
[469] Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, 191.

terms of *poiesis*. In this it does not produce reality so much as gain access to that which is real as transparently as possible. Thus it is possible to return with greater confidence to our principal thesis: *minimalism exemplifies the facticity and persistence of the Real.*

The objects of minimalism, and the field within which these objects emerge, appeal to a quite different type of realism. Perhaps we conceptualise *minimalist objects* best in terms of an agnostic,[470] common sense realism – objects which testify to their own indifferent facticity, to that which simply is as it is – which nonetheless submit to the strong descriptivism of empirical confirmation. *Minimalism*, as a contingent field of aesthetic practices, exhibits itself through a strongly self-reflexive form of entity realism: the existential intensity of minimalism is greatest on neither a conceptual nor an objectal ground, but with regard to its *taking-place* as the connection between the object and the Real as an abstract, minimal entity. Regarding the factical ground or implications of this position, we echo Meillassoux's assertion that "facticity is the lack of reason for any reality"[471] – or, in other words, that facticity indicates the coherence of a reality *as it is* despite the fact that it could have been otherwise. Thus minimalism does not constitute reality as such – it remains indifferent in this regard precisely to exhibit the generic manner of belonging to the Real – but most certainly posits the question with unprecedented emphasis as to whether or not aesthetic objects have the capacity to clarify the relation between fact and reality.

c) Clarifying the Real

The realism to which minimalism attests is homologous but adjacent to those models offered in terms of scientific realism. Traditionally, aesthetics has concerned itself principally with mimetic realism.[472] To the extent that it claims a correspondential relation between a descriptive language and the world, *mimesis* is certainly a species of realism. The precise extent to which its reach is limited ontologically, epistemologically, semantically, or axiologically remains an area of contention, however.[473] Historically,

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[470] See Psillos, *Scientific Realism*, 179-84.

[471] *SRM*, 428.

[472] Considering the reduction of realist aesthetic to a reproduction of reality, it is important to keep in mind Raymond Tallis' hesitation regarding the "tendency to assimilate the iconic truth of a representational mode of signification to the referential truth of an expressive mode of signification" (Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), 195. Danto similarly identifies possible disputes as to whether representation is properly intensional, extensional or relational (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 68-70). Also see Goodman, *Languages*, 34-9.

[473] Although in terms often quite different to those of the present discussion, René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Frecerro (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965)) and *Violence and the Sacred* (René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975)), as well as Philippe Lacoue-

the question of aesthetic verisimilitude is organized by a mimetic rather than an artistic economy – the set of techniques by which existent entities are imitated,[474] rather than those theoretical correspondences between world and work, including the question of beauty, which arguably has been the dominant one for aestheticians since the eighteenth century.[475] Periodic revivals of realism are less revolutionary than they are radical – at once gestures of conservation and renovation, aesthetic immanence and metaphysical transcendence – and succeed to the extent that they expose the minimal but requisite distance between the world and the *mimemata*.[476]

Here Danto's views are instructive regarding the intensification of the relation between thought and reality which art effects: first, that "philosophy begins to arise only when the society within which it arises achieves a concept of reality...that can happen only when a contrast is available between reality and something else – appearances, illusion, representation, art;"[477]and second, its corollaries, that "one could not imagine, any more than one could a world made up just of shadows, a world made up solely of artworks. One could imagine a world without artworks...for such a world would be exactly that in which the concept of reality had not yet arisen."[478]

The difficult relation between thought and reality is precisely that which is intuited by the techniques of *mimesis* which define realist art. Historically, the representational goals of aesthetic realism correspond considerably to the directives of non-scientific realism.[479] If, in both spheres, realism fails to coincide with reality, this occurs not because the latter is resistant to translation, but because our mechanisms for perceiving and reproducing reality are limited and, as has been suggested, necessarily so if the coherence of particular entities is to be maintained. Realism is in this sense the foil to an idealist transcendentalism, motivated, as Nochlin notes, by the desire of art to express its own contemporaneity.[480] The thrust of

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Labarthe's *Typography* (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. and ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998)) remain seminal analyses of the cultural and ontological significance of *mimesis* and its relationship to truth and reality.

[474] Danto offers several significant arguments regarding the manner in which imitation, inasmuch as it is intensional, does not necessarily require an original (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 68-71).

[475] Göran Sörbom, "The Classical Concept of Mimesis," *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 19-21.

[476] Ibid., 22; Danto, *Transfiguration*, 13, 79, 82; Tallis, *Defence*, 195.

[477] Ibid., 78.

[478] Ibid., 83.

[479] Paisley Livingston, "Why Realism Matters: Literary Knowledge and the Philosophy of Science," *Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature, and Culture*, ed. George Levine (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993), 143-5, 150; Gillian Beer, "Wave Theory and the Rise of Literary Modernism," *Realism and Representation*, 193-4.

[480] Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1971), 103, 105-6.

Lukács' celebrated position is not dissimilar. Although the efforts of modernism may be directed towards expressions of formalist autonomy,[481] desocialized existentialism,[482] and denaturalized thought,[483] the principal exigency of contemporary art remains its capacity for exemplifying a "concrete potentiality [which] is concerned with the dialectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality."[484] From such concrete potentiality is actualized the force of a contemporary realism – one which "deliberately introduces elements of disintegration...to portray the contemporary world more exactly,"[485] but which nonetheless returns art to social and political actuality and its participation in history.[486]

It would simply be inaccurate – regardless of how convincing one finds Lukács' case for realism at the expense of modernism – to deny that several strands of the modernist aesthetic approach realism through their acute awareness that the abandonment of mimesis offers a plausible culmination not only for the trend towards autonomy, but also the search for abstract purity.[487] Critical misprision in this regard is fuelled by a view of reality which is not elegant for its simplicity, but rather simply dogmatic. For such a realist, who maintains "that truth to observed facts – facts about the outer world, or facts about his own feelings – is important,"[488] and who is "intent on arresting semantic play by insisting on the need of life-likeness and verisimilitude in representation,"[489] the *sensus communis* retains a naivety which resists theoretical substantiation. To this dogmatic view minimalism offers a genuinely radical counterpoint, circumventing the associated problems by substituting the object itself for the entire mimetic system.

Yet, as has already been noted, the radical reorientation towards the world of objects is in a significant sense a fulfilment of the realist vocation to intensify rather than replicate reality, and is a solution not entirely without precedent. Modernist avant-gardes frequently emphasize that objects potentially function metonymically with respect to reality, from the Dadaist readymade,[490] to a growing significance of

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[481] Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin, 1963), 19, 25.
[482] Ibid., 19-24.
[483] Ibid., 27, 31-3, 38-9.
[484] Lukács, *Meaning*, 24.
[485] Ibid., 39
[486] Ibid., 34, 36. This is similar to arguments offered by most broadly Marxist analyses of the opposition of modernism and reality, including by Adorno, Benjamin and some of the later Frankfurt School (See Pam Morris, *Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 17-23). Bruce Robbins makes a convincing case for reconsidering the relation between representation and realism as determined by social rather than epistemological criteria (Bruce Robbins, "Modernism and Literary Realism: Response," *Realism and Representation*, 225-231).
[487] Foster, *Return*, 127.
[488] G.S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 21.
[489] Fluck, *Surface and Depth*, 69.
[490] The relation of the Dadaist aesthetic to minimalism is discussed in some detail below.

indifferent *things* in the experimental novel. Stein and Joyce are both deeply concerned with "the objectivity and apartness of things,"[491] and the Bloomsbury group, particularly Woolf, adopted aspects of G.E. Moore's brand of atomism by way of a psychologico-phenomenal realism which regards as central the constructive importance of sensation in its relation to externality.[492]

In a proposition reminiscent of Stein,[493] Alain Robbe-Grillet considers literature subject to a mimetic exhaustion in which the writer "has nothing to say, [retaining] merely a manner of speaking."[494] The vocation of words becomes once again *poietic* – not the reflection, but rather the g*eneration*, of reality itself, "creat[ing] a world...out of dust."[495] Attending to infinitesimal detail, Robbe-Grillet's prose constitutes a literary phenomenology of particular severity, it is true, but also of *poietic* promise. The reality of objects is carefully distributed between sensation and perception and the literary means of negotiating and relating these, but, moreover, is intensified by the peculiarly self-reflexive, and arguably self-productive, character of this radical realism. It is difficult to accept the hyperbolic claims that the problems of formal realism "completely lose[…] their meaning the moment we realise that not only does everyone see his own version of reality in the world, but that it is precisely the novel that creates this reality."[496] Here the suggestion is not simply that a realism which knows itself as such escapes the "[o]bjectivity [which], in the current meaning of the term – a completely impersonal way of looking at things – is only too obviously a chimera."[497] Rather, by integrating aesthetic self-reflexivity with a precise *mimesis* – keeping in mind here Danto's argument that representation does not of necessity require a formal prototype[498] – Robbe-Grillet believes that artificiality and reality become indistinguishable through a work's objectal *presence*. The reality of the work is "no longer...permanently situated elsewhere, but *here and now*, without ambiguity...[and] no longer find[s] its justification in a hidden meaning…Beyond what we see…there would henceforth be nothing."[499]

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[491] Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 25.
[492] S.P. Rosenbaum, *Aspects of Bloomsbury: Studies in Modern English Literary and Intellectual History* (London: MacMillan, 1998), 4. This prefigures Merleau-Ponty's identification of sensation as the basic unit of perception (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 3-12. Hereafter *PP*).
[493] Indeed, similar propositions are offered by Beckett as well as Sontag.
[494] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "On Some Outdated Notions," *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), 73.
[495] Ibid.
[496] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality," *Snapshots*, 156.
[497] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "A Path for the Future Novel," *Snapshots*, 52.
[498] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 69-70
[499] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "On Some Outdated Notions," 68-9.

This is fairly conventional of the canonical minimalist aesthetic which Robbe-Grillet was to influence significantly.[500] Turning to the short prose work, *In the Corridors of the Underground*, we discover exemplified with some clarity the strategies which distinguish Robbe-Grillet's phenomenological literature from its realist predecessors. The first part of the work, "The Escalator," presents a meticulous description of a group of people on an escalator in a Parisian underground station. To grasp accurately what simply *is*, Robbe-Grillet intimates that the initial definitions and anticipated objects of existing knowledge must be suspended. Here is not the commonplace escalator, but its moving parts – "a long, iron-grey staircase, whose steps become level, one after the other, as they get to the top, and disappear, one by one…with a heavy, and yet at the same time abrupt, regularity."[501] By a curious inverse nominalism, the escalator is kept at an ontological distance from its passengers: its name is withheld, and its *haecceity* or *thisness*[502] is divorced from its functionality.

Such phenomenality is heightened by a careful exposition of the "inexpressive"[503] character which pervades perception, even in its constructiveness. It is the dystopian vision of "a universe in which …most things are unsayable"[504] which excites from the minimalist text a perceptible realness. Impassive realness is reinforced by the redundancy or circularity of motion. Movement is "almost imperceptible"[505] or gives way to "motionless[ness]"[506] itself, of a group "petrified for the duration of the mechanical journey."[507] Furthermore, what minimal movement exists is repeated,[508] uniform in speed,[509] and preserves an indifferent equidistance between objects,[510] negating a dynamic sense of temporal passage. We might associate such instances of inertia with a *deconditioning* which Cela claims is implicit in the position language adopts in relation to itself in Robbe-Grillet's writing.[511] Admitting such self-reflexive deconditioning, it is possible to clarify the manner in which Robbe-Grillet's phenomenology expands upon the basic *generative* units – initial ideas, signs, objects, or situations – from which it is constructed.

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[500] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 291.
[501] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "In the Corridors of the Underground," *Snapshots*, 27-34.
[502] This term is discussed below.
[503] Ibid., 34. See ibid., 28, 33.
[504] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 25.
[505] Robbe-Grillet, "Corridors," 27.
[506] Ibid., 27. See ibid., 33-4.
[507] Ibid., 27.
[508] Ibid., 28-30.
[509] Ibid., 29-31.
[510] Ibid., 34.
[511] Carmen Garcia Cela, "Hearing in Robbe-Grillet," trans. Denise Pessah, *Poetics Today* 21.2 (2000): 453.

Of this creative procedure, Leach notes "a strong inclination to allow the work to develop from a source outside of [it]."[512] Refining this proposition, Morissette identifies three principal types of literary generator: situational generators – occurrences, or sequence of occurrences, which produce a specific narrative course;[513] formal or linguistic generators – those parts of a text which operate at the level of plot and structure;[514] and serial generation, a "deliberate serial patterning"[515] which involves the purposeful juxtaposition of generators which are not specifically related to narrative content. The work presently under discussion exemplifies the latter – *motion*, as it relates to physical and represented movement on the one hand, and *poietic* process on the other: in the first part the reader encounters "a motionless group"[516] on an "interrupted journey,"[517] which, by the second, gains the uniform momentum of a "thinly scattered crowd of hurrying people, all moving at the same speed,"[518] only to be "brought to a halt,"[519] and when these people attempt to board the train, "they remain more or less stationary."[520]

The implication of generative phenomenology is particularly significant to minimalism for the way in which it refocuses traditional aesthetic consideration to the problems and promises of *poiesis ex nihilo*. The affinities between this and the minimalist aesthetic are noteworthy. Both reject any straightforward notion of *mimesis* and representation in favour of immediacy, presence and nonrelation. The minimalist enterprise proposes a further radicalization, however: it substitutes actual objects for representations of objects; and in place of the intuition of natural processes, it offers direct access to aesthetic processes in their very *taking-place*. Its province is thus explicitly an intensification of the Real.

d) Returning to the principles of ontological realism

The species of ontological realism are numerous, and incorporate the realist logic of the pre-scientific commonplace, quasi-scientific metaphysical realism, and even realist phenomenology. A paradigm of the

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[512] David Leach, "Parallel Methods in Writing and Visual Arts," *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*, ed. David Leach (Fredericton: York P, 1983), 11.
[513] Bruce Morrissette, "Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou," *Generative Literature*, 27. Importantly, Morrissette maintain "there is no such thing as a pure situational generator, and…there is no situation which does not already occupy a number of forms." (ibid.)
[514] Ibid.
[515] Ibid., 31.
[516] Robbe-Grillet, "Corridors," 27, 30.
[517] Ibid., 27.
[518] Ibid., 31.
[519] Ibid., 33.
[520] Ibid., 34.

latter is offered in the metaphysical thought of Roman Ingarden, which is habitually and unjustly subordinated to his consideration of literature which, for the most part, is merely a field of exemplarity for his ontological position.[521] For Ingarden, "our apprehension of a real object is based on our recognition that all the properties of which it is a carrier are appropriate to its nature in that they qualify the object as a concrete unity."[522] Regardless of whether an object is presented in formal or material terms, or with regard to its existential mode of being,[523] there exists no final disjunction between the object and the manner of its presentation or apprehension. Hence, "the real world is essentially connected with that of the nature of the real individual object, since it occurs on the basis of their intertwinings as the possible form binding together their totality."[524]

Although still figured in terms of facticity, realism by this view pertains primarily to ontological, and secondarily to epistemological correspondences.[525] In this sense it differs from the prevailing perspectives of scientific realism which centre upon the epistemological legislation of facts and phenomena. The present work aims to return to a realism which recognizes the primacy of its ontological dimension, while demonstrating that a radical, minimalist aesthetic facilitates our apprehension of the manner in which the Real transects the ontological and existential planes. In brief, the axiological aspect of aesthetic realism – the questions of correlation and coordination, of presentation and representation – dominate its appearance, while a quantitative, ontological minimalism constitutes the radix of its possibility.

In this claim we seek to oppose the elision of the ontological proposition of an entity into the realm of its qualities or the pattern of causal situations to which it belongs. For instance, that which is *Real* in a stone is *that* it *is* – the coextensiveness of the activity and facticity of its Being. This position is too readily confused with the claim that its realism arises *because* it is a stone, or, in other words, that its realistic status is the predicate of certain qualities which define its substance. Resisting such a reduction of Being to qualitative substance and causality, is at the heart of Duns Scotus' proposition of *haecceity*, and is pursued in the present work, albeit with somewhat different emphasis, in terms of *quantitative ontology*.

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[521] Amie Thomasson, "Roman Ingarden," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 20 November 2011 <http://plato.stanford.edu/ entries/ingarden/>.

[522] Eugene H. Falk, *The Poetics of Roman Ingarden* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1981), 114-5.

[523] Ingarden identifies the Absolute, Real, Ideal, and Purely Intentional as the four principal or highest modes of being (Thomasson, "Roman Inharden").

[524] Anna-Teresa Tymnieniecka, "Beyond Ingarden's Idealism/Realism Controversy with Husserl - The New Contextual Phase of Phenomenology, *Ingardenia: A Spectrum of Specialized Studies Establishing the Field of Research* (Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel, 1976), 283.

[525] Thomasson, "Roman Ingarden."

Claiming that it is minimalism which best exemplifies such a quantitative ontology, we face the heart of Being in terms of pure multiplicity, a position which is subsequently defended with reference to the work of Alain Badiou. Where extreme forms of representational abstraction – either of entities or processes – tend to view multiplicity as the aggregate of the qualities they have sought to radicalize,[526] minimalism intensifies access to, rather than instantiates, such multiplicity. The objects of minimalism, by virtue of their minimal status – their simplicity, transparency, processual clarity – generate the conditions in which multiplicity, or the ontological substance of the Real, becomes increasingly visible. Here the distinction of Being from existence is once again instructive. With respect to Being, minimalism partakes fully of multiplicity. At the level of existence, however, it makes no claim to instantiate multiplicity. Its works render maximally perceptible the manner in which art subtracts itself from multiplicity, without reducing the multiple, and thus attest obliquely to the claim of multiplicity to an ontological absolute: that multiplicity constitutes every possible horizon of Being.

Here a brief excursus regarding the present use of the term *Real* is necessary. To this point, *real* has mostly been used only to describe competing formulations of realism or reality. Where it has been used in the upper-case *R*eal it suggests a substantive force. Hence, if the *Real* is to be regarded as a metaphysical construct, it must be stressed that its metaphysics would remain deeply rooted in the irremissibility of a material world marked by the *taking-place* of objects. Meillassoux captures the dynamic of this situation well, albeit in general terms, by noting that "[a]gainst dogmatism, it is important that we uphold the refusal of every metaphysical absolute, but against the reasoned violence of various fanaticisms, it is important the we re-discover in thought a modicum of absoluteness."[527]

The considerable significance of the polemic which persists between realists and anti-realists begins to emerge in this light. Although anti-realism takes a number of forms, none has proven more influential than the aesthetic diagnosis offered by Jean Baudrillard, which is effective precisely to the extent that it mistakes the existential intensity of a particular object for the sum of its qualities. "In fact, [the real] is no longer really the real,"[528] Baudrillard contends. "Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself."[529] This argument is contingent on accepting not only the ruination of the naturalist first of order of

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[526] In this respect we might look to examples as diverse as the aleatory work of John Cage, the action painting of Jackson Pollock, some of the more relentless metafiction of John Barth and the *polystylistics of* Alfred Schnittke's *concerti grossi*.
[527] *AF*, 49.
[528] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), 2.
[529] Ibid.

simulacra – the mimetic processes which, in aiming to reproduce the world as it is, commits it to a naive realism – but also that the burden of compensating for the loss of a sense of immanence, which presentation formerly had fallen to realism, now rests increasingly upon second and third order simulacra. The second order simulates, through the construction of fictions, that which the first order fails accurately to represent, encouraging speculation regarding possible futures. The third order, to which the second gives way, involves the "simulacra of simulation,"[530] which effect a stifling distance between the real and the represented. "Founded on information"[531] they install "the model…[as] an anticipation of the real, and this leaves no room for any sort of fictional anticipation…or imaginary transcendence."[532] Baudrillard offers a nostalgic threnody for a time when "[r]eality could go beyond fiction: that was the surest sign of the possibility of an ever-increasing imaginary. But the real cannot surpass the model…And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object."[533]

It is not unreasonable to wonder whether this state of affairs might not also characterize the relationship proposed between minimalism and the Real. It has been suggested that minimalism witnesses the Real, yet does not itself *constitute* reality *per se*; it exemplifies the Real, but remains incapable of generating the Real *ex nihilo*. The apprehension of that which enters existence while participating in, but not constituting, the Real, are points indispensable to the present argument. Finally, that which is Real remains radically indifferent and fundamentally independent of any of its possible manifestations. In this sense, the Real cannot be predicated in any final sense: it cannot be revealed as such, or contained by any possible configuration. However, this is not simply to admit to the melancholic insistence of Baudrillard – of the Real as spectre, a "lost object" to which contemporaneity can no longer lay claim except as an absence. That the Real is not finally predicable does not condemn us to a disappointed lament for an impossible utopianism or dystopianism. Instead, it calls us to imagine an *atopia*: a positive non-space; positive and, indeed, posited by the exemplary entities which bear witness to the Real – such objects as those which minimalism seeks to present.

Displaced from the fields of metaphysics,[534] the Real might easily be mistaken for a matter of *perspective*, giving rise to the misapprehension that what might be judged as reality from a particular perspective, is

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[530] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Science Fiction," *Simulacra and Simulation*, 121.
[531] Ibid.
[532] Ibid., 122.
[533] Ibid., 122-3.
[534] That is as a structured field of philosophical inquiry, and not a vague realm beyond physics.

identical to that which is Real. Equally, it might be inaccurately judged the product of, rather than the indifferent precondition for, the nexus of *relations* we habitually call reality. Quentin Meillassoux warns against such a situation in which facts are incorrectly conflated with facticity,[535] contingent conditions with necessary conditions.[536] A realism dependent on perspective and relation cannot tolerate the independence and integrity of entities – their being such as they are[537] – and presses potentiality itself into that narrowest and most restrictive of existential containers: human consciousness. The preponderance for this distinctly anthropocentric understanding of existence – one which systematically suppresses both pre-cognitive and pre-reflective existence – exemplifies a tendency towards self-limitation by virtue of an understanding of thought as bound to human rather than pure being. Such concerns are not merely theoretical, however. Turning to minimalism, a considerable amount of the controversy prompted by its canonical movement arises from the fact that its objects at once claim autonomy and contingency upon perception, significantly problematizing the relationship between subject and object.

e) A topology of the Real

In the spirit of reconnecting realism and universality, it is necessary to suspend the view of reality as a correspondence between cause and effect. The Real concerns itself with the non-predicative aspect of every entity, drawn from the inexhaustible fabric of Being. The realism endorsed here is neither naive, nor the assertion of some primary quality that is pervasive in certain entities and absent in others. In fact, "*we must uncover an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity.*"[538] An entity or object is Real not because it is itself absolute, but because there is an Absolute. The Real accounts for the proximity of the object to the Absolute, without dissolving the one into the other. Stated in terms of the realism adopted here, there simply can be nothing in existence that is genuinely beyond the Real; that could not be real in some possible world.

The minimalist aesthetic addresses the doubts which art nowadays habitually raises regarding this type of ontological realism, despite the fact that, thus defined, there is simply nothing with which to be at odds in the Real – the Real simply *is*, without its being attached to any particular predicate. Thus the Real designates a peculiar type of ontological *naturalism* which at once grounds and is approximated by the

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[535] *AF*, 39-40, 79-80.
[536] Ibid., 36-7, 62, 80.
[537] *CC*, 13-5
[538] *AF*, 34. Italics are Meillassoux's.

aesthetic realm. This is a bold claim, but crucial if we are to comprehend the manner in which minimalism defines an aperture through which the recuperation of the Real might be pursued.

At this point it is possible to offer a schematic outline of the relationship between Being, existence and the Real which underpins the present work (Figure 50):[539]
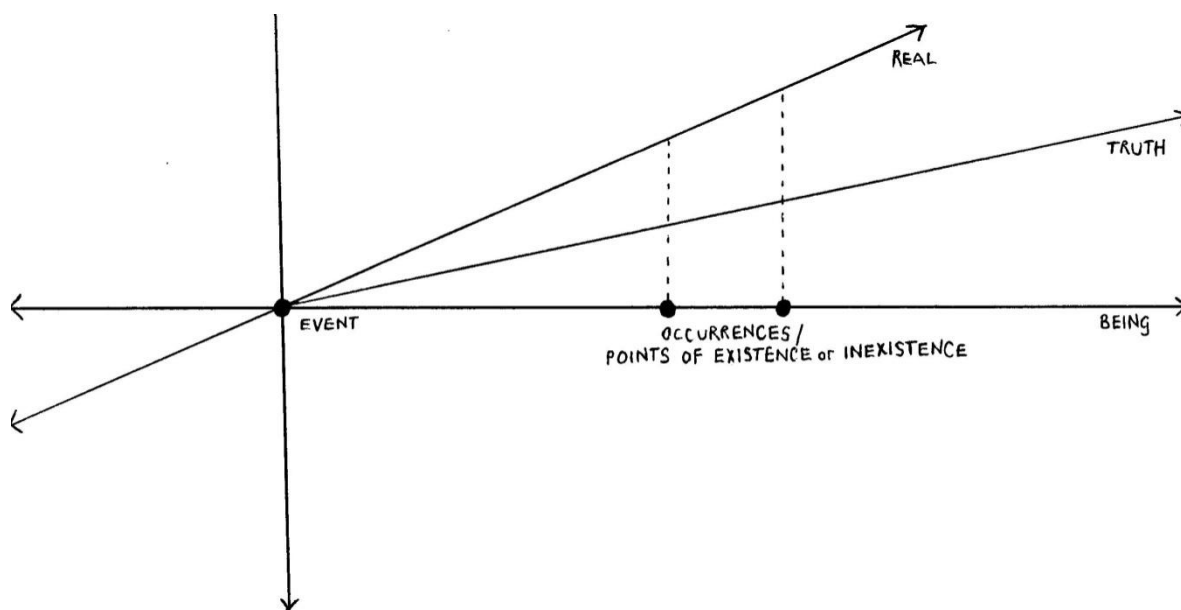
Figure 50: Topology of the Real with Respect to Being, event and occurrence of entities.

Being does not begin. What we call beginning takes place within the pervasiveness of Being. Being is pure multiplicity[540] and, as such, has no conditions to which it is tied. Being without any condition is Absolute. It has neither nature nor natural limits. Its temporality is non-specific but linear and

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[539] Much of the vocabulary of this preliminary schema is adapted from various ontological discussions of Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux and Giorgio Agamben, although it cannot be overemphasized that its current form is as general as it is incomplete – the first tentative step of a larger synthetic project on the one hand, and an attempt to formulate a novel view of radical realism on the other – and that its graphic representation does not aim accurately to translate its propositions, but merely to offer a means of rapidly apprehending their dynamic and systemic interaction. Furthermore, this schema attends only to situations of positive Being.

[540] *BE*, 40-8. Also see Hallward, *Badiou*, 61-3; Miguel de Beistegui, "The Ontological Dispute: Badiou, Heidegger and Deleuze," trans. Ray Brassier, *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005), 46-7, 49.

irreversible.[541] Fluctuations occur in Being[542] – events, occurrences, entities – but these are not fluctuations in Being itself.[543] The being of Being, or the multiplicity of multiplicity,[544] is Absolutely Real to the extent that the Real is the mark of that which is beyond any act of positing, point of access, or *telos* of interpretation. The Real thus transects Being as a condition for the existence of entities which, contingently persistent over a period of time, constitute reality. As will subsequently be demonstrated by reproducing the argumentation of Meillassoux, the only necessity inherent to the Real is that of contingency: for the Real to persist, contingent entities must emerge or desist, appear or disappear;[545] that is, must *take-place* in time. The corollary to this contention is that any beginning – that is, emergence or appearance of an entity – takes place within the existential field denominated by the Real. Such entities take place *between* Being and the Real, in an existential field punctuated by occurrences or points upon which entities begin to exist, or begin to inexist or disappear. Henceforth, the *Real* implies the pervasiveness in Being of the necessity of contingency and the irreversibility of time.

Since it is recognizable principally by its instantiation through entities, it is plausible to suggest that the Real, in its relation to Being, constitutes an existential field. Once again a corollary applies: every entity begins by the force of an appearance within the Real; a contingent but irreversible occurrence in the Real.[546] This does not imply that an entity cannot desist, nor that it could not have occurred differently, but that this occurrence itself, once it has *taken-place*, cannot be reversed. Such an occurrence may be of something absolutely new,[547] in which case, following Badiou, it might be tied to an event. In its shortest

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[541] See Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (London: Flamingo, 1985), 7-8.

[542] See ibid., 135; *SMP*, 29. Badiou, "On Subtraction," 109-10; Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), 13-4.

[543] According to Badiou, "being is…multiplicity plucked from the void" (*SMP*, 29).

[544] Badiou, "Question of Being," 47-8.

[545] *SMP*, 30-2.

[546] It is important to distinguish an *occurrence* within Being, from an *event*. An occurrence belongs to a *logic of appearance* – the advent of a particular organization of relationships, of entities being-there, within Being: for "being-there, or appearing, consists not of a form of being but of *forms of relation*," (*SMP*, 31), while Badiou maintains that "[o]ne can reasonably call 'logic' a formal theory of relations" (ibid). An event, on the other hand inaugurates absolute novelty precisely to the extent that it is *trans-ontological* , cutting across the entire order of Being (Alain Badiou, "The Event as Trans-Being," *TW*, 103). An occurrence presents a rupture within Being, while an event signifies a rupture across Being.

[547] The opening of Sam Gillespie's *The Mathematics of Novelty* usefully juxtaposes the views of novelty offered by Deleuze and Badiou. For the former, being is marked by *becoming* – at once whole and open to change, and thus intrinsically "orient[ed]…towards the new (Gillespie, *Mathematics*, 7). Novelty is thus the product of *becoming*: "being continually produces itself anew" (ibid., 5) by means of minute differentiations derived from the repetition inherent to substantiation, so that "[c]reation is tantamount to the positing of being" (Gillespie, *Mathematics*, 2). No essential gap exists between the self-positing and the subjective positing of a concept, so that "everything new has its origin in an appearing or expression of being's innermost potential" (ibid.).

version, Alain Badiou defines the event as the inauguration of something totally new and rare, a new subject in Being, "a point of rupture with respect to being [that] does not exonerate us from thinking the being of the event itself."[548] In this case an event is *trans-ontological* – something "which is not being *qua* being…which subtracts itself from ontological subtraction."[549] To clarify the topology of an event's trans-being – its being both proper to and also subtracted from Being – Badiou claims that, "[i]n effect, an event is composed of the elements of a site, but also by the event itself, which belongs to itself."[550]

According to the Axiom of Foundation, a multiple – the set which indicates contingent coherence across the ontological and existential fields – cannot be founded on its own elements.[551] In every multiple there is a founding element which is not part of the multiple in question.[552] According to Badiou, the sole exception to this rule is the event which is founded on an element which is also its essential constituent – an occurrence on the edge of the void.[553] While an event itself is an *unfounded multiple*, for it to be even momentarily present in Being, it requires some sort of *topos* to support its upsurge – its "originary disappearance, supplementing the situation for the duration of a lightning flash."[554] Such an *evental site* acts as a foundation for that which cannot be founded.[555] Thus the event is unpredictable with respect to Being, yet undeniably arises in relation to Being. This, Badiou terms, an event's *trans-being*.[556] From an event emerges what Badiou envisages in terms of a *subject* or *truth* which has the capacity to organize and to valorize information in a field of existence.[557] Importantly, Badiou limits the definition of truth or subject to the direct consequences of an event, but stresses that the pure eventality of the event is irretrievable as such.[558]

For Badiou, novelty is necessarily marked by "[a]bsolute beginnings," (ibid., 8) which "derive from nothing" (ibid., 3) – the void or the empty set, which is the necessary ontological structure for either being or becoming to take place. Occasionally and unpredictably, *events* erupt from the void, disrupting an existing situation, constituting a novel field (a subjective fidelity to the generic progress of a truth-procedure). These "ruptures or breaks within knowledge…force us to redefine our general categories and standards of determination" (ibid., 3) and, according to Badiou, present the possibility of genuine novelty in the fields of politics – the four conditions of philosophy within which thought seems eminently capable of tracing its consequences (*MP*, 34-5).

[548] Badiou, "Event as Trans-Being," 100.

[549] Ibid. See *BE*, 189-90.

[550] Badiou, "Event as Trans-Being," 103.

[551] "[T[he non-void set is founded inasmuch as a multiple always belongs to it which is Other than it" (*BE*, 186).

[552] Badiou, "Event as Trans-Being," 102. "[T]here is at least one element that 'founds' this multiple, in the following sense: there is an element that has no elements in common with the initial multiple" (ibid.).

[553] Ibid., 101; *BE*, 175.

[554] Badiou, "Truth," 124.

[555] *BE*, 175.

[556] Badiou, "Event as Trans-Being," 102-3; *BE*, 173-6, 185-7.

[557] Badiou, "Truth," 127; *MP*, 85.

[558] "Let an event have taken place – it will, as such, have vanished…incapable of setting in or of lasting. All that remains are its consequences, among which is that defining the eventual value of the site" (*SMP*, 83).

Much more common than events are occurrences – those changes within a given situation of existence derived from rearranging its elements. Through occurrences, entities come into existence as well as desist or inexist. These nascent entities, which we might hesitantly denominate ordinary subjects and objects, are not absolutely new in the strictest sense, but often take on the appearance of novel objects.[559] We might say that the point at which such an entity, in defining its relation to the Real, intersects with the progress of a truth, is the point at which the entity expresses its fidelity to a truth – to an event having taken place. To paraphrase, the occurrence of entities in a situation presents the basic existential material which an event (as distinct from an occurrence) potentially reorganizes. Such occurrences also define the *poietic* substance of art. Where events transect Being, occurrences transect existence. Again we are reminded that entities confirm the distinction of existence from Being, and that this confirmation is subtracted from Being without reducing its essential multiplicity.

While both event and occurrence concern the Real, only the former is strictly aleatory,[560] and retains a degree of indifference to human existence. To be clear, Badiou maintains that an event can only be *known* retroactively through the relation of an historical situation.[561] However, if it is not the *event itself* which is known historically, but rather the site and consequences of its taking-place, it does not follow that such an event would *necessarily* be bound to anthropocentrism, nor that it would be impossible for events to occur in nature.[562] To this extent the present work expresses some doubt regarding Badiou's procedural vision. This said, since an event is transitory and can finally be attested to only retrospectively, it must be approached from within a given existential situation.[563] Thus the comprehension of novelty is inconceivable without the point which separates existence from inexistence, appearance from disappearance, and entities from non-entities.

Most significant for the present is that existence is coincidental with the emergence of Real entities. If it is possible to assert that something exists, then it is an entity. The Real, admitted in this sense and *contra* Baudrillard's assertion, *opposes* the inertia which anaesthetizes everyday reality rather than succumbing to it. It reveals the operations by which Real objects are often subjugated to forces such as history and context, which seldom recognize their ontological autonomy. As Bruno Latour recognizes, history and

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[559] See Gillespie, *Mathematics*, 7-8.
[560] *BE*, 191, 193
[561] *BE*, 179. Badiou suggests that "[i]t is rational to think the ab-normal or the anti-natural, that is, history, as an omnipresence of singularity" (ibid., 174).
[562] *BE*, 174, 177-9, 187-8.
[563] *BE*, 178.

context become truly "visible only by the *traces* [they] leave[…] when a *new* association is being produced between elements"[564] not intrinsically related. We are thus warned against the inertia[565] of fixing the Real in terms of a set of historical predicates. Existence enjoins us to accommodate simultaneously the irreversible temporality of the Real, and the multiple and often contradictory temporal trajectories of entities. The Real entity extends itself across contingent and contradictory multiples – the innumerable fluctuating metabolic times of organisms, as well as those of aesthetic entities.

To grasp that the Real discovers no final predicate, yet still is instantiated in every entity – and with particular clarity in entities which self-reflexively uncover the minimal conditions of their own *poietic* emergence and persistence – is to recognize that every entity participates in, but only approximates, the Real. I submit that this point of recognition characterizes the moment at which an entity is subtracted, or subtracts itself, from Being – the point at which a work appears or disappears, exists or inexists. Here, upon this minimal distinction, *poietic* Being takes on its full force, and the relation of art to the Real is at its most intense. This speculative proposition might be stated as follows: when self-reflexive interrogation is simultaneously a reflection on the nature of the Real, then we might say that thought thinks itself as the minimal subtraction of existence from Being, or, in other words, the most minimal entity possible.

f) The persistence of the Real

The Real persists. This is its most abiding feature. Entities may or may not come into existence – such is the universal condition of their contingency – and so partake, or not partake, of the Real. In either case, the contingency of their existential status does not affect the Real as such. It is true that the contingent part of any entity might reside in its material, conceptual or perceptual composition, and that it is these contingencies which charge the potential of every entity. Such contingencies would be impossible, however, if there were not some principle to which they appeal which is itself not contingent, but which is the persistent ground upon which basis entities are capable of persisting. For Meillassoux, this persistent ground is the force of contingency itself.[566] In this light, persistence is understood to indicate the most

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[564] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 8. Latour, an exponent of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which might (amongst many other equally plausible descriptors) be characterized as "a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes" in order to constitute a sociology, which, although in many ways different from the present proposition, is similarly opposed to formulations which mistake context for causality (ibid., 5-7).
[565] Ibid., 66-7, 75, 85.
[566] "[C]ontingency is necessary , and hence eternal...[and] contingency alone is necessary" (*AF*, 65).

intrinsic part of any entity[567] which exists as a contingent quantity across a period of time. That which persists in an entity, does so insofar as it implies the Real, accepting which, the Real and contingency are in fact inextricable.

Returning to the central thesis – that *minimalism exemplifies the facticity and persistence of the Real* – it is clearer what is intended by the term *persistence* and its connection to the Real. At this point it is possible to suggest that minimalism persists precisely to the extent that it is complicit with the Real. Regardless of the analytical and theoretical vocabulary within which minimalism is investigated, it gives up the same secret, which is no secret at all. The minimalist object exposes objecthood in itself as both the source and the target of its aesthetic. Minimalism *clarifies* the Real precisely to the extent that its objects adhere to and also exemplify the existential mould of the austere brand of realism currently under consideration.

The incapacity of minimalist objects to be other than they are is the pivot upon which their aesthetic turns.[568] Minimalism is focused through its objects – not in the sense that a particular object maintains a particular referential relation to a universe of significance, association, or meaning, but in the *fact that it is* an object. The pervasive condition, exhibited in every minimalist object, is its capacity to "allow…a contingency to be."[569] It is this sole realization – that things could have been different, yet that they are not – that renders contingent entities factical, and every fact contingent except the fact of contingency itself. Contingency is absolute and cannot itself be reduced to a contingent situation.[570] This is merely an approximation of Meillassoux's argument, discussed below, which inaugurates a route between the Absolute and the Real. My contention is that for a minimalist object *not to be as it is*, it must *not be at all*. In other words, minimalism testifies to contingency at a radical, ontological level, rather than at the level of the correspondences which culminate in the proposition of its identity.

Minimalism exists in such a way as to intensify the Real by exposing through its most singular property – *being such as it is* – the various forces of *poietic* generation: of creation and decreation, of emergence and recession, of appearance and disappearance. Yet, if this is its overwhelming sense, an immediate problem

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[567] This intimate force underpins even the possibility of the generation of entities, regardless of whether in an aesthetic field dominated by human consciousness and technology, or through the activity of natural objects and processes themselves.

[568] "Creation – or existence – is not the victorious struggle of a power to be against a power to not-be," notes Agamben. "[I]t is rather the impotence of God with respect to his own impotence, his allowing – being able to *not* not-be – a contingency to be" (*CC*, 32).

[569] Ibid.

[570] *AF*, 80.

arises as to where, precisely, such a force might be located. Of course, one such location is the minimalist object itself. Yet, to the extent that minimalism habitually eschews all external reference, its locus is finally *atopian* – neither properly material nor conceptual, but contained within a self-reflexive non-space beyond that which is given in the ordinary topology of objects.

The manner in which such minimalist *atopoi* intensify our recognition of the Real is of considerable significance. Several postulations might be offered in this regard: first, that since the Real is the continuous part of every entity, neither arising nor receding with respect to this entity, it (the Real) necessarily coincides with what is intended by persistence; secondly, accepting that the Real here defines a field within which every entity arises, that it (the Real) can evidently not be contained in an entity, as in this case it would only be knowable to itself, and would be limited to the manifestation of the entity; third, that if the Real is not contained within an entity, yet is still continuous with that entity, that it must in some sense manifest *beside* this entity – at once indissociable from the entity, yet apart from its apprehension, interpretation, or explanation. A mode of being which operates *beside* an entity, while remaining proper to the same entity, might be called a *para*-ontology. It is through a para-ontology that an entity exhibits the minimal conditions of its autonomy *qua* objecthood – its paradigmicity, "show[ing] 'beside itself'...both its own intelligibility and that of the class it constitutes."[571]

Understanding minimalism in para-ontological terms allows us to approach the object from two perspectives at once: the first strives to guarantee the Real *qua* Being – the very pervasiveness of multiplicity from which an entity is subtracted; the other testifies to the Real *qua* existence – the manner in which entities are presented. In describing the subtraction of existential entities from Being, such a para-ontology approaches the very heart of *poiesis* itself. Minimalism seeks something more Real than any mimetic logic can admit: the persistent ground of that which makes something knowable as an entity in the first instance, and the para-ontological or exemplary conditions which define the entity by its *taking-place* such as it is.

g) The facticity of the Real

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[571] Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone, 2009), 24.

For the Real as it is posited here to gain credibility, it is necessary to overcome the paradox that the "realist always has to posit some more concepts to prove he has accessed pre-conceptual reality."[572] The realization that absolute necessity exists *because of* and not *despite* the fact that there is no entity that is absolutely necessary – either in itself, or as it is related within a set of determinate laws – is what reinvigorates such a realism. In other words an entity is Real precisely because it is entirely contingent; its existence is only imperfectly accounted for by any determinate structure. To construct a compelling case for the revivification of realism, Quentin Meillassoux explains his fundamental objection to what he terms *correlationism* – an idea in modern thought[573] which insists that "we only ever have *access*[574] to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."[575]

Although Meillassoux distinguishes several manifestations of this correlation, the one most significant to the present argument is that which maintains that it is finally impossible to conceptualize objects independently of subjects, in which case it is impossible to formulate a convincing account of an entity which exists entirely autonomously, or *in-itself.*[576] The manner in which access is granted to objects is of prime significance in this regard. In brief, correlationism suppresses the possibility of an entity existing *in-itself* and affirms that all entities exist in terms of the *access* which is granted to them, and thus only inasmuch as they exist *for-us.*[577] Meillassoux's refutation of correlationism is advanced through a formal proof that the correlationist rejection of realism rests on an inaccurate dismissal of the absolute. His recuperation of the absolute requires that we hold to two principal points. The first asserts *ancestrality* – "reality anterior to the emergence of the human species"[578] – which is indicated by the existence of *arche-fossils* or objects expressing the "givenness of a being anterior to its givenness."[579] *Arche-fossils* can be proven to exist independently, both by logic[580] and with respect to the laws of physics.[581] The second

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[572] *SRM*, 422.

[573] Correlationism is thus the name he gives to the principal thrust of modern philosophical thought – from Kantianism, Hegelianism and Idealism, through the phenomenological tradition, principally of Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, to ordinary language philosophy and those versions of analytic and postmodern philosophy made possible in its wake (*AF*, 5-8).

[574] The italics here are my emphasis.

[575] Quentin Meillassoux, *AF*, 5.

[576] *AF* 3-5. The terms *in-itself* and *for-us* are most famously used by Sartre, whose existentialism is in most senses diametrically opposed to Meillassoux's project. See page 205 of the present work.

[577] Ibid. See also *SR*, 409, 416-7, 426-8; Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave, 2007), 64-7.

[578] *AF*, 10.

[579] Ibid., 14.

[580] Ibid., 10-9.

[581] As Meillassoux notes, "[d]ating became 'absolute' with the perfection of techniques...that allowed the scientist to determine the actual duration of the measured object" (*AF*, 9).

point involves the systematic reversal of the traditional opposition of necessity and contingency, arguing that the sole necessity in Being is contingency itself.[582]

From this position Meillassoux applies himself systematically to the task of demonstrating that a minimal presupposition of absolute autonomy resides in every claim of inter-dependence: thus, the manner in which *for-us*, *access*-oriented correlationism exists includes some element of the *in-itself*. This demonstration requires the clarification of two further terms fundamental to Meillassoux's thought: contingency and fact. In Brassier's summation,

> [c]ontingency is empirical and pertains to phenomena: a phenomenon is contingent if it can come into or out of existence without violating the principles of cognition that govern phenomena. Facticity is transcendental and pertains to our cognitive relation to phenomena, and hence to the principles of knowledge themselves, concerning which it makes no sense to say either that they are necessary or contingent, since we have no other principle to compare them to.[583]

Meillassoux insists that there is no way of asserting the transcendentality of the factial[584] relation except through an ultimate self-contradiction, by falling back on an absolutization of facticity, of its being neither necessary nor contingent. Asserting an absolute, however, has the contradictory implication of deciding as to the necessity of contingency. In this case, what was meant to remain undecidable – that facticity could not decide between contingency and necessity – effectively asserts that "the contingency or groundlessness of the *for-us* (the correlation)…becomes *in-itself* or necessary precisely insofar as its contingency is not something which is merely *for-us*."[585] In other words, fact absolutized as the condition of indecision, decides as to the necessity only of contingency. In the most direct terms possible, this compels the acknowledgement that there is a *Real* outside of the claim that reality cannot distinguish between subject and object.

It is necessary to retrace the most essential points of Meillassoux's argument. His first claim is ontological, derived from what he might recognise in terms of Heideggerian strong correlationism – the

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[582] Ibid., 78-81. As Harman notes, Meillassoux is "doubting the Principle of Sufficient Reason while keeping the concept of non-contradiction and he's thereby doubting necessity" (*SRH*, 385-6).

[583] Brassier, *Nihil*, 66.

[584] Meillassoux distinguishes between facticity and the factical on the one hand, and factiality and the factial on the other. The latter refers to "the speculative essence of *facticity*, viz., that the facticity of every thing cannot be thought as a fact. Thus factiality must be understood as the non-facticity of the fact" (*AF*, 79). The present work follows this distinction, although since its primary concern is with existential presentation, references are for the most part to facticity, and hence the factual and factical.

[585] Brassier, *Nihil*, 67.

"necessity for everything that is [that exists in being] to be a fact."[586] If something *is*, it is a fact in relation to some determinate principle or law which confirms that it *is*: it exists, and it is factual with regard to this existence. Facticity refers "not [to] an objective reality, but rather [to] the unsurpassable limits of objectivity confronted with the fact *that there is* a world; a world that is describable and perceptible, and structured by determinate invariants."[587]

This is a properly ontological contention, and, as has been suggested, facticity should not be confused with knowledge as such. Thus, Meillassoux is able to maintain that the "facticity of every thing cannot be thought of as a fact,"[588] since this would introduce an insurmountable logical and ontological contradiction; it would precisely reduce facticity (non-contingency) to the realm of knowledge, which itself is, according to the correlationist argument, contingent. In such a case, the contingency of contingency itself would be affirmed, the insistence upon which would be disastrous for ontology, as Meillassoux notes,[589] since it implies that infinite regress is the acceptable fate of every analytical endeavour. If this were the case, then determination of what counts as knowledge could potentially rest solely upon dogmatic decisions as to the reality or unreality of one thing over another and, terrifyingly, even the conservation or destruction of such real or unreal things.

Meillassoux provides significant opposition to the idea that infinite regress or circularity are unfortunate but inevitable consequences of accurate analysis. Such resistance – the persistence of the Real against its possible reduction to any particular reality or nexus of realities – is confirmed by Meillassoux's affirmation of the "non-factual essence of the fact."[590] According to this claim, at the centre of any fact, of anything that *is* or *is knowable* as existence in Being, there resides something radically unstable. Such instability is not the result of any failure to articulate some spectral essence or errant identitarian core, but is the very basis of ontology, the Real, as well as any expression of these last terms in any possible reality. One of his primary conclusions is thus that "*only facticity is not factual* – viz., only the contingency of what is, is not itself contingent,"[591] and he proceeds to clarify that this "does *not* claim that contingency is necessary; its precise claim is that contingency *alone* is necessary – and only this prevents it from being

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[586] *AF*, 79.
[587] Ibid., 40.
[588] Ibid., 79.
[589] *SR*, 437.
[590] *AF*, 79.
[591] Ibid., 80.

metaphysical. For the statement, 'contingency is necessary' is in fact entirely compatible with metaphysics."[592]

The significance of this argument for the present work is that it expresses the urgency of determining the theoretical parameters of the Real – the means of its communication, exemplification and effectiveness – through objects in the world. Where the majority of contemporary philosophical discourses "forbid[...] any possibility of a conceptual discourse about the Real in itself,"[593] Meillassoux advocates the reconnection of the Real to various forms of realism.[594]

Minimalism, I claim, offers a legitimate exemplar of such a speculative realism – exemplifying, without subduing, the Real. The pursuit of realism should not, however, distract us from the recognition, increasingly felt across quite different spheres of knowledge production and testing, that there exists "a lack of reason of any reality; that is, the impossibility of giving an ultimate ground to the existence of any being. We can reach conditional necessity, but never absolute necessity."[595] In the place of the absolute necessity of any entity, Meillassoux absolutizes facticity itself. He proposes a *Principle of Factiality*,[596] asserting through this principle "the speculative essence of *facticity*."[597] Meillassoux contends that everything that is, is a fact. In terms more familiar, being *qua* existence is factual; it can be reflected with relative accuracy by facts which present the "structural invariants" of existence.[598] Facts, however, are not necessary to being *qua* being. While facticity prompts us "to grasp the 'possibility' of that which is wholly other to the world, but which resides in the midst of the world as such"[599] – Being, or pure multiplicity – it does so by revealing the impossibility of exchanging any set of facts for Being itself.[600] Facts are finally products of conditional necessity, conditioned by determinate laws rather than absolute necessity. To paraphrase: the relationship between rule or law and its predicate in terms of *fact* is, therefore, one of *conditional* necessity rather than absolute necessity. For example, that gravity is a law to which all matter bends appears only as absolute necessity once one has accepted that relative stability is the mark of existence. Of course, in such a case the consequences of asserting contingency where

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[592] Ibid.
[593] *SR*, 434-5.
[594] Ibid., 435.
[595] Ibid., 428-9.
[596] The distinction between factuality and facticity might be characterized as follows: factuality is facticity in its relation to fact, whereas facticity is just the fact-ness of a fact.
[597] *AF*, 79.
[598] Ibid., 39.
[599] Ibid., 40.
[600] Ibid.

presently stability persists, are existentially catastrophic. However, the configurations which tie potentiality to obligation are ethical rather than ontological, and finally there may be no absolutely compelling reason to suppose that no world *could* exist at all outside of the contingencies which currently reign.

Assumptions in this regard are doubtless conditioned by the reign of correlationism, a consequence of which might be formulated in the claim that it is impossible to conceive of a world convincingly outside of the relation between thought and that which it thinks; outside of the correlation of thought and being. To break with this dogma is to recognize that all which is fact for us is contingent, but that this contingency itself, the facticity of the fact, is both absolute and necessary.[601] Accordingly, there exist no necessary, universal laws, with the sole exception of the law which affirms that there is no necessary universality to any law. "[C]ontingency and only contingency, is absolutely necessary. Facticity, and only facticity, is not factual, but eternal. Facticity is not a fact, it is not 'one more' fact in the world…[T]o be is to be factual – and *this* is not a fact."[602] Regarding determinate entities as they relate to determinate laws, we are enjoined either to trace painstakingly the conditions which define the emergence of facts[603] – the potential passages between entity and knowledge – or to affirm the unity and independence of the entity as such. In this light, it is of considerable significance that the Real exhibits the compossibility of decision and the undecidable, the axiomatic and non-axiomatic, the contingent and the absolute.[604] In either case, our relation to contingency is drawn beyond passive withdrawal to the contingent but positive *taking-place* of Real entities in irreversible time.

h) A minimalist realism

The Real, as it is formulated above, makes clear claims as to its affinities with both pre-scientific realism – it conforms to the commonplace regarding the separateness of entities – as well as scientific realism, in a sense merely paraphrasing what science demonstrates experimentally regarding the interaction of origin, time and object. As it is offered here, the Real is explicitly minimal, and it is the shared desire for clarity and presence which binds it convincingly to the minimalist aesthetic. Minimalism presents a radicalization of that to which Badiou alludes in terms of a "[d]istancing – conceived as the way that

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[601] Ibid., 79-80.
[602] *SRM*, 432.
[603] Ibid.
[604] Ibid.

semblance works out its proper distance from the real – [which] can be taken as an axiom of [recent] art...a reflexive art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process, an art that wants visibly to idealize its own materiality."[605] For minimalists, the minimal displacement between the fundamental quantity of an entity and its existential vocation *qua* art – that is, its marking the transumptive mediation of the very force of *poiesis* – instantiates at once the *passion for the Real* and the concern with *proper distance* which Badiou recognizes as central traits of contemporaneity. Minimalism offers arguably the most direct of the many aesthetic "attempt[s] to devise transparent, self-regulating forms of thought whose only occasion, in the absence of any object that they might represent or interpret, is an encounter with the generic nudity of the real."[606] That the parameters of reality are as often set ideologically as by any force of metaphysics, reinforces the distinctive indifference of the Real. Thus we approach Norris' claim regarding "Badiou's realist ontology...[that] a situation is in no way dependent on what we may perceive, recognize, believe or take ourselves to know concerning it."[607]

The present formulation of the Real – although more reductive in its presentation – shares a great deal with the propositions of Meillassoux, Badiou and Norris on this subject. Norris is particularly concerned to reconcile scientific realism with those accounts which discern the Real from within the realm of cultural production. Too often are the latter dismissed arbitrarily as anti-realists on the assumption that all subscribe to a paradoxically dogmatic relativism – one which "assume[s] the priority of language over thought and of thought in its diverse, linguistically articulated modes over anything pertaining to the nature or structure of mind-independent reality."[608] Accepting this, relativists are able to justify that "'reality' *just is* coextensive with or restricted to the domain of known, verifiable, reliably vouchsafed, well-documented, adequately sourced, or at any rate sufficiently agreed-upon historical facts."[609] That a suspicion regarding the absolute – such as that entertained by deconstruction – should so often be mistaken for an absolute refusal of the fact that such practices habitually remain "anchored firmly in certain properties of the physical or natural world and in certain likewise robust phenomenological truths,"[610] owes finally to the acceleration of anti-realism from a logical to a dogmatic position.[611]

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[605] Alain Badiou *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 49-50.

[606] Hallward, *Badiou*, xxx.

[607] Norris, *Badiou*, 62.

[608] Ibid., 213.

[609] Christopher Norris, *Re-Thinking the Cogito: Naturalism, Reason and the Venture of Thought* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 212.

[610] Ibid., 225.

[611] Ibid., 217.

The present recuperation of the absolute – derived in equal part from the work of Meillassoux and the *taking-place* of minimalist objects – is similarly opposed to such dogmatism. To recall: that which is Real, *is*; and that which *is*, is *absolutely contingent*. However, if we understand properly what is intended by absolute contingency, it becomes clear that what *could* have been otherwise is *not* otherwise – it is *as it is* in a particular situation. For this reason, it does not follow that if what is, is absolutely contingent, that the Real is also absolutely contingent. Rather, the Real is what is *necessary* to an entity's existence in order for it to be such as it is. Since it is understood that Being is also *necessary* to existence, there exists a modal argument for considering the Real as transecting Being and existence. Briefly phrased, the Real is the manner in which Being makes itself known within the immanence of existence.

In short, Being *qua* being supervenes upon any expression or situation of being (for example, a situation, an object, an identity, and so on), but any expression or situation of being does not supervene upon Being itself. Similarly, the Real supervenes upon any possible expression of a reality, but reality does not supervene upon the Real. In other words, just as specific beings or existents participate in Being in general, but cannot themselves constitute or reconstitute Being in general, so subjects, objects, things and processes, which together constitute descriptions of reality, participate in the Real, but cannot themselves constitute or reconstitute the Real. Indeed, we might paraphrase this by a conceptually difficult, but crucial, paradox: that which in any entity is genuinely *transcendental* is in fact *immanent* to the same entity. That, in practice, the transcendental is always subject to the conditions of objectal immanence, explains how the most frequent, if spurious, attacks on realism tend to reject the notion of ontological presence altogether. Once its factical conditions are divorced from the immanence of its objects, the Real is unable to resist the reduction of its ontological concerns to various sets of epistemic conditions.

Thus it remains paramount that the Real be distinguished from its instantiation in objectal terms – discerned in the material terms of the exemplary field upon which existential contingency unfolds within an irreversible temporal continuum. It is this field which I claim, at least in part, for the minimalist enterprise. As has been argued, the numerous configurations of reality define existence in the orbit of the Real, to which extent they remain contingent upon the Real. Such reality is always subject to the laws of contingency, however, and does not itself produce the force of contingency as such. Thus we are returned to Meillassoux's thesis: that everything is contingent except contingency itself, which solely is necessary and hence absolute. The Real, defined as the necessity of contingency apprehended within the persistence of time, attempts to comprehend the absolute in motion. It is to this possibility which the minimalist

aesthetic attends in terms of transumption: *poiesis* apprehended at its most radical location in the very midst of its instantiation as quantity.

PART TWO: MINIMALISM AS QUANTITATIVE ONTOLOGY

6. MINIMALISM AS QUANTITATIVE BEING

a) Counting and the experience of existence

One of the clearest memories of my early years involves a seven-hour return journey with my parents and sister from a seaside holiday. Such journeys so often seem marked by an intense combination of excitement and regret, anticipation and melancholy. It was Good Friday. I know this because interrupting another of my failed attempts to prove that if one stares at the sun without blinking or looking away for more than ten seconds it would cease to be bright, was the closing reminder of a religious radio broadcast: that the Crucifixion had taken place from twelve to three. This was followed by the midday news. I assume that general mindfulness was what the broadcaster was after. However, for one of those reasons which are senseless to all but children in such arbitrary situations, I decided to attempt to count to a million in those three hours, convinced, of course, that this was perfectly achievable.

As my imagination surged towards this huge target, the torrential count became increasingly incoherent. The mental sounding and visualization of numbers merged until I was no longer sure whether or not I was making any progress. I began again, slowly, then a little faster, then was lost again. Despite the ferocious determination of the count, I never got to a thousand. I abandoned the attempt after half an hour. Whatever association had temporarily flared between religion as achievable infinity subsided abruptly.

If the emotional complexity of that day has rendered its memories unusually clear, this lucidity has also allowed me to reflect on this precise moment as one of some significance. Mathematical possibility had, to this point, been easily predicable – imminent additions and subtraction of apples and so forth; concrete things. Suddenly it had become abstract. I understood and accepted that a million was possible, but I could only conceive it stratospherically, in some unreachable possibility – possible somewhere else and for someone else also. Henceforth, mathematics would be predicated in the ether, away from this concrete world or its systems of knowledge production – their unremitting emphasis on solution and equation, predication and proof – within which such abstraction was unwittingly affirmed. For what keeps this massive count grounded is that we accept that it simply is. Accepting this facticity of numerical

accumulation uncritically is not, however, a question of acceding to the base quantity of being, but precisely rebranding this quantity as an ultimately desirable quality. "That number must rule, that the imperative must be: 'count!' – who doubts this today?" asks Badiou. "For, under the current empire of number, it is not a question of thought, but of realities."[612]

I think back to that day, that specific hour, and it is hard not to discern the Platonic echo of the situation and its consequences.[613] A boy stares into the sun. He is young enough still to possess that intrepid, experimental naivety that does not apprehend an imminent limitation to knowledge and knowability. He stares and believes he can fully grasp its generative power: more than grasp – objectify, unify, even domesticate. He dreams of some sort of control in a world that always seems to realize itself too haphazardly, too slowly. The force of his gaze is frustrated, but not thwarted. The desire behind this force migrates. The singular quantity, totality, the One, is sought now through a process of quantification. The count of a massive number, one million, is the only approximation in the undermarked memory of the boy that might approach the infinite dimension of the sun in its productive capacity – both the beginning and end of form and formation; the very possibility of Form itself. This number proves unattainable. The failed apprehension of an immanent, original quantity, the One, the correlate of an absolute Form, is compounded by a second failure to approach the One through quantification or approximation. Thus I became unwittingly an appellant to the essential axiom of ontology, according to Badiou: "*the One is not.*"[614]

I am tempted to say that at an early age I was subject to a Platonic disappointment of sorts, since which the force purported to underpin the One has always seemed disappointingly fragmentary. However, disenchantment on one level – the loss of accessibility to the relation between number, mathematical

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[612] Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 1. Hereafter *NN*.

[613] I refer here, in a rather free-spirited way, to Plato's use of the sun to illustrate that Form is both that which coheres in experience, and also that which provides coherence to experience (Plato, "Republic," trans. G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1128-1132.

[614] *BE*, 23. Badiou traces the concept of the One to the Classical Greek thinking of number, arguing that the impediments presented by the infinite, the concept of zero, and the contemporary obligation to accept the multiplicity of being, compel a modern rethinking of the substance of number, which itself takes three forms: logical (Frege and Russell), which fails to come to grips with the conditions of thought itself; formalist (Peano and Hilbert) which, because entirely rule-governed, is too easily deployed as technique; set-theoretical (Dedekind, Cantor, Zermelo, Gödel) which Badiou favours for its ability to come to terms with the possibility of pure multiplicity, albeit many of its practical applications remain to be extrapolated (*NN*, 7-9, 11). If Unity (the One) is negated, it merely gives way to various processes of normative unification, of contingent stabilization, which Badiou refers to as that which "count[s]-as-one" (*BE*, 24). A crucial caveat must be added at this point regarding terminology: while the present work prefers the term *quantitative* principally for clarity it offers when opposed to quality, Badiou is specific in qualifying its use so as to avoid a Kantian understanding of the denumerability of Being (*BE*, 265-9).

operation and world – spelled re-enchantment on another. Over the course of my education, my mathematical skills were subject to the average fluctuations. There were concepts and operations which struck a chord, and others that were profoundly bewildering. If that day inaugurated a numerical disappointment, it is one that ultimately may be universal as much as it is mine. Perhaps such numerical disappointment is a condition not only characteristic of western culture, but even of being in general and of the knowledge of such being, reflective of an unavoidable tension between the boundedness of entities and the infinity of number.

It requires no great skill of observation to affirm that the importance of numericity, as well as its potential divisiveness, is marked repeatedly in western education – in the quantitative pull of the mathematical and hard sciences from the qualitative magnetism of the cultural field. It is possible here to endorse, if only broadly and in passing, Aristotle's distinction: that quantity is that which "is divisible into intrinsic parts each of which has by constitution a sort of unity or thisness,"[615] whereas quality is essentially the positive or negative attributes of quantity.[616] We habitually take sides in a manner which allows quantity to indicate the amount and magnitude inherent in being, claiming this as prerequisite for the emergence and determination of *quality*, or specific properties which orient an entity within being. Within the processes which we conventionally associate with the cultivation of the mind, the results seem dismayingly predictable: those interested in the sciences tend to quantify the cultural sphere, and those interested in the cultural tend to qualify the scientific. The sufficiency of either quantity or quality is doubtful, and neither can be defined functionally within an existential context in the absence of the other. If it remains an urgent task to criticize the reign which quantity exercises, most obviously through the various techniques of capitalism, the solution is surely not simply to elevate quality in its place.

All of this threatens to miss one crucial aspect, a point that is intimately tied to a contemporary reassertion of realism. The ontological predominance of quantity holds precisely to the extent that the absolute is the product of neither a naive realism, nor an absolute idealism. This recalls the recent work of Meillassoux discussed above, which argues that that it is only contingency itself that is not contingent, and hence absolute. "*[O]nly facticity is not factual* – viz., only the contingency of what is, is not itself contingent…[which] does *not* claim that contingency is necessary; its precise claim is that contingency *alone* is necessary – and only this prevents it from being metaphysical."[617] Within such a realist ontology, objects are once again free to be objects – Real quantities – without simply disregarding their qualitative

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[615] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1998), 134.
[616] Ibid., 135-6.
[617] *AF*, 80.

dimension. What is Real simply *is*, and is indifferent to its own affirmation or negation, or any particular sense in which it might be known. That this proposition might be challenged by denying the possibility of the Real as a basis for any categorical thought, is only compounded when we consider that even competing arguments in favour of privileging ontology have habitually veered away from quantity: from the emphasis on substance in various orthodox materialisms and naïve realisms, through the qualitative bias of much phenomenology, to the Heideggerian or Deleuzian endorsement of becoming.

If few are unaware of the brutal aspect of quantity and its potential consequences, recognizing its ontological pre-eminence seems to have been largely subverted by the understanding that being is simply unthinkable without the qualification that "a world-in-itself, subsisting independently of our relation to it, is an absurdity."[618] Whether this is the Cartesian connectedness of thought and being, or the vitalist or existentialist understanding of being-in-the-world,[619] what remains essentially unchallenged is the submission of ontology to epistemology; of the conditions of being to the conditions of knowledge regarding being. The proclivity for scientific and methodological advancement, and the various attendant fields of knowledge which have accompanied the rise of epistemology, bring their own range of inconsistencies and problems. This modern disposition, which Simon Critchley characterizes as beginning in disappointment,[620] is one that is pervaded by ontologico-political nihilism. We are enveloped by a growing sense of "the meaninglessness of reality, or rather its essential unreality, which inspires either passive withdrawal or violent destruction."[621]

Opposing this nihilism becomes paramount, and if we no longer can affirm a simple transcendental solution, this does not render Critchley's assertion – that we must "face up to the hard reality of the world"[622] – simply naive. In attempting to forward suitable consolation, it seems to me that too few recognize that the key to undoing this pervasive pessimism lies in an ontological proposition most often dismissed as the province of naïve realism: that the ground of being is prior to affirmation or negation; prior and indifferent to the complication of qualification. This priority I here identify with the persistence of quantity within the Real. What persists in the Real is also antecedent to any specific qualities or significance that any real object might possess, and this is its absolute quantity; atopian, without location, and affirmed principally through the mirage of self-reflexivity. It is in the field of minimalist aesthetics

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[618] Brassier, *Nihil*, 50.
[619] Ibid., 50-1.
[620] Critchley, *Very Little*, 2-3; Simon Critchley, *Infinite Demanding: Ethics of resistance, politics of commitment* (London: Verso, 2007), 1-3.
[621] Ibid., 6.
[622] Ibid.

that I identify the objects most capable of attesting to these conditions with consistency and force. In this light, I suggest that much minimalism mirrors what we might call the conditions of a quantitative ontology.

b) The loss of quantity and the ascendency of quality in the understanding of ontology

When I recall my disappointment that Good Friday and the failure of my count – the failed unification or quantification of being – I return also to an exemplary rehearsal of the surrender of quantity to quality. The awful cost of such situations resides not in this acquiescence itself, but in that a refusal of the quantitative basis of ontology allows quantity to return as a destructive protocol – as the sole logic of both being and existence. In failing to recognize precisely when our lives have been reduced to mere being as a number, we effectively reinstate our being-as-quantity as the primary quality of existence. Badiou identifies five pervasive examples through which numerical being dominates: the political, the institutionalization of knowledge acquisition, cultural representation, economy, and the existential notion of being human.[623] The recognition of a quantitative ontology – that being is predicated on magnitude, quantity, and number – in no sense advocates a world in which quality is suppressed. Badiou's lament, that "we don't know what a number is, so we don't know what we are,"[624] must be understood thus in terms of affirming quantification against its wholesale betrayal to qualification. In failing to grasp number in itself, we expose the danger of glossing over the quantitative aspect of ontology, of reducing being to *just another number*, a reduction which can subsequently be applied to endorse, indeed to *qualify*, particular qualities, ideologies, or situations. The turn away from number spells the ruthless return of number, and quantity comes insidiously to dominate existence, to predicate our disappointment, not as an ontological principle, but as the tragic marker of our inability to harness the quantitative force of ontology itself against the absolute quantification of existence.

It is an error to assume, on the basis of the existential threat posed by actual infinity (which finds its mathematical proof in set theory[625]) and the vastness of quantity, that being might simply be recalculated in qualitative terms. Quality, it is true, dominates the moment we orient our engagement with an external world based on the dogmatic acceptance of this externality. "*Only as phenomenology is ontology*

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[623] *NN*, 2-3.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Hallward, *Badiou*, 328-34.

possible,"[626] Heidegger famously assures us; but if it is possible to agree with the many and profound consequences which stem from his painstaking analysis of *covered-up-ness* as antithesis to Being, it is more difficult, in the light of the realist commitment of this work, to accept interpretation as the pivot upon which the relation between phenomena, human being, and Being depends.[627] Affirming the externality of the phenomenon to Being, and that Being must henceforth discover some sort of qualification, serves to coordinate the suppression of a quantitative ontology. It is in returning to ontological quantity – with caution and without naivety – that the persistence of minimalism proves indispensable.

c) Sustenance and silence

Given that the work of its most celebrated exponents is intimately concerned with testifying to quantitative being, it is unsurprising that I claim for minimalism a peculiar exemplarity in this regard. Edward Strickland draws attention to the problems associated with any attempt at an uncomplicated definition of minimalism in terms of chronology, the affiliation of artists, or even the primacy of certain aesthetic characteristics.[628] In music, for example, we might describe, at best, two very broad lineages – drone music and motoric repetition – which have very different implications for how minimum is conceived.

The first lineage emphasizes sustained tone and silence, often of indeterminate duration. Monotonal and drone works are of particular aesthetic interest for the manner in which they expose duration as essential musical matter. In so doing, they further problematize the relation between sound and silence and the phenomenological status each enjoys. Does sound arise from silence or from a chaotic background of noise,[629] and what might either solution imply for the manner in which sensory information coheres to complement or complete various forms of sonic and temporal objecthood?[630]

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[626] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 60.
[627] Ibid., 59-62.
[628] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 4-7; 211-2.
[629] Serres, *Genesis*, 13.
[630] The conditions of temporal objecthood are examined more fully in the subsequent discussion of concretism.

Numerous philosophers – amongst them, Wittgenstein, Derrida and Kant – have affirmed silence as the unsayable "limits to thought, rationality, even to the human imagination," as Stuart Sim reminds us.[631] Others, such as Dauenhauer, affirm a more positive phenomenological dimension to silence, "an active human performance…[which] involves a yielding following upon an awareness of finitude and awe."[632] Accordingly, if ordinary speech and its attendant activity maintain their momentum through an *after-silence*[633] by which we recollect the activity just past and anticipate that to follow, then there is also a more profound silence of the *to-be-said*,[634] which necessarily pre-exists any affirmatory articulation of existence. The eclectic philosopher, Michel Serres – in concert with the aesthetic John Cage pursues through his silent composition, *4'33"*[635] – asserts the opposite, that being is inextricable from noise:

> [t]he background noise never ceases; it is limitless, continuous unending, unchanging…Noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it. As soon as a phenomenon appears, it leaves the noise; as soon as a form looms up or pokes through, it reveals itself by veiling noise. So noise is not a matter of phenomenology, so it is a matter of being itself.[636]

Undifferentiated noise, sustained pitch, and silence persist in a complex relationship. Many theorists of perception endorse views of selective auditory attention, the "process by which the perception of certain stimuli in the environment is enhanced relative to other concurrent stimuli of lesser immediate priority."[637] Theoretical constructs such as the *auditory filter*[638] provide models through which it is possible simultaneously to situate empirical research regarding the selectivity of frequency attention and

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[631] Sim, *Manifesto for Silence*, 87. Although any discussion of Wittgenstein's celebrated conclusion to the *Tractatus* – "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), 89) – must remain woefully inadequate here, we might note even on a superficial level, that silence as a liminal figure is simultaneously active and passive: as response or orientation to the limits of logical delimitation, silence is arguably a spectral saying of the unsaid and the unsayable.

[632] Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 24.

[633] Ibid., 10.

[634] Ibid., 20-1.

[635] John Cage, *4'33"* (New York: Edition Peters, 1993). Much of Cage's output deals with silence and desistance, from his early *String Quartet* (John Cage, *String Quartet in Four Parts* (New York: Henmar Press, 1960), in which the quartet becomes progressively slower and quieter in the first three movement, to *0'00"* which extends the logic of *4'33"* to any number of performers for any duration (it is in other words a way of marking the silent passage of time).

[636] Serres, *Genesis*, 13.

[637] Marty G. Waldorff, "Auditory Attention," *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. Robert A. Wilson and Frank. C. Keil (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT, 1999), 50.

[638] Virginia M. Richards and Gerald D. Kidd, Jr., "Audition," *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. Robert A. Wilson and Frank. C. Keil (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT, 1999), 49.

perception[639] as well as primary sensory experience. In terms of the latter, prolonged exposure to sustained sound or to the genuine absence of sound produces a curious and sometimes uncomfortable type of sensory amnesia: an inner sensory limitation of the world. John Cage describes how even in an anechoic chamber in which every external noise is eliminated, the internal sounds produced by the functioning of the body affirm an internal soundscape.[640] In his characteristically modular prose, Samuel Beckett, similarly problematizes the tension between the phenomenality of sound itself, and our incorporation and dulling of the phenomenon by our sensory experience: in "this stillest night," we persist by "listening trying listening...for no such thing as a sound."[641] Conversely, drone music frequently dominates our perception to the extent that extraneous information is either missed or masked.[642] The inward world which is affirmed is that of the sonic object, of the tone itself in its persistent indifference to an environment which on another level appears to contain it.

That this difficult relationship of drone music to silence finds diverse expressions is not surprising. Composition drawing extensively on either might be epic or miniature, of indeterminate duration or rigorously controlled. Yves Klein's *Monotone Symphony – Silence* (Track 10),[643] which was regularly used by Klein to accompany his performance and action painting, and which is arguably the first minimalist drone work,[644] consists of a single chord[645] held for an indefinite period, followed by an extended period of silence.[646] By returning to the fundamental possibilities of music itself, this "two-part continuum of sound and silence"[647] demonstrates through the confluence of duration and tonal presence or absence, the very quantitative basis of a musical ontology.

The inextricability of noise and silence is only problematically reduced to a type of binarism, however.[648] If proto-minimalists such as Klein, John Cage or Morton Feldman pay equal attention to sustained tone as

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[639] Ibid., 48.

[640] John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight, 1989), 228-9. Hereafter *CG*.

[641] Beckett, "Still 3," *CSP*, 270.

[642] The phenomenon of masking is discussed by Richards and Kidd, "Audition," 48.

[643] Yves Klein, *Monotone Symphony,* 1949, 20 November 2011 <http://www.artep.net/kam/symphony.html>.

[644] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 124.

[645] As Strickland suggests, the work is more accurately described as monochordal than monotonal (ibid., 35).

[646] For example, the performance which accompanied the first of Klein's celebrated *Anthropométries of the Blue Epoch* (Yves Klein, *Anthropométries of the Blue Epoch*, 1960) – action painting where naked models, painted in Klein's signature colour, International Klein Blue (IKB), would imprint their bodies on canvases mounted on gallery walls – consisted of a sustained chord of twenty minutes, followed by twenty minutes of silence (Hannah Weitemeier, *Yves Klein* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 55).

[647] Ibid., 11.

[648] Another problem might be the connection between drone and repetition, and the former as an exponential case of the latter, although Strickland correctly criticizes the tenuous basis of this argument (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 145).

to its alternation with silence, the music of La Monte Young and those that follow in his path, exposes the possibility that sustained tone can itself be interpreted as silent. Exemplary among such works is Young's first epic drone composition, *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*,[649] a composition which, in principle, is still ongoing.[650] In its many incarnations by Young's *Theatre of Eternal Music*,[651] various sustained tones are held above an amplified drone which was initially produced by the motor of his pet turtle's aquarium, but subsequently replaced by synthesized sound. Young set up these drones to sound for some time prior and subsequent to any performance of the work, intensifying their representational element as a "primordial sonic vibration,"[652] an ethereal continuum from which sonic being arises. In several ways, *The Tortoise* maintains Young's link to aesthetic indeterminacy:[653] the precise duration of Young's drone environment is unspecified, running from a few hours to several days;[654] with the exception of the drone, instrumentation and accompanying pitch are not set out by the composition itself, determined only in relation to each performance.

Yet, for all this, the dominant characteristic of this music is the persistence[655] of its invariance, a distinctly difficult, but nonetheless necessary determinacy.[656] It is precisely to the extent that the work seems static that it reveals within its constituent, sustained pitches a sonic world in considerable flux. Young's drones are intended to explore the tension at the heart of sustained sound. Exposing that these sounds are themselves complex singularities containing a series of overtones which are intensified in relation to the sounding of other prolonged pitches, allows Young to reveal the possibility of a musical materialism which presents together the properly quantitative aspect of duration and the qualitative feature of timbre. It is important to stress, however, that in terms of our sensory encounter, the complexity of the latter essentially rests on the prolongation of the former. For a listener to be fully aware of the timbrel subtleties of drone music, it is essential that their exposure to the sustained tone is of sufficient duration.[657]

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[649] La Monte Young, *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*, 1964-present.

[650] Ibid., 157; Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 39.

[651] This is the name Young and Marianne Zazeela chose for the group responsible for performing these works, subsequent to his affiliation with the *Fluxus* group of artists and his first drone compositions, amongst them, *Composition 1960 # 7*, which directs performers to hold an open fifth for an indefinite period (ibid., 38; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 139-40; 145).

[652] Ibid*.,* 157.

[653] There are as many distinctions between the work of Young and Cage as there are similarities. As Strickland notes, "[w]hereas Cage's aesthetic embraced a theoretical infinity of sounds as music, Young gravitated again and again to a specific and singular sound-event, on which he focused normally by means of extended duration" (ibid., 144), echoing the sentiment of Nyman (Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 119) and Mertens (Mertens, *American*, 25).

[654] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 121.

[655] Potter calls attention to the adoption of the term *sustenance* in relation to Young's drone work (Potter, *Four*, 22).

[656] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 122.

[657] Ibid.

It is also true that performed at high enough volumes, the persistence of drones masks extraneous information, and thus paradoxically is proximate to silence to the extent that it constitutes a ground – a point of strange, inertial stasis[658] – which acts simultaneously to re-expose not only the possibility, but also the immanence, of movement and change. We might say that the apparently original function of both silence and noise are easily displaced into one another, and thus that drone music produces a particular noisy silence, responses to which invariably range from perturbation to approbation, from interest to obliviousness. As Rasch reminds us, because noise is destructive from the perspective of those trying to distinguish a specific message from within its generative multiplicity, but is simultaneously the ground from which genuine autonomy might be produced in the first instance, it must "be seen as inherently ambiguous, neither desirable nor undesirable in and of itself."[659]

d) Autotelism

Yet, if duration and tonal presence or absence are central to quantifying musical being, they leave only partly unveiled the processual aspect of composition and performance.[660] In particular, Robert Fink identifies this second lineage of musical minimalism as *pulse-pattern minimalism*, emphasizing his concern with "minimalism *as* repetition, particularly as repetition with a regular pulse, a pulse that underpins the complex evolution of musical patterns to alter listener perception of time and *telos* in systematic, culturally influential ways."[661] That repetition and process are elements fundamental to most music is not in dispute.[662] They serve as mnemonic devices which provide cohesion at the level both of content and of structure, and in this process steer our perceptual directedness, our temporal as well as spatial situatedness (as Fink suggests). "Repetition in the traditional work appears as a reference to what

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[658] Schwartz remarks that *stasis* is the "single word [that] summed up all of Young's musical interests," describing how his celebrated string *Trio* discards melody and pulse in order to expose immobility and temporal suspension as its principal musical ends (Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 23).

[659] William Rasch, "Injecting Noise into the System: Hermeneutics and the Necessity of Misunderstanding," *SubStance* 67 (1992): 66.

[660] Nyman notes that in Young's music "one is able to hear what is happening while it is happening (even if one is not aware of why it is happening)" (Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 123). This type of audible process is easily differentiated from that clarified by later minimalism (particularly in the music of Reich and Glass), since it remains essentially bound to the persistence of sounds themselves or their relation, as opposed to the rhythmical, repetitive modes of minimalist expression.

[661] Fink, *Repeating*, 20.

[662] Ibid., 5. Mertens, *American,* 13-7. For the present, I bracket the considerable philosophical implications of repetition, focusing on its role in the communication of the fundamental music material of pitch, of pitches in combination (melody) and their durational aspect, or rhythms.

has gone before, so that one has to remember what was forgotten,"[663] in Mertens' provocative formulation of a teleological imperative: for a sense of direction and purpose to exist, the recollection of the past *must* imply the future.

However, this should not distract us from the quantitative significance of minimalism's emphasis on process and repetition. If minimalist repetition provides a sense of motoric movement, often even forward propulsion, it is not a motion which is easily associated with a purpose, be this the stable and predictable build-up and release of harmonic tension, or an end arrived at through music's representative or associative aspects. Minimalism problematizes the notion of *telos* or purpose. Bertrand Russell – almost certainly taking into equal account potential scientific, mathematical, philosophical and political trajectories – reminds us that the teleological and the causal must be kept discrete, and that the type of knowledge these produces is distinct:

> When we ask 'why?' concerning an event, we may mean either of two things. We may mean: 'What purpose did this event serve' or we may mean 'What earlier circumstances caused this event?' The answer to the former question is a teleological explanation, or an explanation by final causes; the answer to the latter question is a mechanistic explanation…[E]xperience has shown that the mechanistic question leads to scientific knowledge, while the teleological question does not.[664]

Cursorily, it is worth mentioning that much contemporary thought on teleological operation – particularly that derived from General Systems Theory with its emphasis on dynamic teleological models involving multifinality, equifinality, circular causality, autopoiesis and so forth[665] – poses significant problems for a reductive account such as Russell's above. We might add to these, from an entirely different perspective, the work of hermeneuts such as Gadamer, who argues that the notion of truth cannot be separated by science from the questions posed by art. This is not to suggest that a wholesale elision of either field into the other is possible, nor is it essential to insist that the relation of minimalism to a quantitative ontology has a necessary bearing upon the posing of teleological or mechanistic questions in themselves; it clarifies each in turn, without collapsing them into one another. For the sake of brevity we might distinguish between music as part of a *representational* teleology, which is purposive in relation to external elements, and music as an *autotelic* phenomenon, in which case it is purposive in terms of the internal relations of its constituent parts.

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[663] Ibid., 17.
[664] Russell, *History*, 73.
[665] Ludwig von Bartelanffy, *General Systems Theory* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 16-7; 77-9.

That we experience within music a sense of beginning and ending, and, between these, various types of tension and release, hinges on the understanding that what we term music emerges through a number of relations. In many cases such relations are essentially representational – of its programmatic and narrative references;[666] of the nexus between composer, composition, performer and listener; of the process of music itself and the relation of part to whole, of instant to temporality. It is an immanent relation to sound, whether in its perception or production, which renders music essentially teleological or purposive.

Accepting firstly that *telos* marks in music an overall sense of purposiveness – that the music is going somewhere in particular,[667] which "gives the listener a non-ambivalent orientation and that attempts to inform him of *meaningful* musical *contents*"[668] – it becomes possible to trace the differences between what Fink terms a classical (relational) teleology and recombinatory (autotelic) teleologies. Classical teleology, he argues, rests on two basic assumptions: an anthropic principle, according to which the purposiveness of music "maintains a basic phenomenological congruence"[669] with the human experience of tension and release;[670] and a formal principle which asserts that "the complex arc of [tension and release…] coincides exactly with the shape of the piece…[U]timately *telos* determines form."[671] Many critics, Wim Mertens amongst them, remain adamant that minimalism essentially abandons teleology,[672] invoking a "non-directed evolution in which the listener is no longer submitted to the constraint of following the musical evolution." Not being compelled to follow a specific chain of significances, we are free to experience minimalist composition for what it is: generative process *qua* generative process.

While Fink might not dispute this last point, he quite correctly doubts the view of teleology espoused by Mertens. In its place he proposes that minimalism exemplifies a recombinant teleology: "there is in fact no nonteleological experience of music in Western culture, only new recombinations of teleology not yet

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[666] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 213.

[667] Fink, *Repeating,* 31.

[668] Mertens, *American*, 17. Arguing in a mould informed by Hegelian dialectics and Marxist materialism, Mertens conflates *telos* with synthesis, suggesting that in teleological music the traditional conception of composition is able thus to combine "rhythm, melody, harmony, and so on in a causal, pre-figured way" (ibid., 16-7).

[669] Fink, *Repeating*, 44.

[670] Fink draws particularly heavily on the psychoanalytic concepts of desire and pleasure and their economic elaboration in this regard.

[671] Ibid., 45. This is most conspicuous in sonata-form, where the careful exposition, development, alternation and recapitulation of several themes present a mutually reflective productivity between content and form.

[672] According to Fink, this is predicated on Mertens' and Nyman's acceptance of minimalism's indebtedness to the experimental aesthetics of John Cage which necessarily means that it similarly is dependent on a rejection of teleology and purpose (ibid., 33-4; 36-7; 40). However, Cage's position is not as unambiguous as this might suggest, since Cage in fact endorses something far closer to multifinality: "[t]he answers have the questions in common" (*CG*, 215).

recognized as transformations of goal-directedness."[673] Although Fink almost immediately retracts this strong hypothesis of recombinant teleology, what is significant in this proposition is that purposiveness is perfectly plausible both in concept and experience from outside of either the metaphysical or formalist paradigms through which artistic production might be understood.

Fink's recombinant teleology must be understood as an attempt to account for the inner-purposiveness of minimalist music in its indifference to anthropomorphic scale[674] and formalist protocols.[675] If it subverts the extensive parameters, patterns and progressions which conventionally dictate movement in western art music, minimalism is not devoid of direction as such. It is conceivable that the timbrel subtleties of a single tone might indicate an inherent tendency towards other pitches, and hence to relationship. Equally, although a sequence of pitches might present only fragmentary testimony to existing teleological structures – principally, diatonic harmony and the melodic repetition and isorhythms (repeated rhythmic patterns) which habitually attend it – the assumption that such sequences cannot in themselves capture and orient attention speaks more of a limited understanding of structure than of any intrinsic property of music or sound.[676] Pulse and rhythm, suspension and resolution, progression and cadence: these are all perfectly conceivable within minimal, modular, fragmentary or processual music.

Music might legitimately be described as *autotelic* (self-directed and intrinsically purposive) when its self-referential capacity is simultaneously *autopoietic* (self-productive). To state the case otherwise: the fact that certain sounds follow other sounds is due to their internal properties and the relations these establish; simultaneously, for these sounds to be such as they are, these relations and the directions they imply must be seen as necessary; we are faced with the choice, either this necessity pre-exists as a structural demand, in which case we reinvest ourselves within in a teleological metaphysics, or the necessity is in fact produced within the sound itself as the potential for relation, in which case it is *autotelic*.

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[673] Fink, *Repeating*, 43.
[674] The "time-frames listeners can recognize" (ibid., 44-5).
[675] "Detach teleology from form, and an entire panoply of new arrangements opens up" (ibid., 46).
[676] Ibid., 86.

e) Modular process as sonic quantity

Although the *autotelic* marks both lineages of minimalism identified here, it is considerably more prominent in minimal forms which draw their substance from process, repetition and pulse, than in drone works. Such minimalism in itself contains purposiveness sufficient to render external reference or relation non-essential. The first radically minimalist use of repetition as a structuring and *autopoietic* technique might be traced to Erik Satie's *Vexations* (Track 11),[677] a composition which instructs the performer to repeat its spartan fifty-two beat material eight hundred and forty times without variation, a performance which lasts approximately eighteen hours.[678] As suggested above, it is no great stretch to accept that repetition should be essential to coherence and structure in music and, indeed, art in general. However, that repetition should be capable of deconstituting conventional teleology, effecting a significant formal and associative amnesia, while simultaneously substituting for this loss a new type of tensional arrangement, is what makes its employment in minimalism remarkable.

Variously taken up in the logic of serialism,[679] of which Anton Webern's condensed miniatures are exemplary,[680] the aleatory music of John Cage, and the work of eclectic composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, such repetition is pursued with particular clarity and force in pulse-pattern minimalism, to recall Fink's term. In particular, we might consider Philip Glass' *Two Pages* (Track 12),[681] although a similar emphasis on modularity and process is evident in other early minimalist works, Terry Riley's jubilant early masterpiece, *In C* (Track 13),[682] as well as Steve Reich's work *Piano Phase*[683] amongst them. Glass' composition takes its name from the fact that its constituent modules were originally scored on two manuscript pages. This work is paradigmatic of both the composer's early and most formally severe output, as well as that brand of minimalism which hinges on the exposition of systematic and often audible processes. The performance score for *Two Pages* specifies neither instrumentation nor dynamics, although the *Electra Nonesuch* recording features piano and electric organ in unison.[684]

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[677] Erik Satie, *Vexations*, 1893-5.
[678] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 32; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 125; Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 10.
[679] Early serialism involved the arrangement the twelve pitches of the standard chromatic scale into a specific series which, repeated throughout the composition, constituted the basic melodic material of the music. In its later and more austere and severe forms, not only was melodic material serially organized, but also rhythm, dynamics, orchestration and timbre.
[680] In terms of repetition within serial structures, Strickland highlights Webern's *Variations for Orchestra*, Op. 30 (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 126).
[681] Philip Glass, *Two Pages*, 1969.
[682] Terry Riley, *In C*. CBS, 1968.
[683] Steve Reich, *Piano Phase*, 1967.
[684] Ibid.

Its principal structural feature is the use of additive and subtractive modules. In the case of additive modules, a sequence, consisting of a number of pitches in a specific order,[685] is repeated a number of times before being supplemented, either by a single pitch[686] or by an additional series of pitches,[687] which would then be repeated. For the compositional process to be transparent, such an additional series of pitches will normally be a variation on the first. These supplementary series can themselves be either additive – in which case they would present notes in addition to the original series[688] – or subtractive – in which case they would present fewer notes than the original series.[689] Such variation might equally be properly subtractive, in which case the sequence itself would contract.[690] It is partly because complex instrumentation does not distract from this exacting structural systematicity that the compositional process is rendered maximally audible.

Similar techniques are observable in minimalist literature and minimalist visual arts. In the case of the former, we might consider Samuel Beckett's "Company." Here the modular phrase "To one on his back in the dark"[691] undergoes various permutations in effecting within the overburdening density and inertia of the closed space within which Beckett sets this novel a minimal sense of agency and movement. Against the borders of self-consciousness, the boundaries of sensory and conceptual verification, and the existential limitation of the body within actual space, the narrator (Voice) struggles against the darkness of fading memory in order to guarantee the darkness (unknowability) of future contingency: "figments of the imagination whose function is aesthetic play,"[692] affirming the struggle of creation itself. The additive transformation of the initial module is systematically balanced out by a recursion to the original formula. Thus, the unstable relation between agent and agency which is brought to a climax in the query, "Can the crawling creator crawling in the same create dark as creature create while crawling?", is symmetrically predicated upon contrasting expansions of motionless darkness of the initial module. The imagination is

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[685] As a hypothetical example, we might take the sequence of notes, C-D-E-F.
[686] For example, C-D-E-F-*G*, where *G* is clearly a single note supplement.
[687] For example, C-D-E-F-*C-D-E-F-G*, where the italicized *C-D-E-F-G* is the supplement.
[688] Using the example above, C-D-E-F-C-D-E-F-*G*, where *G* is added to the sequence C-D-E-F in order to constitute the sequences which supplements the original.
[689] The subtractive version of what is still an additive sequence (in the sense that a sequence is still being added to the original) would be C-D-E-F-C-D-E, where *F* has been subtracted from the original sequence in order to constitute the sequence which supplements the original.
[690] The repetition of C-D-E-F would be followed by C-D-E, and so forth. This should be distinguished from subtraction which still takes place in an added sequence, since the processual logic remains additive in such cases, as is predominantly the case in Glass' *Two Pages*.
[691] Beckett, "Company," 3. With this phrase Beckett begins the second line of the text.
[692] C. J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber, 2006), 107.

stirred to genuine *poiesis* – "visions in the dark of light,"[693] and "the conjuring of something out of nothing"[694] – which is clearly additive. This is almost immediately undercut, however – "Crawls and falls. Lies. Lies in the dark with closed eyes resting from his crawl"[695] – and the piece comes to rest as it began "in the dark…Alone."[696]

Although far less formally rigorous than the examples set by musical modularism, Beckett's structural concerns are certainly comparable to those of phase-pattern minimalism. A still closer homology might be discovered in Robert Lax's poem, "word,"[697] a minimalist miniature which presents a four-line stanza flanked by three, three-line stanzas, two at the start and one at the end, the first and the last being identical:

> word
> word
> word
>
> a word
> a word
> a word
>
> one word
> two words
> one word
> two words
>
> word
> word
> word[698]

The first stanza – "word/ word/ word" – presents the initial module of the work. Here is echoed the concern which Derrida famously identifies in terms of the triplicate logic of identity – "There was immediately a double origin plus its repetition."[699] Admittedly, Derrida's logic speaks not merely of the manifest, but of the very possibility of identity. Nonetheless, Lax seems also to be asking the question,

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[693] Beckett, "Company," 44.
[694] Ibid., 39.
[695] Ibid., 40.
[696] Ibid.
[697] Though the poem is untitled, I name it here by its first word/line.
[698] Robert Lax, "word," *New Poems* (London: Coracle, 1986), 9.
[699] Jacques Derrida, "Ellipsis," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 378.

how many times must a thing be repeated for this repetition contingently to stabilize the void at the heart of identity? The answer appears to be three: the first repetition marks the split and incommensurability between the lost unity of an idea and its presentation; the second repetition doubles the split, re-presents it, in order to stabilize presentation itself. Badiou would suggest that this repetition, or metastructure, is the minimal necessity for the presentation of any situation whatsoever.[700] *Word* is clearly self-referential – it is the word "word," and it traces, performs and encircles the performance of its content. Its reference is also external to the other repetitions of the module "word" in the stanza, as well as a more general law of consecution which underpins the traditional order of language: that one word will follow another word. These concretize – indeed, quantify – the minimal conditions in which *poietic* force and poetic presentation are able to coincide.

By adding the indefinite article, *a*, the second stanza defines an expansionary supplement to the first: "a word/ a word/ a word." This increment further concretizes and predicates what in a sense remains ideal in the first stanza – "word," hovering between the substantial and insubstantial, becomes "*a* word." Simultaneously this predication is a subtraction, however, for there is a definite quality, or arguably a certain purity which is retained in the idea, which is sacrificed through the addition of the indefinite article. "[A] word" hovers between the idea – the idea of identity and the reflexivity of the idea itself – and the definite; between "word" and *the* word. Lax resolves the problem in a remarkable and, indeed, minimal manoeuvre, by shifting to the numerical realm of specific quantity. The third stanza presents a more complex variation, the alternative "one word/ two words/ one word/ two words," which is again both additive and subtractive in relation to the initial module, "word". It is additive, first, in several obvious senses: the addition of the plural ("word*s*"); the fact that these lines posit additional variations on the initial module; the internal variance of the stanza (the alternation of "one word" and "two words") is itself a type of addition; and most significantly, the alternating lines also present rudimentary counting and addition, "one…two." These lines also add definition: the indefinite article "a" becomes alternately "one" and "two." Interestingly, such definition is also subtractive in a significant sense, since specificity is shown here to be subtracted from non-specificity.

Interpreting *word* as a concrete poem[701] – one in which the form and content of the poem reflect one another, the flow of language obeying its own meaningful prescription – we encounter the full sense in which this third stanza must be understood as deeply ambiguous. "[O]ne word" clearly is self-

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[700] *BE*, 93-4.
[701] It is possible to identify at least three types of concrete poetry: visual, sound and verbal. This last is well exemplified in the present example of Lax's poetry.

contradictory from the perspective of concrete reflexivity: it subtracts from its substantial, self-referential independence, since "one word" is, of course, not *one* word, but *two* words. In this subtraction, however, it refers back to "a word" of the second stanza, which, in turn, is a "word," indeed *the* "word" of the first stanza: a single word struggling for its conceptual and concrete singularity. So, in a sense, the developed module "one word" subtracts from itself only to add quantitatively to the original module, while also affirming the intrinsic concrete value of "word." The alternate line of the third stanza, "two words," presents itself without such contradiction. Clearly, it is adding "a word" to the initial module, "word," and so is "two words," a self-reflexive, affirmative performance. Simultaneously it makes oblique reference to the two words of its alternating partner – "one word" – by providing an external point of reference for the latter. In returning to a repetition of the opening module and stanza – "word/ word/ word" – the poem seeks to affirm the quantitative, cumulative, modular, and repetitive character of materialization, and, more specifically, materialization through language. Having begun with a self-referential idea, and proceeded through its indefinite and then numerical quantification, we are closer to recognizing in the final stanza three singular and discrete words. Lax, through an exemplary, modular minimalism, points us precisely towards the conditions of internal and external reference which approximate the quantitative conditions of being.

In the visual arts, a parallel emphasis on serial and modular expansion is evident in Sol le Wit's sculpture with its exposition of the modular logic of geometric structure. In *HRZL 1*, (Figure 51)[702] a work composed of concrete cubes, we discover " the realization of a numeric and geometric sequence of incremental units," which, much like some of the open-ended additive techniques of Philip Glass, could "extend out indefinitely" in exposing the "variations available within an original premise…[and] within the basic cube and square form."[703] The work simultaneously pulls the viewer inward, along the central axis upon which it is aligned,[704] and upward, along the diagonal line of its progressive levels. It transects space in a manner which is at once so systematic, impersonal and pervasive that it "set[s] art and reality on the same plane...[T]he selection of a regulated scheme…[reveals] works that self-referentially stand for what they are without illusionistic deception."[705] In the space shared between perceiver and work, the constituent cubes of *HRZL 1*, even more blatant in a sculpture such as *1 2 3 4 5 5 6* (Figure 52),[706] cannot

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[702] Sol LeWitt, *HRZL 1*, 1990. Private collection, Italy.
[703] Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 68.
[704] Ibid.
[705] Anne Rorimer, "Approaches to Servility: Sol LeWitt and his Contemporaries," *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective,* ed. Gary Garrels (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000), 70
[706] Sol Le Witt, *1 2 3 4 5 6,* 1978. Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond.

help but recall the architectural, the "the geometry of the city.[707]" Yet, this should not detract from the fact that, in its modular expansion, the work exemplifies the *autotelic* thrust of minimalism in its geometrically quantifiable aspect.
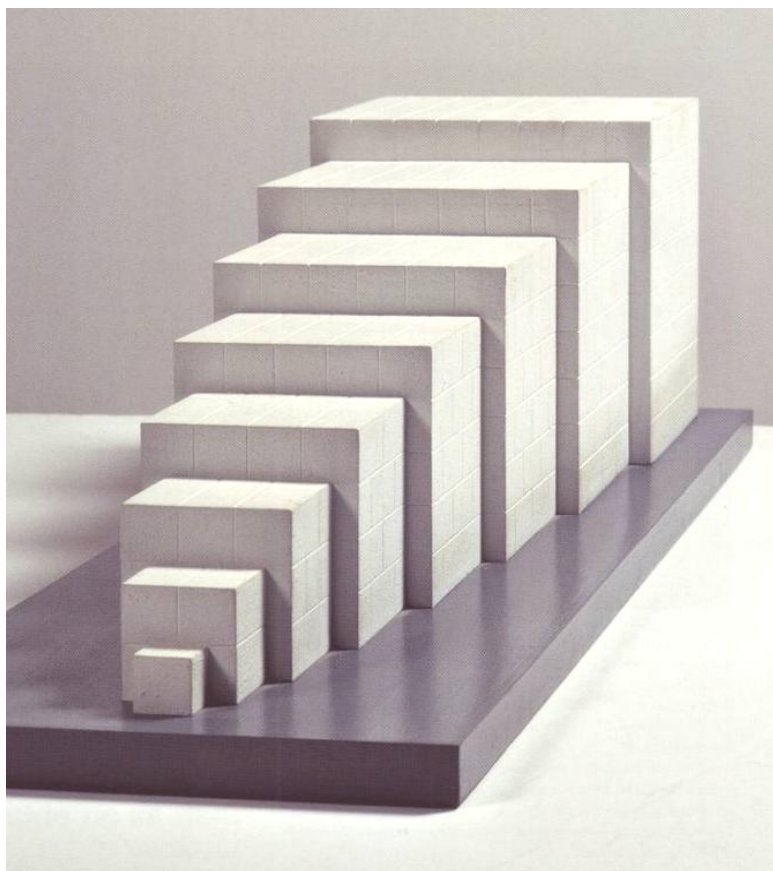
Figures 51: Sol LeWitt, *HRZL*, 1990   **Figure 52: Sol Le Witt, *1 2 3 4 5 6*, 1978.**
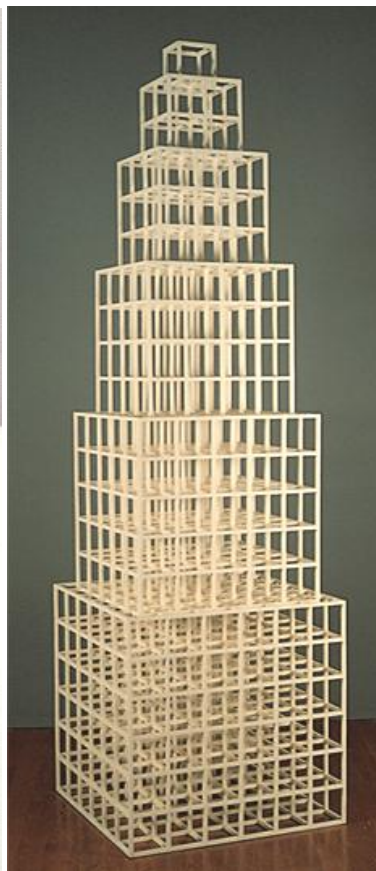
Of Glass' use of additive and subtractive modular repetition, Keith Potter writes the following:

> Each work is constructed from a Basic Unit…The scores simply notate the expansions and contractions of the Basic Unit that forms the structure of each work. They do this, though, by grouping sub-units and their expansions or contractions into figures of varying lengths…*Two Pages* represents Glass's first use of rigorous additive process in a composed-out score.[708]

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[707] Martin Friedman, "Construction Sights," *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective,* ed. Gary Garrels (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000), 55.

[708] Potter, *Four*, 287-8.

It is somewhat unexpected that despite the composition's formal simplicity, despite its being little more than a "study in the elongation and subsequent contraction of a simple musical line,"[709] it retains a certain complexity. A possible explanation might be found in considering the manner in which more complex art habitually conceals its own artificiality. To be maximally effective it presents its constitutive complexities as essential. There is no strain in affirming the realism and mimetic precision of Don Eddy's *Private Parking V* (Figure 52).[710]

Figure 53: Don Eddy, *Private Parking V*, 1971.

We are struck not by the virtuosity of the brush strokes that must accompany such a painting, but rather by the sheer fact that, were the context of our perception even slightly different, we might easily mistake the work for a photograph. Such technical complexities, with the possible exception of formal composition, easily could pass us by entirely by the very force with which such complexity coheres within a single work.

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[709] Tim Page, liner notes, Philip Glass, *Early Works*. Elektra Nonesuch, 1994.
[710] Don Eddy, *Private Parking V*, 1971. Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf's short story, "The Mark on the Wall,"[711] presents, through a complex diction, syntax and structure of relations, the manner in which the curvatures of thought are habitually related to singular, phenomenal points – in this case, a mark on the wall of a room in which the narrator is seated. This realization serves not to dematerialize such physical points into the complexity of the linguistic, but rather affirms the integrity of matter obliquely within the complex of perception and perspective which language negotiates.

We encounter the mark from several perspectives: first, as the minimal differentiation of substance within undifferentiated sensory experience, the "small round mark"[712] of novelty, upon which attention and thought readily "swarm;"[713] second, as a hole made by a nail, an intrusion into the integrity of the unified surface of reality (the wall), but also a functional absence which supports the possibility of represented phenomena (the "miniature" painting[714]); third, the mark as the possibility of something radically exterior to thought and perception, of "some round black substance"[715] which draws us back from "the inaccuracy of thought"[716] to the world of matter; fourth, "[i]n certain lights the mark on the wall seems actually to project from the wall…I cannot be sure, but it seems to cast a perceptible shadow,"[717] suggesting the manner in which reality takes shape through the unsure but effective orientation of perception and thought, in sensory information ionised towards the polarity of material consequences.

By tracing these complexities of thought through the subtleties of experience to which this self-conscious and subtly metafictional[718] narrative alludes, Woolf affirms the comparability of the fictive and the Real: "[h]ow shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things…were not entirely real."[719] The narrative faithfully reproduces the complexity of the process through which the real, perception, and thought become entwined. Implicitly, it enacts a local version of Husserl's universal

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[711] Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall," *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).
[712] Ibid., 3.
[713] Ibid.
[714] Ibid.
[715] Ibid., 5.
[716] Ibid., 4.
[717] Ibid., 7.
[718] "But how dull this is, this historical reflection! It doesn't interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought," the narrator remarks, with a degree of self-consciousness arguably sufficient to suggest that in the figure of the narrator, memory, language and intention combine with sufficient force actively to script, rather than merely transcribe, reality (ibid., 5).
[719] Ibid., 6.

phenomenological *epochē*, or a "*method of parenthesizing*"[720] which aims to establish the independence of the realm of empirical consciousness from the external world of spatial and temporal conditions. The real – here the mark on the wall – re-emerges only when we bracket our insistence on the existential aspect of its being: "*[w]e put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude;* we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being: *thus the whole natural world* which is continually 'there for us'."[721] In order to apprehend the *noema* or perceptual content of the mark on the wall with greater clarity, the narrator – and, to the extent that the imagination is able to reproduce this mark, also the reader – must apply a local *epochē* which enables the discernment of specific perceptual information from within an immensely complex situation. It becomes possible to weigh various perspectives, and to identify an object which corresponds to accurate observation. It is such a local exercise which, from a phenomenological perspective,[722] allows us to follow the experimentation with the limits of phenomenal experience explicit in the narrative itself, while still speculating as individual interpreters on the nature of Woolf's mark. The present argument diverges fundamentally in this respect: although the reader follows these paths with the narrator, ultimately we do not recreate this full complexity in itself, but only its appearance. This appearance, which might easily be taken for genuine equivalence, reveals the forces which may be regarded as specific to representational literature, which seems to bind an excess of data through a medium that, despite the odds, we are capable of processing as a contingent whole.

This is not to suggest that complexity clarifies. Nor should we underestimate that within an "environment [which] is always already more complex than any and all systems and the observations and operations they carry out"[723] we might be tempted to explain the totality of aesthetic effect by "the quintessentially modernist and Enlightenment strategy…of reducing complexity via social consensus."[724] With the notable exception of those who come to a work with a specialized critical agenda in mind, we habitually encounter in most representational and teleological art an enjoinder to the hermeneutic task of first affirming the work as a totality in effect, before proceeding to a structured delineation of its constituent parts, references or meaning. Such propositions, in combining the normative functions of taste and

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[720] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 60.
[721] Ibid., 61.
[722] Although the present understanding of the Real is almost entirely at odds with the phenomenological insistence on the primacy of consciousness and the intentionality of perception, it nonetheless provides an apposite qualitative counterpoint to the claim of quantitative ontology I sketch in relation to minimalism in the present work.
[723] William Rasch and Cary Wolfe, Introduction, *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 22.
[724] Ibid.

teleological judgment, potentially miss what is formalism's most obvious gain: that otherwise chaotic sensibility is unified not by reducing its complexity, but by rendering such complexity perceptible without having aesthetically to recreate the detailed processes of formation. Such works conceal that form itself is subject to formation, or that structure is subject to structuration.

Minimalism by contrast – even in its monotonal, monochromatic, and most concrete literary manifestations, all of which emphasize immanence and presence – draws attention to the processual elements of both form and structure. Minimalism presents not only minimal material, but also minimal impediment to the generative or *poietic* process itself. The sheer immanence of this process, the quantity of information it presents as immediate, has the potential to overwhelm, appearing thus more complex than in the case of its referential aesthetic counterparts.

The significance of the broadly-speaking formalist analyses of *Two Pages* undertaken by Wes York[725] and Potter[726] becomes clearer when we consider that their meticulous deciphering does not reflect solely on the structure and effects of the music. Recalling the argument above regarding the *autotelic* character of pulse-pattern minimalism, the modular repetition and variation in *Two Pages* paradoxically draws attention to the manner in which musical change and progression occur, both from the perspective of form and from that of the perceiver. As such, minimalism represents nothing other than the process of production itself, and it is this *poiesis* to which formalist analyses obliquely attest. In Potter's analysis, the one hundred and seven constituent modules[727] are grouped in four parts. Each part presents a different exploration of additive and subtractive procedures, mostly through permutation of a basic sequence, G-C-D-Eb-F. The first involves what is described above as a subtractive supplement, in which what is added is a contracting restatement of the original material; the second is properly additive, and involves the symmetrical expansion and contraction of a sub-unit; the third involves a "still more complex additive structure" involving the addition of a second figure; the fourth involves additive repetition once again, but having abandoned the grounding pitch, G, shifts the referential ground of the listener. The effect – irrespective of towards which tone in the various relentless repeated sections the listener's attention might be directed, with the resultant variations in tonal gravity such differences solidify – is one of evolving displacement.

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[725] Wes York, "Form and Process," *Writings on Glass*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz and Robert Fleming (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997), 60-79.
[726] Potter, *Four*, 289-92.
[727] Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 120.

In the case of modular minimalism, a tension persists between asymmetry and rigorous mathematical order which stresses the already emphatic connection between repetition, additive and subtractive modularization, number, and a quantitative ontology. The transparency of these quantitative processes helps only to regionalize a certain aesthetic dislocation, a generative atopia. In particular, musical minimalism – even as it engages and interacts, retaining not only conceptual but often expressive links between composer, work, performer and audience – demonstrates itself as simultaneously self-reflexive, self-productive, self-structuring and self-sustaining. It is thus that minimalism is both committed and indifferent, and in this paradox it draws attention to the point at which what is normally taken as the qualitative realm of musical form and content, reveals its quantitative substrate. Minimalism's first lineage – the drone composition, the monochromatic canvas, the most austere and descriptive prose – indicates quantity through duration and sonic immanence, invariance of surface, the interplay of sustenance and silence, presence and absence. Modular minimalism – phase-pattern music, serial sculpture, the modular approach of much concrete poetry – exposing its *autotelic* bias, draws out the quantitative ontology of accumulation, series and counting. In both paradigms, we witness a shift from the critically and philosophically dominant assumption that at the heart of art's being we finally discover only a complex set of qualitative relationships. It is thus by the austere path of minimalism, that we discover a back-door – the aesthetic – through which we might take a few tentative steps towards a quantitative understanding of being.

7. THE QUALIFICATION OF QUANTITY

a) The refusal of quantity

Regardless of whether its form is transcendental, logical, existential, or phenomenological, the refutation of the Absolute which inhabits most strains of contemporary thought is intimately bound to the refusal of quantity. Exemplary amongst such repudiations is the opposition offered by Horkheimer and Adorno to the manner in which the Enlightenment instrumentalizes reason by reducing thought to a correlate of

quantification.[728] Nature, justice, economy and knowledge are unified under a supreme law of calculability.[729] Quantity comes to dominate quality.[730] It is the dogmatic extension of the quantitative claim that similarly subjugates multiplicity to unity,[731] allows science to colonize, and thus mythologize, the *poietic* sphere,[732] and installs the anthropic subject as maker and master of the material world.[733] Quantity reduces to a nodal relationship between subject and object "[t]he manifold affinities between existing things."[734] On this basis, it becomes possible to indicate a point of confluence between an "objectifying definition"[735] that confirms the radical disconnectedness of concept and thing, grounded solely in the illegitimate ascendency of quantity, and a division of labour between science and art.[736] Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the maintenance of such oppositions is comprehensible only by passing through the heart of dialectical identification – "each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not". Just as subject and object, concept and thing, are ultimately interdependent, so too are art and science. "Science," they claim, "becomes aestheticism, a system of isolated signs,"[737] while "art as integral replication has pledged itself to positivist science, even in its specific techniques. It becomes indeed, the world over again."[738]

A philosophy of progressive enlightenment identifies as its transhistorical vocation the pursuit of freedom through the systematic elimination of what is unknown. To guarantee its momentum, such a philosophy posits close to its foundation the very chasm between intuition and concept, world and idea, which it seeks subsequently to seal.[739] For Horkheimer and Adorno, the principal problem lies not in the potential circularity of this type of justification,[740] but in the strategic error which philosophy makes in insisting upon quantity as an absolute and immanent pre-dialectic ground for its emergence. Equation becomes the master of the dialectic, restraining the sheer "abundance of qualities,"[741] sealing the incalculable within a

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[728] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 19-20.
[729] Ibid., 4.
[730] Ibid., 3-6.
[731] Ibid., 3-5,
[732] Ibid., 7, 13, 18
[733] "The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them" (ibid., 6).
[734] Ibid., 7.
[735] Ibid., 11.
[736] Ibid., 12-3.
[737] Ibid., 13.
[738] Ibid.
[739] Ibid.
[740] "[T]hought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced so that it can finally be replaced by the machine" (ibid., 19).
[741] Ibid., 6.

"preemptive identification of the thoroughly mathematized world with truth."[742] Through asserting unity as both origin and goal,[743] philosophy fails to recognize its dialectical foundation, and passes instead into a mathematical fundamentalism. To begin counteracting the "triumphant calamity"[744] which proceeds from the instrumental application of such absolute quantification, we must undertake the dialectical enlightenment of enlightenment itself.

Those situations which claim autonomy require particularly close attention, since their logic presents a fragmentary totalization of the rift between concept and world. Prime amongst these is art which, "[a]s an expression of totality…claims the dignity of the absolute."[745] In its *poietic* aspect, art becomes the generative subject of a world; in its mimetic aspect, it faithfully traces "the world over again."[746] These forces manifest through the distribution of sensible and cognitive information across the various species and media of art, a situation which proves strictly nonsummative. If the unity of art "can never be restored by the addition of these arts, by synaesthesia or total art,"[747] we are yet called to postulate something integral or convergent in its stead, for art, ultimately, has definite referents. On one hand art offers itself as self-productive totality, but on the other, it is clear no additions of its parts can constitute the totality it claims to generate or translate. There is a clear disjuncture between art as self-productive totality and art as nonsummative synaesthesia which reproduces the rift which separates concept from thing. To grant consistency either to this separation or to its bridging, we are compelled to choose between the foundational, pre-emptive ascendency of quantity (and its concomitant suppression of quality), and critical consciousness, which functions dialectically through a transformative processing of difference as the essence of identity.

Quantity subjects culture and society to a mode of domination from which an incalculable enlightenment promises liberation – an outside to the irrational state to which reason has dangerously regressed. The inheritance of a metaphysics of "true reality"[748] must be challenged by passing through the void of identity, to a negative dialectics, which, Adorno claims, "change[s] this direction of conceptuality" – the compulsive movement towards predicated identity – through a "turn towards non-identity."[749] It is

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[742] Ibid., 18.
[743] With respect to the former, "its ideal is the system from which everything and anything flows" (ibid., 4); as regards its destiny, "anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion" (ibid.).
[744] Ibid., 1.
[745] Ibid., 14.
[746] Ibid., 13.
[747] Ibid.
[748] Ibid., 16.
[749] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 12.

possible to concur with much of the argument presented by Horkheimer and Adorno. They expose the dark potential that inheres in situations where like and unlike are *counted-as* one another – the tyranny of the One, prefiguring Badiou – and in which political, legal, ethical and economic equivalence become the rule. Retaining a critical antagonism towards the illegitimate reign of irrationality, their analysis sketches not a simplistic dystopia, but the possibility of a return to reason. By uncoupling thought from number, they recognize the antagonistic dynamic at the heart of cultural production – the ideological strain between quantity and quality – in which art emerges as a key negotiator.

It is less clear how negative dialectics is not guilty of the same failure it criticizes in mathematics[750] – the inability to adhere to its own axiomatic self-limitation which leads it to identify itself as foundational possibility. The negative dialectic operates by assuming the full decisional force of the axiom internally, thus positing itself as a totality which self-reflexively and necessarily undermines its own totality. Are we not asked merely to affirm a series of strategic inversions: decision becomes constitutive undecidability; positive identification passes into a "consistent sense of non-identity;"[751] the ruthless quantification of reality becomes a refusal of quantity? It is finally an axiomatic decision to grant a certain authority to the dialectic which prevents this argument from drifting into a quasi-anthropological history of equivalence, a threnody for the sacrifices demanded by capitalist quantification. For all its strengths, the argument is founded upon a decision regarding number: number and enumeration, quantity and quantitative progression, constitute a "substrate of domination."[752]

By contrast, I suggest that quantity is simply an ontological substrate of pure indifference. Quantity is constitutively disinterested in quality. Is it not possible that ontological quantity passes into instrumental quantification at the precise moment at which quantity is itself held as the primary quality of every entity? Such a qualification of quantity ought to be counteracted faithfully by insisting on a quantitative ontology – the quantitative persistence of what in Being is *in itself*. [753] While indifference and nonidentity are retained at the rhetorical centre of Adorno's negative dialectics, they remain spectral and inexpressible not of necessity, but through a refusal of quantity in itself, which is accompanied by a radical conversion of quantity into quality. The critique of instrumentalization becomes itself instrumental, and it is not number which betrays us to this fate, but a growing insensitivity to fluctuating intensities of quantity.

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[750] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 19.
[751] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.
[752] Ibid., 6.
[753] Ibid.

Minimalism might be understood as the aesthetic attempt to translate such intensities without the mediating vocabulary of qualification. This it does not through an indiscriminate assertion of quantity, however. In almost all cases, minimalism renders with unprecedented clarity, the manner in which particular qualities and ontological quantity are co-emergent in the work. However, it also reveals the character of the absolute – that the work rests on the recognition of quantity *qua* quantity. This is not the paranoiac fear of externality which Horkheimer and Adorno suggest arrives with "the pure immanence of positivism,"[754] and which results in the periodic claim that art can be sealed from reality. To the contrary, what is absolute in minimalism – whether it be revealed through reflective judgement or through the *autopoietic* emergence of the work – is that minimalism presents access to the Real.

b) The One and the persistence of the universal

Once we are willing to reject the Absolute and the Real, the suspension of quantity as the radix of being and the hypostatization in its place of quality as principle of ontological fundamentalism, are all too easily accomplished. The affirmation or negation of the world is henceforth, from the perspective of thought, devoid of absolute quantitative value or pure number. We are given over to what Meillassoux identifies as the dominant coordinating expression of western philosophy – the correlation of being and thought.[755] In this respect, might we not return to that cornerstone of metaphysics, Parmenides' *Fragments*, to discover that if "the same thing is there for thinking and for being,"[756] what is evoked is not the equation of thought and being, but the recognition of the Real (in the form of the One) as an absolute precondition. At the precise moment at which the Real is suppressed in favour of the equation of thought and being, the destitution of a radical or absolute notion of number and quantity appears not only desirable, but a necessity. If the quantitative and mathematical aspect of being periodically reaffirms its centrality – from Parmenides in antiquity, to Russell in modernity– a melancholia persists in its depths; a pervasive if silent acknowledgement that the conditions of thought through which the Absolute might legitimately be expressed in quantitative terms are always subject to paradoxes, fluctuations and regresses.

To be clear, the preliminary recognition upon which a reclamation of the Absolute depends is the repositing of thought as the basis for contemporary materialism, although, we ought perhaps to follow Blackburn in terming this a radical *physicalism,* since "physics itself asserts that not everything that exists

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[754] Ibid., 11.
[755] *AF*, 5.
[756] Parmenides, *Fragments*, trans. David Gallop (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984), 57.

is material; the world includes such items as forces and fields."[757] The transumption of the Real from the transcendental realm of pure ideas to the physical realm promises to salvage the Absolute by demonstrating the legitimacy of the claim that entities and thought participate equally in substantiality (materialism).[758] This claim, it will be argued, must now appeal to something beside the *doxa* of an exhausted dualistic metaphysics. The conspicuous diversity of responses attests to the fact that this field remains contested. From the *radical empiricism* of William James' later monism, with its insistence that the distinction of mind from matter is predicated on different arrangements of the same fundamental material,[759] through the eclectic materialist critique of ideology offered by Slavoj Žižek, to the Platonic recuperation of the substantiality of thought emphasized in the work of such ontologists as Badiou and Meillassoux,[760] we discover a common orientation towards reanimating the relation between being and ontology. In more recent work particularly, the overwhelming concern lies in discerning genuinely radical change from within the almost overwhelming multiplicity of undifferentiated information which marks every continuous existential situation. Moreover, it promises us the means by which to persist with such radical change; to draw out its consequences.

It is the latter process which underpins Badiou's definition of the subject: in brief, the subject as the ongoing process and ensuing effects of affirming the radical innovation that can only be heralded by a true event, a rupture across being itself. Persistence marks the manner in which entities follow the shape of the Real. It is the activity of the subject to trace this persistence. As Badiou notes, it is a matter of "subjectivation and a consistency."[761] "All that is required of us is to hold to […what can be completed] and to what cannot be completed,"[762] to persist in the understanding of what is immanent to knowledge and what is infinitely potential. Persistence – the "pure patience of the subject"[763] – reveals that the essence of hope is the manner in which the subject is able infinitely to commit itself to a situation which is both immanent and indefinitely distant. And it is this persistence which marks what Badiou terms fidelity.

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[757] Simon Blackburn, "Metaphysics" (with a section on Time by Robin Le Poidevin), *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy,* ed. Nicholas Bunnin and E.P. Tsui-James (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 65.

[758] It should be noted that the term *partake of* is preferred by the majority of Plato's translators, and here should be understood to be interchangeable with the term *participate in* which I have generally preferred for stylistic reasons.

[759] David C. Lambeth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 75-8.

[760] This is not to return to that which Meillassoux criticizes in terms of the correlation between thought and being, but precisely to recognize the being *of* thought. See *AF*, 28; Hallward, *Badiou,* 51; see Brassier's contribution to *Speculative Realism* (*Collapse* III), 319-21. Hereafter *SRB*.

[761] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 91.

[762] Alain Badiou, "Truth," 136.

[763] Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 98.

> "Hope is…the subjectivity of a victorious fidelity, fidelity to fidelity, and not the representation of its future outcome…[H]ope has nothing to do with the future. It is a figure of the present subject, who is affected in return by the universality for which he works."[764]

But is the knot of hope, potentiality and persistence limited to subjective activity, and, if not, how might it manifest from the perspective of entities? It is to this possibility that minimalism addresses itself. It does this both through those entities which are produced – the objects predicated upon the persistence of subjective activity – and those entities which exceed any such division – absolute entities or objects, in other words. If it is possible to conceive within a single paradigm, Badiou's assertion that persistence in itself ("fidelity to fidelity") propels subjectal activity together with the claim that persistence, insofar as it exceeds any particular contingency, names the weave of entities within the Real, this paradigm must be one in which an object counts fully as a subject, but without being a subject. Such a situation is, finally, an extension of the limits of existence itself.

If minimalism proves exemplary in this regard, it reveals itself, above any stylistic peculiarity, as a significant, if oblique, meditation on the nature of ontology. What persists in the exemplary minimalist work is nothing other than persistence itself – the persistence which traverses both subject in its relation to incompletion (a position which will be clarified below), and entities insofar as they exist *qua* the Real. In this light, the persistence of minimalism is a self-reflexive instantiation of pure persistence; and since persistence – as in the case of Badiou's formulation of hope – is not referential or predicative as such, but the innermost property of the Real, we are once again brought to the *autotelic* character of minimalism, and of its ontological status. The persistence of minimalism presents the process of producing objects without end – end, both in the sense of its being without a necessary final predicate, as well as its being without an externally directed purpose.

The mere facticity of persistence – *that* an entity persists – is sufficient to produce in relation to the persistent entity, a theory of the universal. As Badiou notes, "[t]hought becomes universal only by addressing itself to all others."[765] Regardless of whether we take as the point of departure singularity or multiplicity, discrete entities or undifferentiated chaos, this is precisely the force that must persist if the One is to be universal: it must be One for all.[766] Attempts to define the One advance only spasmodically,

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[764] Ibid., 95-7.

[765] Ibid., 109.

[766] This is "the determination of a subject-of-truth who indistinguishes the One and the 'for all'" (ibid., 108), which Critchley refers to as Badiou's *situated universality* (Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 42). Affirming this view,

if at all. We are today no more fundamentally certain of its ontological or conceptual actuality than was Parmenides, its first great theorist, for whom "[t]he multitude of sensible things a[re] mere illusion. The only true being is 'the One,' which is infinite and indivisible."[767] In the fragmentary remnant of Parmenides' philosophical poem, the interrelation of modality and being is firmly established: "What routes of inquiry alone are there for thinking:/ The one – that [*it*] *is*, and that [*it*] *cannot not be*/…The other – that [*it*] *is not* and that [*it*] *needs must not be*."[768] The prescription is vast: within the scope of the One lie both the cosmos and existence. Ontology without some consideration of the One – whether in affirmation of contradiction – proves prohibitively difficult. We habitually stumble on the uneven ground left from the effort of sealing the rift between the One in itself, and our attempts to stabilize it through thought. We are returned to a decision, the very axiom from which Parmenides draws the force of his poem: "the decision about these matters, depends on this:/ *Is* [*it*] *or is* [*it*] not? but it has been decided, as is necessary/ To let go the one as unthinkable, unnameable…/but to allow the others, so that it is, and is true."[769] "Thus [the One] must either be completely or not at all."[770]

c) One and Multiple

The paradoxes which attend the exposition of this fundamental ontological axiom – that the One is, or it is not – are nowhere elaborated with greater tenacity or insight than in Plato's *Parmenides*. By focusing on the minute detail of dialectic method, the work relentlessly interrogates the difficulties in establishing the essential ground of metaphysics. Being – which to be must itself be oriented towards consistency – reveals a great deal of instability in response to our attempts to impose upon it stability, either through thought or procedure, as form or as entity. We encounter a constant vacillation between the One and the Multiple in attempting to think either independently, or relatively. Here we might recall that the young Socrates of this dialogue, who, adhering to a still immature theory of forms, sets as the discursive target nothing other than a proof that the One and Multiple are in themselves mutually implicative: "if he should demonstrate... what one is, to be many, or conversely, the many to be one – at this I'll be astonished."[771]

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albeit from the eclectic but also mathematically informed perspective of Michel Serres, we might consider, in the terms of Harari and Bell, that "universality and the global can only be conceived in a mode that recognizes the predominance of regionality and the local" (Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell, "Introduction: Journal àplusieurs voies," *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* , by Michel Serres (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), xiv).
[767] Russell, *History*, 55.
[768] Parmenides, *Fragments*, 55.
[769] Ibid., 67.
[770] Ibid., 65.
[771] Plato, "Parmenides," trans. Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan, *Plato Complete Works*, 129b/363.

This doubt rests on an assertion of form as discrete for each entity, as somehow not subject to the inconsistencies of being. Form allows us to conceptualize the One as part of the multiple, totality of being, and the Multiple as part of the One, but it also presents a strict injunction against the outright confusion of these. We are barred from the One *as* Multiple, and from the Multiple *as* One.[772]

The difficult recognition that Parmenides requires of the young Socrates, and indeed of the reader, is that the effective power of either form or entity, over one another or in interrelation, is finally a "power in relation to themselves"[773] – a *meta*-relation. The aspect of form which is itself involved in formation, occurs not through the power of the entities that appeal to a certain form, so not by a mere metaphysical extension of form. Rather it takes place through an essential self-relation: of form to itself, and of entities to themselves. This is a power external to the subject of knowledge or any formal instantiation this might take. We can, therefore, not simply rely on a transcendental authorization of being by form. The One and the Multiple – examined both self-reflexively and in relation to one another – call our attention to the possibility that fundamental contradiction materializes whenever the essentially quantitative aspects of being such as totality, unity, and multiplicity are taken as the objects of ontological scrutiny.

This problem Plato addresses in *Parmenides* through eight central hypotheses, each of which ends in an irresolvable paradox concerning the nature of the One, and so, too, of Being. The first hypothesis – if the One is, it is not Many[774] – exposes, through a process of negative definition, the oblique conditions for understanding the One as absolute. Each of its eight constitutive theorems demonstrates an area of being in which the One cannot participate: part and whole, schema or shape, location, motion and rest, like and unlike, equal and unequal, time.[775] Accepting the One as effectively barred from participatory being, compels us to speculate as to the condition under which the One could be, and yet not participate in existence. This ontological paradox must be understood as an extension of the first hypothesis, an

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[772] See Hallward, "Introduction," 3-4.

[773] Plato, *Parmenides*, 134d/369.

[774] Ibid., 137c-142a/371-376. Brumbaugh's work is cited to provide alternate translations and coordinating exposition and discussion of the hypotheses and theorems of *Parmenides* (Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato on the One: The Hypotheses in the Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961), 86-90).

[775] The following are the eight theorems of the first hypothesis (Plato *Parmenides*, 372-6; paragraph references in parenthesis: i) the One is neither whole nor has parts, and is unlimited (137c-e); ii) the One is without schema or shape (137e-138a); iii) The One is without location, in nothing and nowhere, neither contained nor self-contained (138a-138b); iv) One is neither in rest nor in motion (138b-139b); v) the One cannot be the same as another thing or itself, nor can the One be different from itself or another thing (138b-139e); vi) the One cannot be like or unlike itself or the others (139e-140b); vii) the One cannot be equal or unequal (140b-140e); viii) the One has no share in time and cannot be *in* time, and so cannot be older or younger (140e-142a). These hypotheses are discussed systematically by Brumbaugh (Brumbaugh, *Hypothesis*, 55-85).

extension necessitated by the comprehensive dialectical method outlined earlier in the dialogue.[776] Philosophical rigour demands that we explore with tenacity both the positive and the negative conditions of a proposition. Here we are asked what it might mean to exist outside of existence: if the One cannot exist within ordinary being, then we are called to consider under what conditions it might exist as an extraordinary being by tracing from the perspective of Being,[777] those same theorems exposed in the first hypothesis from the perspective of the One.[778]

Here, temporality emerges as central to the interrogation of metaphysics offered in *Parmenides*. The dialectic exposition of the One confers a contractory coherency on the apprehension of time as inconsistent within Being. Yet, if the whole of Being were pure inconsistency, existence would be impossible. The unstable relation of the One to presence and futurity, to being and to becoming, is stabilized only through the proposition of the supplement to the second hypothesis, the Eudoxian Cut.[779] This Plato characterizes as an *instant*, a moment of transaction which allows us to account for continuity in an existential situation which is marked simultaneously by disjunction and transformation. The One, which in its Being appears to be entirely contradictory, and yet on another level perfectly operative, can only persist if an a-temporal *instant* is offered as an ontological hinge of sorts. The One is in some instants part of Being and in others not part of Being; at some instants in time and at others out of time; at some instants stable, and at others in flux.

Hallward offers an admirable précis of Badiou's reconsideration of the dialectic of the Multiple and the One:

> [B]eing[780] can be thought either in terms of the [M]ultiple or the [O]ne...[T]he only coherent conception of Being as One ultimately depends on some instance of the One either as transcendental limit (a One *beyond* being, or God) or as all-inclusive immanence (a cosmos or Nature)...[M]odernity and in particular modern science have demonstrated that...the idea of a One-All is incoherent...[T]herefore if Being can be thought at

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[776] Plato, *Parmenides*, 136 a-c/370-1.

[777] To recall, the upper-case Being is used to designate an ontological field, while the lower-case *b*eing indicates an existential field.

[778] The following are the theorems of the second hypothesis (ibid., 376-87): i) If the One *is* , it is part and whole, so indicates both the oneness of being and that it is multiple and infinite (142b-145a); ii) as whole and part it both has, and does not have, a schema or shape, a beginning middle and end (145a-b); iii) the One is both in itself, and in the others (145b-e); iv) the One is both in motion and at rest (145e-146a); v) the One is both the same as itself and different from itself (146b-147b); vi) the One is both like and unlike to itself (147c149d); vii) the One is both equal and unequal to itself and to the others (149d-151e); viii) the One has an unstable but persistent relation to time, since it is and becomes both older and younger than itself and the others, and it is and becomes neither older nor younger than itself and the others (151e-155e). See Brumbaugh, *Hypothesis*, 86-145.

[779] Plato, *Parmenides*, 155e - 157b/387-9. See Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 146-150.

[780] I have preferred upper-case lettering for several terms here for the sake of consistency.

all, it must be thought as multiple rather than One...[O]nly modern mathematics can think multiplicity without any constituent reference to unity. Why? Because the theoretical foundations of mathematics ensure that any unification, and consideration of something as one thing, will be thought as the *result* of an operation, the operation that treats or counts something as one; by the same token, these foundations oblige us to presume that whatever was thus counted, or unified, is itself not-[O]ne (i.e. [M]ultiple).[781]

In this light we come to understand that genuine novelty is not merely the product of a subtraction from pure multiplicity. Such is the mechanics for ordinary existence. On the other hand, any systematic proposition of novelty must at some point come to terms with the idea of an instant, a point of sudden change. In a more contemporary expression, but one still remarkably faithful to Plato, Alain Badiou proposes this fundamentally unstable and aleatory point as an event: "There certainly is novelty in the event's upsurge, but this novelty is always evanescent."[782] The present work is invested in the event and the instant to the extent that these account for the sudden emergence of novelty and, so, constitute the necessary condition for the materialization and elaboration of novelty in its aesthetic register. Our contention is that minimalism illustrates the strain between the One and the Multiple exemplified at the heart of the emergence of Real entities. Its most significant works invariably amplify the manner in which matter is shaped as art, the force of its aesthetic effect and of its phenomenological presence. Upon the tense field between substance, concept and effect, minimalism recalls, through the instantiation of its objects, the occurrence of relative novelty itself – indeterminate intermediary of the One and Multiple.

Rather, what interests us here is the mode of novelty with which the minimalist object confronts us, and which presents the minimal field upon which objectal taking-place and persistence can be discerned – a field which problematizes the proximity of the object to the event, and the mirage of the event within a material world of real entities. The interposition of the instant or occurrence establishes the necessary ontological condition upon which the claim that the One both is and is not, is not mere impossibility. The six hypotheses which follow the proposition of the instant in *Parmenides* elaborate an essential ground upon which the One both is and is not. Indeed the history of metaphysics is inscribed within this problem. It begins with the Aristotelian view that "the most distinctive mark of substance appears to be that, while remaining numerically one and the same, it is capable of admitting contradictory possibilities,"[783] and

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[781] Hallward, "Introduction," 3-4.

[782] Bruno Bosteels and Alain Badiou, "Can Change Be Thought: A Dialogue with Alain Badiou," *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005), 253.

[783] Nicholas Jolley, "Leibniz: truth, knowledge and metaphysics," *Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. IV: The Renaissance and Seventeenth Century Rationalism*, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 354.

manifests subsequently with particular force in Leibniz's exposition of the necessary and sufficient conditions for existence. Briefly phrased, Leibniz insists on the following: that every entity must necessarily exist monadically, as an entity which is intrinsically *possible* within a possible world; that when such entities together comprise a possible world, they are said to be *compossible*; a possible world, which "might be defined as a maximum set of compossible individuals"[784] is finally incompossible with any other possible world, which accounts for the singular existential charge which resides within the actual world.[785] Accordingly, an entity cannot be impossible in itself or incompossible with other entities in an actual world.

Attempting to unravel the difficult ontological configuration within which the One and the Multiple are compossible, the third and seventh hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* address themselves directly to the Multiple. The third – what is not-One is Multiple – is the direct compliment to the One as it is exposed in the first hypothesis.[786] Turning to questions of appearance over pure Being in itself, Plato's seventh hypothesis probes the properties of the Multiple from the perspective of identity, of what is discernibly other to the One. Its principal insight is that if a simplistic atomic view of the world is implausible[787] – if the One is not – then the others, which are not One, must ultimately subscribe to pure multiplicity. However, for the Multiple to appear at all, it must in some sense be held as One, and, consequently, both are at once limited and infinite.[788]

In both hypotheses, the Multiple reveals Being as intimately connected to the interrogation of belonging. Examined closely, the third hypothesis sets up the quantitative conditions under which belonging is foundational to the shape of existence.[789] Since the Multiple is other than the One, it must also consist of parts (in relation to the whole). Yet a part is not a part of many things – not a part of itself – but a part of a whole.[790] In terms of existence, the Multiple thus makes possible the One without being One; it is

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[784] Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 171. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 171-2; Norman Madarasz, Introduction, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, by Alain Badiou. Trans. and Ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State U of New York P, 1999), 19-20. Hereafter *MP*.

[785] Ibid., 171-2; G.H.R. Parkinson, "Philosophy and Logic," *Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. Nicholas Jolley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 212-6.

[786] If in the first hypothesis, One is understood as not-many (not Multiple), in the third hypothesis not-One is equated with many (Multiple). Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 151. See ibid., 151-158; Plato, *Parmenides*, 157b-159b/389-90.

[787] Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 180.

[788] Ibid., 180-1; Plato, *Parmenides*, 164b-165e/395-6.

[789] *BE*, 44-8; Hallward, "Introduction," 14-5; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 22, 24-5. Hereafter *HS*.

[790] Plato, *Parmenides*, 157c-e/389.

Multiple without forcing into existence pure Multiplicity which would bring with it essential inconsistency. Do we not discover here precisely the schema by which Alain Badiou distinguishes being – pure multiplicity – from existence, or multiplicity which is counted-as-One?[791] Also, does this not prefigure that fundamental ontological ground of mathematical or quantitative relation and identity which is formalized in the set theoretical terms of the Axiom of Foundation – "[t]hat in every multiple, there is at least one element that 'founds' this multiple, in the following sense: there is an element that has no element in common with the initial multiple?"[792]

Upon this distinction, the contradictory belonging of the seventh hypothesis veers away from impossibility and towards compossibility: the One and the Multiple both do and do not belong to the infinite. Recalling that the hypothesis is specific in its dismissal of the atomic, we find that what counts as One, multiple existence which nonetheless appears contingently unified, is apparently opposed to the pure Multiplicity of being *qua* being. However, what is arguably most significant here is that neither the One nor the Multiple exhausts the other. A model of compossibility emerges within the dynamic of this hypothesis: existence involves the appearance of entities within a specific world; entities – which are numerous and Multiple – are somehow counted as One. Being and existence, ontology and appearance, are actually predicated on the pre-existence of pure multiplicity as the fabric of the Real.

Between positing the existence of the One in all things[793] – the fourth hypothesis – and the affirmation in the seventh that for entities to arise or to appear in existence, the Multiple (when the One is not, or when the not-One is) must be counted as One, Plato examines more fully the properly negative aspects of the One. Demonstrating that the One is not, and has no part of existence, is the task of the fifth hypothesis.[794] Yet, even in non-Being, the One proves particularly resilient. It is only in relation to things that exist that the One can be said to inexist, and if this is the case, then the One retains a residual relation to existent entities, and must be treated as inextricable from being and becoming, in terms of the realization of existents as well as pure forces of generation. The sixth hypothesis presses beyond the question of relation, to the ontologically prohibitive proposition that the One has no state in Being whatsoever.[795] This nihilistic deepening of the fifth hypothesis is also a negative response to the question central to the second

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[791] Hallward, "Introduction," 4.
[792] *TW*, 102; *BE*, 500. According to Badiou, the axiom "indicates an essential structure of the theory of being,(ibid., 187).
[793] Plato, *Parmenides*, 159b-160b/390-391; Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 159-64.
[794] Ibid., 165-75; Plato, *Parmenides*, 160b-163b/391-4.
[795] Ibid., 163b-164b/394-5; Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 176-9.

hypothesis – can the One be without participating in being. Here existence is precisely what is barred from the One, in order to necessitate a reclamation of the Multiple and of being in the seventh hypothesis.

"[I]f One is not, nothing is."[796] Parmenides and Socrates, the interlocutors of the dialogue, concur on this point, yet since the terms in question have been problematized so thoroughly throughout the dialogue, it is no surprise that the final hypothesis[797] offers no clear resolution. "Whether one is or is not, it and the other both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear in all things, in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other."[798] Under the pressure of the dialectic method, the fantasy of unity – that which might be mistaken for an unambiguous foundation of the Real capable of anchoring thought and being to universality – is exposed as a form of metaphysical idealism which simply cannot stand up to its own logical demands. Yet, if the One is not, no simple solution is discovered by blindly asserting the Multiple in its place. For, as Plato understands, fixing the one generates a passage to the other: the One becomes Multiple; the Multiple appears as One. We are returned to the original claim of Parmenides, if the One is, it is not Multiple, only now with a considerably richer and more paradoxical understanding: just as pure being is Multiple, the moment it arises in thought or material, it exists, and, in existence, the multiple comes to be held as One. This situation – what counts as one, in the terms of Alain Badiou, which we shall nominate more simply as the Count for the present purposes – reminds us of the strategic aspect of unification, and that existence can only be reduced absolutely to the One at the greatest peril. Henceforth, a significant part of any critical vocation becomes the patient exposition of the situations in which, despite the absence of the One as the absolute condition of being, the force of unification is still in effect in existence.

Admittedly, it would be deeply naïve to presume that it is only art that bears the responsibility for exemplifying this difficult pull between unity and multiplicity. Nonetheless, the traditional concerns of the aesthetic sphere – the *poietic* force of generation, the immanence of aesthetic substance, mimesis and the Real, the communication of meaning – frequently rehearse this fundamental metaphysical distinction with particular clarity. Exemplary amongst such instances is the poem, *[This work has been and continues to be refined since 1969]*, by Robert Barry:

> It is whole, determined, sufficient, individual, known, complete, revealed, accessible, manifest, effected, effectual, directed, dependent, distinct, planned, controlled, unified, delineated, isolated, confined,

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[796] Plato, *Parmenides*, 166c/397.
[797] Ibid., 165e-166c/396-7; Brumbaugh, *Hypotheses*, 185-6.
[798] Plato, *Parmenides*, 166c/397.

confirmed, systematic, established, predictable, explainable, apprehendable, noticeable, evident, understandable, allowable, natural, harmonious, particular, varied, interpretable, discovered, persistent, diverse, composed, orderly, flexible, divisible, extendible, influential, public, reasoned, repeatable, comprehendable, impractical, findable, actual, interrelated, active, describable, situated, recognizable, analysable, limited, avoidable, sustained, changeable, defined, provable, consistent, durable, realized, organized, unique, complex, specific, established, rational, regulated, revealed, conditioned, uniform, solitary, given, improvable, involved, maintained, particular, coherent, arranged, restricted, and presented.[799]

This poem pulls between minimalism and conceptualism,[800] simplicity and complexity, the One and the Multiple. Its form is thoroughly unremarkable, austere yet in no sense monolithic, presenting an inventory of qualifiers. These seem empty in the sense that by prescribing the same work that they claim to describe, impossibly asserting the latter even prior to effecting the former, these qualifiers remain devoid of any immediate external reference. Yet, the poem is simultaneously pregnant with significance, as its contained, non-referential minimalism is countered symmetrically by the expansive associations that arise in following the implications of the auto-generative adjectives which constitute the poem. Minimalism and conceptualism appear in this case to operate contrapuntally, located in an identical medium, but allowing for significantly different interpretive rules to be called into play.

The claim explicit in the title of the poem – that "this work has been and continues to be refined" – presents a significant point of confluence for the divergent trajectories of the work, the poet and the reader. This moment of literary presentation, when the poem affirms its own existence as One, a singular and unified entity ("this work"), is necessarily coextensive with the many contingencies of an ongoing process of literary becoming ("has been and continues"), refinable, incomplete and multiple. As such, the poem is a conceptual place-holder for the deep paradoxes which characterize the creative process in general: the incompletion which inhabits many works at the generative and interpretive levels; the conflict between the finite and infinite parts of the work; an understanding that generative novelty also negates the so-called totality of that which pre-exists it.[801]

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[799]Robert Barry, *[This work has and continues to be refined since 1969].* 1971, 20 November 2011 <http://www.ubu.com/concept/ barry_this.html>.

[800] In conceptual poetry the central concept is both a stabilizing and a dynamic force. It provides stability inasmuch as it constitutes the principal content of the poem, while it is dynamic in that in that this conceptual content is given to numerous trajectories of significance and meaning. Thus, we discover in the conceptual poem a strange materialism: material, for whether by thought or form, the work is granted sufficient stability to become an object of scrutiny; strange, for this stability is definitively on the move – contingent, and full of potential interpretations, frequently open, and yet, in another sense, essentially empty.

[801]The dynamic of novelty announces itself concurrently in a number of ways, from Eliot's theory of historical revisionism (T.S. Eliot, "Traditional and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1999), 13-22), through to theories of violent rupture, forwarded by Futurists and Dadaists which are discussed subsequently.

Simply read from start to finish, with a minimum of semantic reflection, the reader might well be tempted to mistake the deeply disjunctive syntax at the heart of the poem for a superficial but nonetheless binding unity. We are enjoined to affirm that the poem is, as its initial first constituent qualifiers claim, an exemplification of the One: "It is whole, determined, sufficient, individual, known, complete." As the work progresses, a number of descriptors appear to offer themselves in reaffirmation of the One in a work which is "unified…isolated…harmonious…situated…limited…specific…uniform…particular... restricted."[802] Yet, if the poem instantiates the One, how might we account for the manner in which the Multiple reasserts itself in the work's being "dependent…varied…diverse…divisible…repeatable… complex…improvable, involved… arranged?" To address this apparent contradiction, it is worth recalling in full the concluding hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*: "whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear in all things, in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other."[803]

Upon closer inspection, the poem offers an acute testament to the instability and indeterminacy which rapidly overshadow any attempt to claim the absolute ascendency of either the One or the Multiple. Indeed, the reader is invited to recognize numerous possible arrangements or syntaxes from within this parataxis. For Badiou, "the upshot of the aporias in the *Parmenides*...[reveal that] it is pointless to try to deduce the existence (or non-existence) of the One: it is necessary to decide, and then assume the consequences."[804] It is possible to discern this axiomatic imperative in the manner in which Barry's poem marks the conditions of its intelligibility as its primary concern, rather than the consolidation of either the Multiple or the One, by aligning "known…revealed…manifest…apprehendable, noticeable, evident…recognizable…realized… revealed… given… presented." Alternately, we might construct a syntax which accentuates the dynamic role of critical thought in the conceptual stabilization of a poem unapologetically devoid of durable referential content: "accessible…explainable…understandable… interpretable …describable…provable." Moreover, there is sufficient evidence here that the poem appeals to an immanent realism of the type endorsed in the present work, since it is "sufficient…known…revealed…persistent…actual…sustained…consistent." Indeed, what is the counterpoint exposed in the poem between immanent revelation (the adjective "revealed" appears twice, close to the beginning) and the will to "discover" through patient, critical exposition? What balance is

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[802] This is simply to select a few amongst many possible examples.
[803] Plato, *Parmenides*, 166c/397.
[804] Alain Badiou, "Platonism and Mathematical Ontology," *TW*, 60 (51-60).

struck between the poem as the stable manifestation of a transcendental generative, indeed *poietic*, force, and the poem as the indefinite progression of a multiplicity of contingent concepts?

That no stable answer to these questions is forthcoming – that Barry's poem reflects the same undecidability between, and compossibility of, the Multiple and the One as is evident in Plato's *Parmenides* – emphasizes the manner in which minimalist and conceptual poetry attempt indirectly to indicate the undecidable part of thought and being which conditions both *poietic* creation and metaphysical possibility. The poem presents the charged generative situation in which the cumulative operation of the work – the *poietic* force which counts its constituents, its revisions and its indefinite parameters as One – is unified without being a totality, since the poem clearly prescribes its constitutive incompletion, its continuing refinement, its transposition or transumption from the realm of language to that of thought, concept and imagination.

If it is pertinent here to recall that the minimalist aesthetic is popularly translated by Mies van der Rohe's Bauhaus dictum – *less is more*[805] – it is also important to recall Perreault's claim, cited above, that what is minimal about minimalism is its means rather than its end[806] – that there "is nothing minimal about the 'art' (craftsmanship, inspiration, or aesthetic stimulation) in Minimal art. If anything, in the best works being done, it is maximal."[807] In this light, we might contend that Barry's poem presents the minimal conditions which need to be in place for a work to persist, to be coherent and intelligible, while still offering a remarkable insight to the generative *plenum* of *poietic* force.

Thus, although constitutively incomplete, the work nonetheless generates a minimalist recognition of what might constitute the Real. Such a realism is knowable here only through an atopia, a *poietic* non-space within which are incorporated the generative consonances and dissonances which arise between inspiration, concept, language, syntax, context and the improvisatory character of interpretation. The absolute independence and consequent indifference of the Real in no sense reduces the potential for difference, in much the same way as the One cannot finally reduce the Multiple. We discover unfolding at the heart of the poem, a startling example of the quantification of quality which marks the best minimalism. Each possible arrangement of the numerous constituent qualifiers of the work presents an instance of the Multiple being counted-as-One.

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[805] See page 38 of the present work. Ad Reinhardt, "Writings," *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), 167-8.
[806] Perreault, "Minimal Abstract," 260.
[807] Ibid.

Minimalism and conceptualism intersect here, not merely in the way in which minimal means are brought to maximum effect, but also in the implicit focus of the paratactic force at work in the poem upon unity and *Gestalt*. Of similar significance are the *unitary forms* pursued by Robert Morris in his construction of "simple regular and irregular polyhedrons"[808] (Figure 54)[809] which effect a holism that is maximally engaged with both the conceptual and perceptual affirmation of objecthood in all three planes.[810] Morris' exploration of this form of *Gestalt* is exemplary of minimalism's concern with the presentation of aesthetic unity, the passage of self-reference to aesthetic immanence, and the parenthesis of relations external to the work itself.
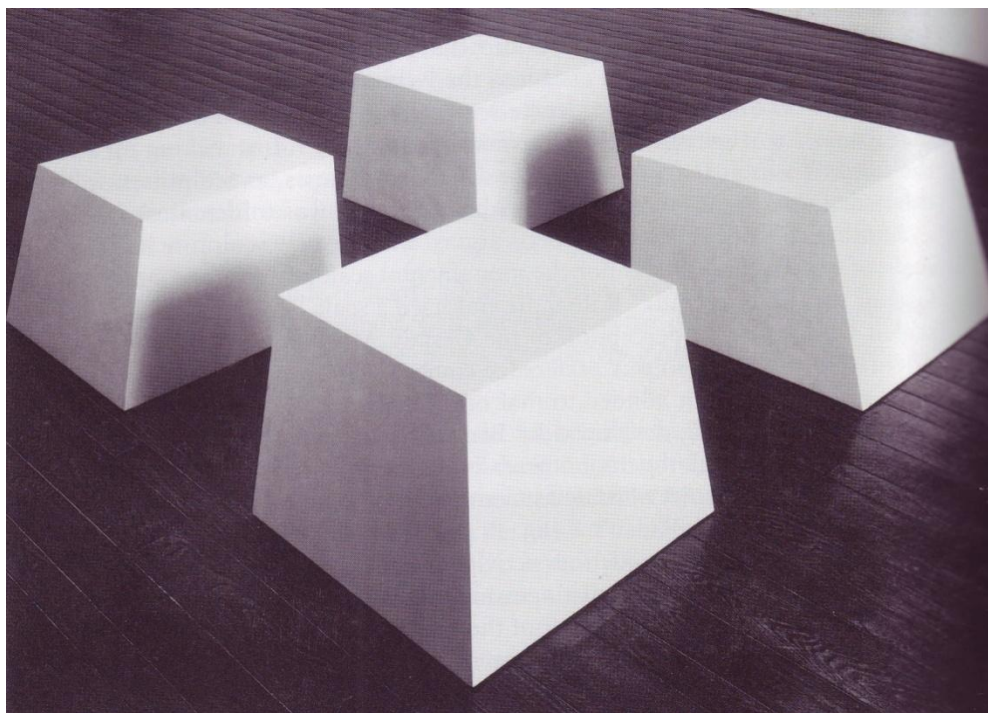
Figure 54: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Battered Cubes)***, 1966.**

Such works call to mind minimalist theories of nonreferentiality and nonrelationality.[811] Ad Reinhardt, for instance, embraced a radical monadism, a rejectionist dogma of art's ontological singularity which is often nihilistic or apocalyptic in its tone: "Art-as-Art is a concentration on Art's essential nature. The nature of art has not to do with the nature of perception or with the nature of light or with the nature of

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[808] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," *MA*, 228 (222-35).
[809] Robert Morris, *Untitled (Battered Cubes)*, 1966. Originally exhibited Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.
[810] Ibid., 225-6.
[811] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 41-58.

space or with the nature of time or with the nature of mankind or with the nature of society."[812] This is nowhere more visible than in Reinhardt's most austere black canvases which, instantiating the minimalist logic of containment or convergence, exemplify the manner in which exclusion and restriction at once effect a *poietic* transumption, or the constitution in an atopian space of what is deconstituted in representational terms (Figures 55 and 56).[813]
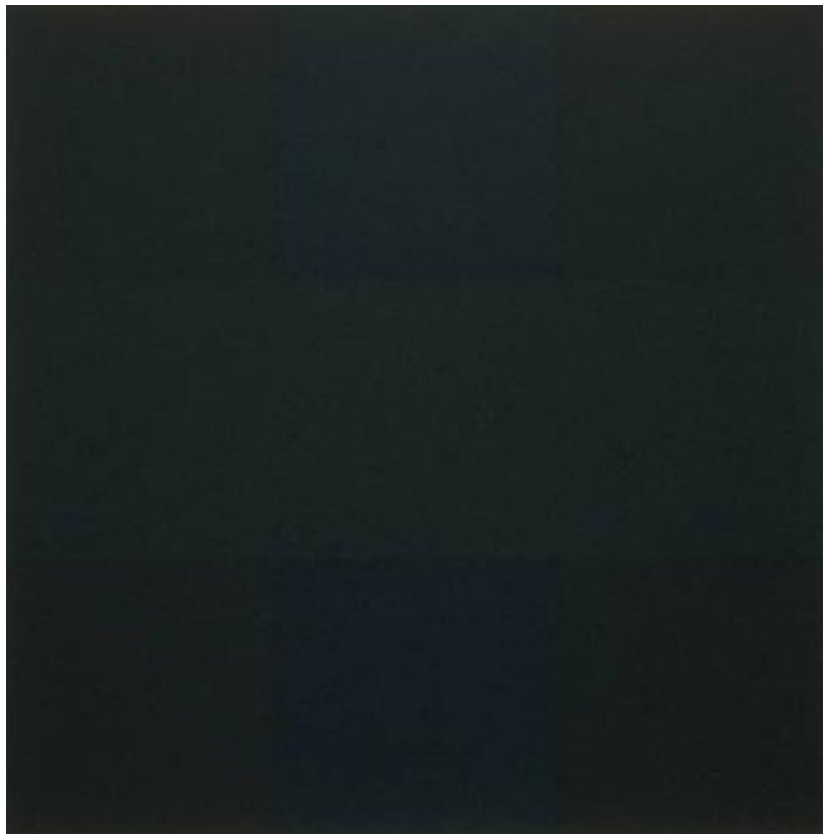
Figure 55: Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5***, 1962.**

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[812] Reinhardt, *Writings*, 173.

[813] Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5*, 1962. Tate Modern, London. I reproduce the same painting here with different balances of brightness and contrast in order to approximate the manner in which Reinhardt's initially undifferentiated black canvases reveal unexpected depths and textures depending on the duration and manner of one's exposure to the work.
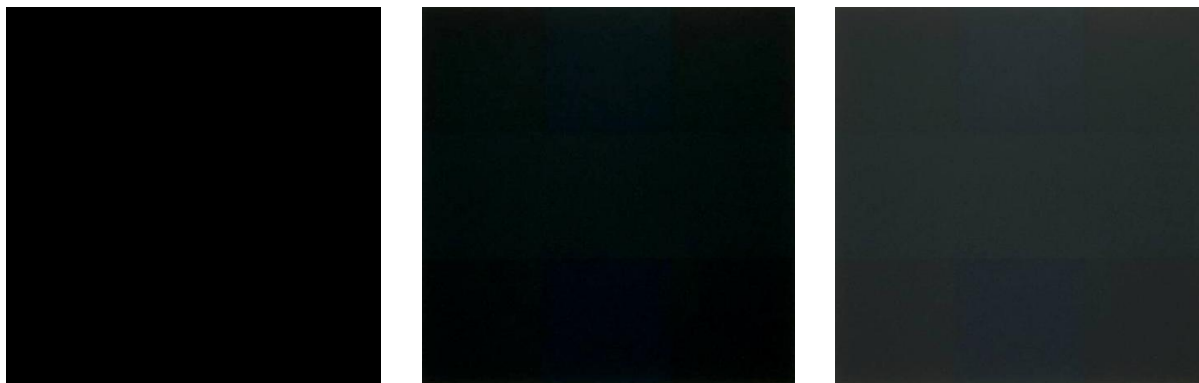
Figure 56: Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5***, 1962; three different exposures of contrast and brightness juxtaposed.**

By contrast, Michael Fried proposes *deductive structures* by which "[works] demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge – as having been 'deduced' from it,"[814] such as is the case in many of Stella's shaped works (Figure 57).[815]

Figure 57: Frank Stella, *Empress of India***, 1965.**

Refusing any engagement with the One or the Multiple, Reinhardt's monochromatic work exemplifies the manner in which minimalist works nonetheless count the Multiple as One by instantiating a monadic but rejective autonomy. In the case of Stella's shaped work, it is possible to deduce the One from the whole by the potent invocation of an aesthetic *Gestalt*. Several of Stella's *Black Paintings* address the relation of part and whole quite differently, however. Painted on regular, rectangular canvases, these works simultaneously intimate part and whole. The manner in which the chevrons of *Die Fahne Hoch!* (Figure

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[814] Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1998) 233.
[815] Frank Stella, *Empress of India*, 1965. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

58)[816] point to centre of the canvas unifies the work, offering it as a singularity or a whole, yet it is clear that the points at which such inward movement might converge (four large rectangles), while lying on the same plane as the work, lie beyond the canvas. In this case, the predication of the One clearly occurs elsewhere, and the work functions as its metonymic equivalent – the analogical echo of the operation by which multiplicity in existence might yet count-as-One.
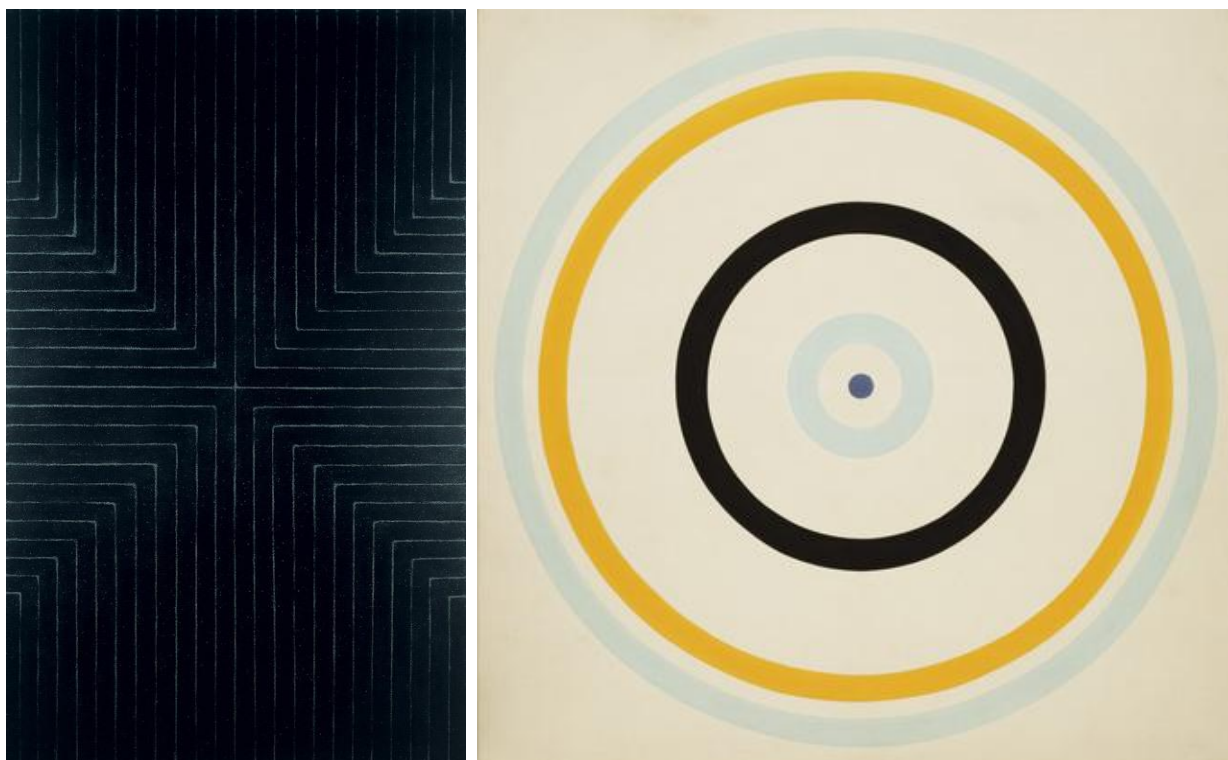
Figure 58: Frank Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959.

Figure 59: Kenneth Noland, *Turnsole*, 1961.

A more obvious visual analogy of the link between concentricity and unity emerges in considering the circular works of Kenneth Noland (Figure 59).[817] The centre of the canvas – the node in relation to which both the expanding concentric series unfolds, as well as the target upon which visual attention is finally focused – functions as a quasi-original generative point, exemplifying what I subsequently argue is one of minimalism's principal modalities – *containment*. In each such cases of containment – Barry's poem, Morris' unitary structures, Reinhardt's monochromes and Noland's centred deductions – the minimalist work attests to the irreducible multiplicity of Being, rendering maximally transparent that it is quantity

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[816] Frank Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[817] Kenneth Noland, *Turnsole*, 1961. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

which is at the heart of ontology, albeit its aesthetic instantiation will always be an exploration of the various techniques by which the Multiple comes to be counted-as-One.

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8. THE COUNT

a) The subtraction of novelty

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary at this point to rehearse the fundamental tenets of Badiou's ontology. Badiou argues that being *qua* being, pure ontology, is irreducibly multiple.[818] However, he also recognizes that the history of philosophy and thought is scarred by the misapprehension that Being can be reduced to unity or the One: the contention that the One is, and all that is, is One.[819] The Parmenidean thrust of philosophy, although subverted with particular force by transcendental philosophy, is never truly exceeded. In this respect, Badiou instigates a major ontological revolution when he offers a recoupment of Platonic thought[820] within an ontology of the multiple,[821] claiming through the conjunction of mathematical and philosophical proof that the One is not, and that pure being is both thinkable and obliquely presentable in terms of pure multiplicity.[822] But if everything is multiple, how is it that things exist in any unified or substantive form, no matter how contingent this form may be? To account for this Badiou distinguishes between consistent and inconsistent multiplicity, or otherwise, structured and unstructured multiplicity.[823] He claims that those things which can be said to belong to being *qua* existence, which exist, have consistency.[824] Such consistency is presented in being as contingent unity or a there-is-Oneness, even though it does not exhaust or reduce multiplicity.[825] The act of presentation is therefore dependent on multiplicity being counted-as-One, which, for obvious reasons, Badiou refers to as

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[818] *BE*, 23.

[819] Badiou reminds us of "the stubbornness of the[...] residues of the One's empire" (*MP*, 57). See ibid., 103-4; *NN*, 7-8, 10-1, 14. "[O]ntology has built the portico of its ruined temple out of the following experience: what *presents* itself is essentially multiple; *what* presents itself is essentially one" (*BE*, 23).

[820] It is, after all, Plato's version of Parmenides that furnishes our knowledge of the One.

[821] *BE*, 23-4, 31, 36-7; Badiou, "Platonism," 60; Norris, *Badiou*, 39.

[822] *BE*, 40-1, 44-5, 48. See Hallward, "Introduction," 3-4.

[823] *BE*, 25, 28.

[824] Hallward, *Badiou*, 90.

[825] *BE*, 24, 29.

the count-as-One, or, the Count.[826] However, as the Count does not eliminate multiplicity from presentation, there necessarily remains some uncounted, inconsistent part – the *void* – in any presentation or existential situation.[827] As the unpresentable part of every presentation, the empty set,[828] the void is distributed everywhere.[829] It is precisely that errant foundational element which is a non-element, subtracted from every Count, but by this very subtraction, implicit in the Count itself.[830] By a sort of spectral presence, the void is thus *unpresented* in every Count.[831] Consequently, for the Count as presentation to be guaranteed its consistency, it must be re-presented – literally presented a second time, or counted again.[832] So there are two principal processes in the guarantee of the consistency of existence: presentation, or the Count; and re-presentation, or the count of the Count. To the extent that Badiou asserts that ontology is ultimately thinkable only in terms of structure and structuration,[833] we could say that if presentation or the Count structures, re-presentation or the Count of the Count acts as metastructure.[834] Within these basic conditions, entities appear with varying intensities,[835] are subject to change,[836] and sometimes also disappear, become inconsistent multiples, or enter into non-being (are destroyed).

The crucial demonstrations of such appearance and disappearance take place in what Badiou refers to as the typology of Being, a further distinction within an existential situation in terms of belonging and inclusion. What *belongs* ($\in$)[837] to a situation[838] must also be present in it as an element,[839] while what is included ($\subset$) in a situation is incorporated by the state of situation as a whole, or re-presented. Numerically, elements included always exceed elements which belong,[840] much as the potential of a river

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[826] Ibid., 24-5, 29. The upper-case *C*ount is generally preferred to preserve the distinctness of this ontological operation from other types of counting, since several examples included in the present work require specific reference to the latter which should not be confused with the former.

[827] Ibid., 56.

[828] *MP*, 124.

[829] *BE*, 57.

[830] *BE*, 58, 93.

[831] *BE*, 55. "The void is the name of being – of inconsistency – according to a situation, inasmuch as presentation gives us therein an unpresentable access, thus non-access, to this access, in the mode of what is not-one, or composable of ones; thus what is qualifiable within the situation solely as the errancy of nothing" (ibid., 56).

[832] *BE*, 93-4.

[833] *BE*, 27.

[834] *BE*, 94; Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 102-4.

[835] Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 118-20.

[836] Hallward, "Introduction," 2.

[837] The parenthesized symbols are those used in set theory to indicate belonging and inclusion.

[838] It is important to recall that what is termed a situation here could also be called a set.

[839] *BE*, 96.

[840] Hallward, *Badiou*, 88-9.

to flow its course is not exhausted by the actual passage of water. Equally, we might argue that the potential flow of a river is contingent on the actual presence of water. In a similar manner, inclusion, despite its apparent quantitative superiority, is precisely a variation of belonging.[841] Yet we miss something crucial if, standing in a river at a particular moment, we fail to recognize that the potentiality of its course is matched by the actuality of the water flowing round our bodies – a normal situation in which inclusion and belonging coincide. From these considerations, Badiou extrapolates his tripartite typology of Being: a *normal* situation, in which an entity belongs and is included, is presented and re-presented;[842] an *excrescent* situation, in which an entity is included without belonging, is represented but not presented and thus, in a sense, *imported* to a situation;[843] a *singular* situation, in which an entity belongs but is not included, is presented but not represented – *exported* from a situation by other parts within the situation.[844]

What remains unclear from Badiou's theory of the metastructure is precisely how to define the force which underlies the process of the Count. He is adamant that "[m]etastructure…cannot simply re-count the terms of the situation and re-compose consistent multiplicities, nor can it have pure operation as its operational domain."[845] It is therefore neither fully another presentation nor fully an operation. It is definitely self-reflexive, but since the structure on which this self-reflexivity rests itself is tied to the void, and so has no possible final predicate, it seems almost as though Badiou hands the metastructural operation over to an exponential and infinite reflexivity. Certainly, as with Badiou's entire system, this force is registered axiomatically, and thus in terms of directedness of thought. It is doubtful, however, that this formulation – or that which Badiou offers in relation to the trans-ontological event[846] – satisfactorily unravels such force on its own terms. The present work aims in part to designate this gap between presentation and re-presentation not merely as an operation, but as a force. This force is ontological, to be sure, but merely claiming that it is the force of structuration goes only a little way in exposing it *qua* force. Finally, I will argue that what Badiou terms *metastructure* from the perspective of ontology, and *re-presentation* from the viewpoint of existence, is in fact precisely a para-ontological force which incorporates while recognizing the distinction of Being from existence – a *poietic* exemplarity self-reflexively directed towards its *autopoietic* realization.

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[841] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 103.
[842] *BE*, 99.
[843] Ibid., 99-100
[844] Ibid.
[845] Ibid. 95.
[846] Indeed, the event names such a radical force, but, as it is strictly trans-ontological, it should not be mistaken for the properly ontological force of structuration.

The charge of Badiou's existential system[847] rests upon the possibility of radical beginning and change,[848] heralded by the sudden eruption of aleatory *events*.[849] Such events are *trans-ontological*[850] – "fundamental anomal[ies],"[851] at once singular in their transection of an existential situation, yet drawn from the multiplicity of this same situation[852] – and disrupting ontology itself as the advent of novelty.[853] No event can be predicted or caused,[854] and it disappears almost as soon as it appears.[855] It is, however, "something which happens *for* this world, not *in* this world, but *for* this world…an affirmative split"[856] constituting the conditions within which active configurations of knowledge are defined in retrospective relation to events.[857] In naming an event, we engage in an ongoing process of discerning its consequences,[858] expressing fidelity to,[859] and so defining, the vectors which emerge from an evental site.[860] Thus the valences are generated which retrospectively locate the event to which they attest. Badiou terms these consequences a *truth*,[861] and the manner in which truths take shape, a *subject* of truth.[862]

In this sense, truth relates neither to correspondences nor transcendence,[863] but to the radical potential for an ongoing realignment of existential information.[864] Truth is a generic multiplicity, in the sense that it

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[847] Here it is worth recalling that Badiou insists upon the distinction Being and existence.

[848] Badiou, "The Event as Trans-Being," *TW*, 100-1.

[849] Ibid., 102; *BE*, 191, 198.

[850] Badiou, "Event," 101.

[851] Hallward, *Badiou*, 99.

[852] On the concurrency of singularity and multiplicity, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 68.

[853] Ibid., 68-9; Badiou, "Event," 103.

[854] These are "precarious supplement[s] whose sole strength resides in there being no available predicate[s] capable of subjecting them to knowledge" (Badiou, "Truth," 148). See Norris, *Badiou*, 126.

[855] An event is an "originary disappearance supplementing the situation for the duration of a lightning flash; situated within it only in so far as nothing of it subsists" (Badiou, "Truth," 124).

[856] Alain Badiou, "The Subject of Art," transcribed Lydia Kerr, *The Symptom*, 20 November 2011 <http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/? page_id=1616>.

[857] *BE*, 178; Badiou, "Truth," 125-7.

[858] "As the event arises from chance experience, and disappears just as quickly, it remains only a trace. Intervening upon this trace comprises the notion of naming, which solidifies the Being of the event by marking it as the undecidable void whose background it is…As a process determined by one of the conditions, the event reaches its truth through the determination of a name…Naming is thus the trace of philosophy's intervention upon truths" (*MP*, 21-2).

[859] *MP*, 81; Alain Badiou, "Eight Theses on the Universal," *TW*, 147-8; Hallward, *Badiou*, xxiii.

[860] This site, "on the edge of the void," (*BE*, 175), is the "*minimal* effect of structure which can be conceived; it is such that it belongs to the situation, whilst what belongs to it [the event] does not" (ibid.); See Badiou, "Event," 101; Badiou, "Eight Theses," 147-8.

[861] Emerging from an event, a truth is "a multiple…that the fidelity [to this event] constructs, bit by bit; it is what the fidelity gathers together and produces" (Badiou, *Ethics*, 67-8).

[862] The subject is "a *finite* moment of the generic procedure [of a truth]" (*MP*, 108) – the concrete manifestation of that which is inaugurated by a truth, and continued by an infinite truth.

[863] Badiou, "Truth," 128.

contains no single "predicative trait"[865] which predetermines its content;[866] it is indiscernible from the objective perspective of a situation alone,[867] and must be decided by commitment.[868] Truth is infinite to the extent that its consequences are indefinitely progressive,[869] constitutively undecidable, and yet elicit the potential for infinite affirmation.[870] Situations in which truth appears finite, Badiou calls veridical: "anticipations of...*what will have been if truth attains completion*,"[871] which projection is necessary for the achievement of knowledge. Finally, truth reinvigorates the universal, presenting "an incalculable emergence, rather than a describable structure,"[872] a "universalizing diagonal,"[873] which is constitutively incomplete and open, for all time, and potentially for every entity capable of expressing its fidelity.[874]

Of particular concern to the present purpose is the manner in which art – one of Badiou's four conditions through which subject, truth and event are intertwined[875] – exemplifies the universality of ontological quantity. More specifically still, our attention turns to minimalism for its austere quantitative modelling, which draws equal attention to the *negation* implicit in the disruption of the *status quo* instantiated by artistic novelty,[876] and the *positive* activity of its taking-place. Synthesizing this apparent opposition is an intimate concern of the Count, and minimalists habitually interrogate, on symbolic terms, the difficulties of calculation through the incorporation of numerical and alphabetical sequences, phonemic utterances, lists and series of various kinds. That this symbolism is exemplary of the concrete aspects of the work, and the ontological situation to which these refer, is a key contention. In this light such minimalism attempts no less ambitious a task than to clarify metastructure itself – the Count of the Count, or the procedural interstice between what is presented or counted, and that which is represented or counted again.

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[864] "[I]t is because it is included within the situation in the form of a singular indeterminacy of its concept, and because it is subtracted from the classificatory grasp of the language of the [situation that it]... is a truth of the situation as such, an immanent production of its pure multiple being, a truth of its being *qua* being – as opposed to a knowledge of this or that regional particularity of the situation" (Badiou, "Truth," 127). See Badiou, "Event," 104.

[865] Badiou, "Truth," 123.

[866] Badiou, "Eight Theses," 154; Hallward, *Badiou*, xxiii.

[867] Ibid., xxvii; Badiou, "Truth," 132.

[868] Ibid., 124.

[869] *MP*, 81.

[870] Badiou, "Eight Theses," 149-50.

[871] Badiou, "Truth," 130; see ibid., 130-1.

[872] Badiou, "Eight Theses," 146.

[873] Ibid.,153.

[874] Ibid., 153-4; *MP*, 81.

[875] *MP*, 33-6.

[876] "'Negation,' because if something happens as new, it cannot be reduced to the objectivity of the situation where it happens. So, it is certainly like a negative exception to the regular laws of this objectivity." Alain Badiou, *Destruction, Negation, Subtraction: on Pier Paolo Passolini*, Graduate Seminar, Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, February 6, 2007, 20 November 2011 <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm>.

The potential of aesthetic novelty in relation to the Count rests quite precisely on a further distinction of considerable importance to Badiou's ontology – that of *destructive* from *subtractive* negation. The former offers an eliminative account of novelty which asserts that emergent identity is related to the destruction of an existing state.[877] The predicate of subtraction, by contrast, is *poietic* or productive, since the multiplicity upon which subtraction is performed remains undiminished. Art illustrates this point well:

> All creations, all novelties, are in some sense the affirmative part of a negation…because if a creation is reducible to a negation of the common laws of objectivity, it completely depends on them concerning its identity. So the very essence of a novelty implies negation, but must affirm its identity apart of the negativity of negation.[878]

It is on the basis of a subtractive ontology that Badiou is able to draw out the consequences of his primary ontological axiom: "[w]hat has to be declared is that the [O]ne,[879] which is not, solely exists as *operation*. In other words: there is no [O]ne, only the count-as-One."[880] To state the case in brief: if the One is not, then Being is Multiple. Yet, there is no way in which multiplicity in itself can be presented,[881] which means a subtraction from pure multiplicity must take place in order for Being to be presented. It is this subtraction which we refer to as the Count. It is by such subtraction that we come to distinguish what appears and is presented in existence – that which is subtracted from pure or inconsistent multiplicity, which counts-as-One – from that which is indiscernible or unpresentable in existence – namely ontology itself, which is uncountable, infinite, inconsistent or pure multiplicity.[882] In Hallward's estimation, "Badiou's subtractive conception of multiplicity sets him sharply apart from many of his contemporaries, who…generally seek in some sense to express, intuit, figure or otherwise articulate the multiple."[883]

b) Configuring the Count

Most significant to the present argument is that the discernment of quantity or calculation is often most conspicuous in art which places an emphasis on accumulation. Central to this proposition is the

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[877] Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 56.
[878] Alain Badiou, "Destruction, Negation, Subtraction."
[879] For the sake of consistency, the upper-case *O*ne, count-as-*O*ne, and *C*ount, *M*ultiple and *M*ultiplicity will be preferred.
[880] *BE*, 24.
[881] *BE*, 27.
[882] *BE*, 23-9; Badiou, "Truth," 129.
[883] Hallward, "Introduction," 5.

understanding that mathematical ontology renders infinity both actual and immanent.[884] Such infinity is clarified by transfinite cardinality which reflects a law of identification by numerical substitution, or infinite metonymy, confirming that every set by which unities might be organized contains a potentially infinite number of subsets,[885] so that there are an infinite number of infinities.[886] The Count is not only eminently possible in this light, but an imperative.[887] It is minimalism which the present work claims is most adept at offering an aesthetic configuration of the Count capable of intensifying that which Badiou intends ontologically by the term.

Of the most transparent and significant aesthetic instantiations of the Count are presented in works of minimalism's two seminal composers, Philip Glass and Steve Reich. As discussed above, Glass' *Two Pages* is exemplary with respect to minimalist techniques of additive and subtractive modules, and the work is effectively a series of expansions and contractions predicated on strictly quantitative enumerations. More subtle, but no less subject to a logic of accumulation, is the pulse-pattern technique of Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (Track 14).[888] The strict pulsation constitutes a persistent aural bulk, varied by the subtle addition and subtraction of voices and accompanying dynamic fluctuations which combine to give the music an almost undulating alternation of intensities which owes indubitably to cumulative, quantitative elements of musical substance. Of comparably physical terms, are the numerous serial sculptures of Judd and LeWitt, but particularly interesting for its articulation of an equally conceptual and physical approach to the Count, is Flavin's series of light sculptures, *the nominal three (to William of Ockham)* (Figure 60).[889] This work presents with parsimonious clarity – recalling that such clarity is at the heart of ontological non-complication associated with Ockham, to whom the title refers[890] – a situation in which the ordinal and cardinal logics of enumeration coincide. The ordinal is evident in the sequencing of its components – respectively one, two and three fixtures – while cardinality regards these components, or groups of fixtures, as monads irrespective of number of fixtures in each group, and to this extent they contain both the potential for cardinal substitution and an ordinary quantitative

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[884] Badiou, "Truth," 129.

[885] *BE*, 63, 97. See ibid., 267-75.

[886] *BE*, 146.

[887] *NN*, 1.

[888] Steve Reich, *Music for 18 Musicians*. ECM, 1978.

[889] Dan Flavin, *the nominalist three (to William of Ockham)*, 1964. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

[890] Govan goes as far as to suggest that "[o]ut of Ockham's *nominalism* Flavin crafted his *minimalism*" (Michael Govan, "Irony and Light," *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004), 37).

dimension. The nominalist affirmation of autonomous entities informs Flavin's search for "primary figures"[891] which favour transparency and purity of form and medium over complexity.[892]

Figure 60: Dan Flavin, *the nominalist three (to William of Ockham)***, 1964.**

However, to the extent that Flavin's work effective instantiates a minimalist logic of *distribution*, its concern with monistic containment and order is supplemented by a far more corporeal experience of quantity. For the substance of this work is finally inextricable from its luminescence, and its expansion in every direction emphasizes that any *account* of its phenomenology necessarily incorporates sensory and conceptual experience. Equally concretized by somatic inference is the Count of Glass' "Knee-Play 1"[893] from the opera *Einstein on the Beach* (Track 15).[894] Composed to be performed at high volumes, the thundering bass of the electric organ which opens the work, consists of three notes which outline the entire harmonic of the composition.[895] This sequence, one of the simplest of all harmonic progressions,

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[891] Dan Flavin, qtd. in ibid., 38.
[892] Ibid., 37.
[893] *Knee-play* is the term Glass and Wilson use for the various relatively brief interludes (although the first is a prelude and the final a postlude) which present opportunities for changing the *mise-en-scène*, as well as conceptual and thematic connectors for the different parts of this immense work.
[894] Philip Glass, "Knee-Play 1," *Einstein on the Beach*. Nonesuch, 1993.
[895] This progression is written C: F: vi-V-I.

but with a strong sense of gravity,[896] is interrupted by the utterance of the number "two." Zero and one perhaps implicit, the Count is already underway, although it is stilted, non-sequential and irregular – continued by the recitation of random single-digit numbers by two female voices over the steady thunder of the organ. The arbitrary calling of numbers gives way to two equally asymmetrical but clearly poetic monologues which are subsequently alternated with the numerical recitation. That this irregularity is framed by the powerful chordal progression is strengthened by the entrance of the austere ascending line of the chorus sung in octaves which stabilizes the progression, its tensions and resolutions.

The encounter is indeed sublime, recalling that, for Kant, what marks an aesthetic of the sublime is precisely the manner in which Reason[897] – which we quite legitimately associate with metastructure or the Count – stabilizes what is an initially overwhelming and discomforting sensory encounter with that which is "absolutely large."[898] The "negative pleasure" which results from sublime experience is a clear extension of Edmund Burke's contention, that "[w]hatever...excite[s] the ideas of pain, and danger...whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."[899] More important, however, is the Kantian distinction between the *mathematical* and the *dynamical* sublime. The former attempts to approximate sublime magnitude in spatial and temporal terms, by "numerical concepts"[900] and the intuitive estimation of magnitude.[901] The latter more evidently emerges in the dynamics of thought and the imagination, which allow us indirectly to confront and overcome the fear-arousing objects and situations: "we merely *think* of

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[896] The sequencing of chords in music results in what is generally termed an harmonic progression, which generally contains tonal centres towards which the entire progression gravitates, and in relation to which harmonic shifts or new tonal centres (modulations) are generated. The effect is the accumulation and release of tension, the perception and teleology of which are determined in equal measure by mathematics, physics, psycho-acoustic association, and cultural norms.

[897] As is well known, the Kantian position, while privileging an encounter with nature over artifice, also recognizes that "sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to the nature outside us" (Kant, *Judgment*, 123). More recent views, following an increasingly scientific understanding of the sublime feeling (Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 49-50) recognize that the sublime is distributed between natural, artificial and technological phenomena (see Michel Deguy, "The Discourse of Exaltation: Contributions to a Re-Reading of Pseudo-Longinus," *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, 12-3; Shaw, *Sublime*, 7-8, 28, 124). Indeed, for Kant the distinction is not absolute, but relates to teleological judgement: "[g]iven that we find something purposelike in nature's products, let us call nature's produce (causality) a technic" (Kant, *Judgment*, 271).

[898] Kant, *Judgment*, 103.

[899] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 39.

[900] Ibid., 107.

[901] Ibid.

the case where we might possibly want to put up resistance against [an overwhelming magnitude], and that any resistance would in that case be utterly futile."[902]

 Kant does not, however, signal here "that there are two kinds of sublime, the one mathematical and the other dynamical,"[903] for "mathematical synthesis and dynamical synthesis do not exclude one another."[904] Indeed, in "Knee-Play 1" the meeting of two languages of the infinite – mathematics and music – are clarified by these two dialects of the sublime. For where the pure quantity of these sounds – their scale, loudness and presence – refers to the dynamically sublime, the inclusion of numerical sequences by way of the explicit recitation of numbers and the implicit harmonic proportions of the music, recalls the mathematical sublime. It is precisely upon the productive tension of the two that the effect and coherence of the composition's Count rest.

The recitation of numbers in "Knee-Play 1," both aleatory and ordered, suggests both the spatial and temporal quantification of existence – the means by which fundamental material consistency and metrical regularity might be deduced. In other of his compositions, Glass prefers the fundamental pitch language of *solfège*, in which linguistic syllables (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti) are substituted for sequential pitches. Significant echoes of this technique are discernible in John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*,[905] a threnody for those who died in the *9/11* attacks, which incorporates lists of names, addresses and telephone numbers as the haunting quantitative substitutes for those missing or dead immediately after the attacks. The cumulative and metonymic logics of sequences and lists are explored to great effect in Nico Muhly's "Archive" (Track 16)[906] from the song-cycle *Mothertongue*. Muhly's is a fascinating exploration of number and listing as means of instantiating fundamental musico-linguistic material, but also offers a subtle investigation of their role as mnemonic ciphers:[907] postcodes, addresses, telephone numbers, alphabetical lists and solfege syllables reflect not only on intrinsic quantities, but act as markers for place, identity, and the crossing of personal, interpersonal and cultural histories. Thus, the postcodes delivered with a growing aggression and intensity in "Monster" (Track 17),[908] the final movement of the *Mothertongue* cycle, might as legitimately be interpreted as the markers for the reduction of humanity to numerical sequences – as in the numbers assigned to prisoners, the biopolitical tattooing of the Shoah, or

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[902] Ibid., 119-20.
[903] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 90.
[904] Ibid., 95.
[905] John Adams, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, 2002.
[906] Nico Muhly, "Archive," *Mothertongue*. Bedroom Community, 2008.
[907] Nico Muhly, E-mail and recorded interview. 12-22 November 2012.
[908] Nico Muhly, "Monster," *Mothertongue*. Bedroom Community, 2008.

identity- or social security numbers – as they might be reference to the space which individuals occupy and in which they interact.[909]

The archive is not unknown to the minimalist aesthetic: at the heart of Josipovici's novel, *The Inventory*, is an exhaustive list of the unspecified items of a deceased man's estate, a list which occasions the disturbing insight that human life is bound to a utilitarian, statistical abstraction. Equally we might look to the example of Samuel Beckett's work, which in numerous places reflects the realization that existence is numerically quantifiable and approximated by a Count. Hence the poignancy of the unforgiving minimalism which opens "A Piece of Monologue:" "Birth was the death of him. Again. Words are few. Dying too...From funeral to funeral. To now. This night. Two and a half billion seconds. Again. Two and a half billion seconds. Hard to believe so few...Thirty thousand nights. Hard to believe so few."[910]

Yet it is continuity, rather than the discontinuity of death, however imminent, which fuels the Count. Indeed, continuity is central to Muhly's "Archive" – a Count within which number is replaced by the rapid recitation of the letters of the alphabet, a sequence which retains its ordinal and quantitative significance. Finally, as the complexity of musical information mounts, so other verbal information is introduced – numbers, addresses, narrative fragments. However, the alphabetic litany which opens the work remains a powerful marker of radical *poietic* material – both musical and linguistic – and the necessity of subjecting these to some sort of archival Count in order to generate aesthetic cohesion and the possibility that such substance persists.

Of a different but no less provocative species is the alphabetic Count of Aragon's well-known poem, "Suicide:"

> SUICIDE
> A b c d e f
> g h I j k l
> m n o p q r
> s t u v w
>
> x   y   z[911]

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[909] Ibid.
[910] Samuel Beckett, "A Piece of Monologue," *CDW*, 425.
[911] Louis Aragon, "Suicide," qtd. Mark A. Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity: Dada Between Modern and Postmodern* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 265.

The central contention of the work is that by its taking-place, the substance of the poem self-reflexively consumes its poetic potential. The mediating activity of the poet, becomes one of perpetual, self-sacrificial exhaustion, indeed suicide. No means of figuring *poiesis* remains except the statement of the quantitative constituents of the poem in their most minimal form: "letters of the alphabet spelled out in sequence."[912] The Count is contained by an admirably severe concision, one which displaces meaning into form,[913] form into the atomic elements of writing – elements which are *recalculated* by the alphabetic sequence to indicate the "finite and infinite possibility of the limited set;"[914] the suicide of predetermined entities constitutes a rebirth of *poietic* language. It is the affirmation of *poietic* potentiality which must be recalled at the heart of the Count, lest it become a purely procedural operation. This is nowhere clearer than in the subtle optimism which is invested in both poetry and reader in the concrete poem by Eric Andersen, "I Have Confidence in You,"[915] which, to my mind, presents the best of minimalism and its productive relationship to quantitative ontology:
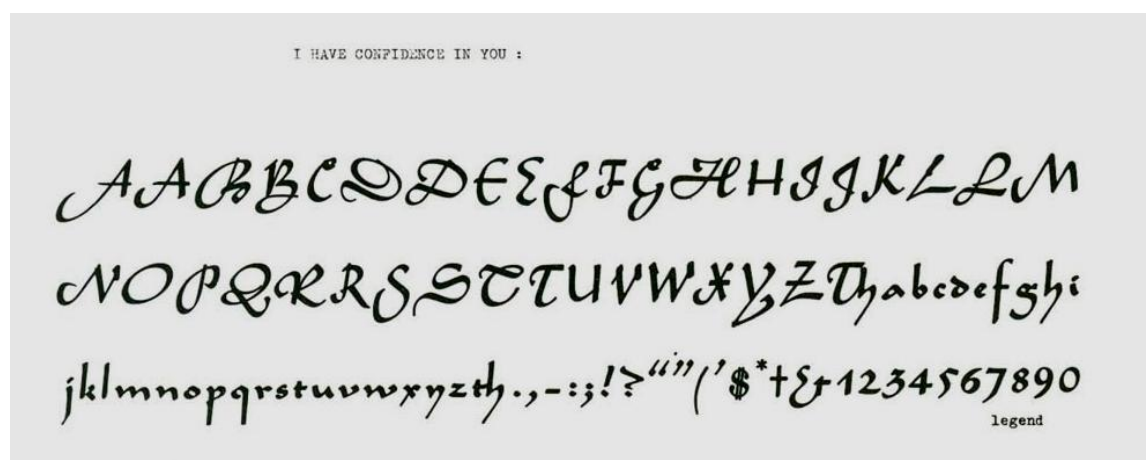
Figure 61: Eric Andersen, ***I Have Confidence in You***, **1965.**

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[912] Johanna Drucker, "Visual Performance of the Poetic Text," *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 147.

[913] Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity*, 265.

[914] Drucker, *Visual Performance*, 147.

[915] Eric Andersen, "I Have Confidence in You," 1965. John Cage, ed., *Notations* (New York: Something Else, 1969), unpaginated.

9. MINIMALISM OF NEGATION AND THE TAKING PLACE OF QUANTITY

a) Minimalist negation made manifest

Minimalism reasserts the quantitative element of the Real, and thus the basis for a quantitative ontology, not by suppressing quality, but rather by presenting minimal impediment to the experience of the qualities in themselves – whether perceptual or conceptual – of a particular aesthetic object. However axiomatic the formalization of ontology may be, a realist position – a minimal phenomenology of the type to which aesthetic minimalism appears to testify – can never be reduced to a decision between quantity and quality. Both quantity and quality persist in the minimalist object. However, if it is the qualities of an object which render it intelligible, this persistence – itself the mark of the Real – is knowable only through the mute indifference of quantity. For quality and quantity to coexist in an object, they must be grounded in the Real – the persistence, necessarily contingent and within a progressive temporality, of quantity.

Minimalism habitually aspires to render the qualities of its objects maximally visible through various processes of reduction, formal simplicity, repetition, and processual transparency. In extreme instances, minimalism proscribes quality itself. Ad Reinhardt, most famous for the black monochromatic paintings referred to above, provides us with a poignant negative manifesto – his "Six General Canons or the Six Noes" and "Twelve Technical Rules (or How to Achieve the Twelve Things to Avoid)" – which comes as close as one might realistically hope to a militant minimalist engagement between aesthetics and nihilism:

> No realism or existentialism…No impressionism…No expressionism or surrealism…No fauvism, primitivism, or brute art…No constructivism, sculpture, plasticism, or graphic arts. No collage, paste, papers, sand, or string…no *'tromp-l'loeil,'* interior decoration, or architecture.[916]
>
> No texture…[Painting] techniques are unintelligent and to be avoided. No accidents or automatism…No brushwork or calligraphy…No signature or trademarking…No sketching or drawing…No line or outline…No shading or streaking…No forms…No figure or fore- or back-ground. No volume or mass, no cylinder, sphere, or cone, or cube…No push or pull. 'No shape or substance'…No design…No Colours…Colours are barbaric, physical, unstable, suggest life, 'cannot be completely controlled' and "should be concealed." No white. 'White is a colour'…White on white is 'a transition from pigment to light' and 'moving pictures'…No light…No space. Space should be empty, should not project, and should not be flat…Space divisions within the painting should not be seen…No time…There is no ancient or

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[916] Ad Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," *Art-as-Art: the selected writing of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1975) 205.

modern, no past or future in art. A work of art is always present.' The present is the future of the past, and the past of the future…No size or scale…No movement. 'Everything is on the move. Art should be still'…No object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images, visions or ready-mades. Neither pleasure nor pain. No mindless working or mindless nonworking. No chess playing.[917]

Reinhardt's manifesto attempts to conceptualize an art of pure quantity. It proscribes all relation, and so any process which potentially might end the predominance of a work's particular qualities over its generic existence. As a set of theoretical propositions, it "takes Minimalist reductivism as far as, or farther than, it can go."[918] Reinhardt's ideal forces both artist and artefact from the traditional ground of aesthetic expression – representation, relation, imagination, expression, communication – and into the realm of pure quantity. So taxing is the process of generating such work – either in terms of its radical conception, or as the *telos* of a process of extreme reductionism, eliminativism or rejectivism[919] – that it is difficult to imagine Reinhardt's work exercising anything other than a relentless pressure towards non-existence. Yet, this would fail to capture the manner in which these paintings, in the very midst of his relentless uncompromising refusal, effect a powerful instantiation of the Real, examined in the terms exposed above, as the quantitative part of an entity which persists in the forward passage of time according to certain contingent existential conditions or laws.

"Reinhardt's career represents a progressive simplification of the two primary elements of representation on canvas: form…and colour,"[920] suggests Strickland. Here is envisioned "the end of the fundamentally delusory enterprise of representation."[921] Reflected in this work is an apotheosis of the confluence of the minimalist aesthetic with the modernist desire for autonomy. Its will is to evade the existential chains imposed by mimesis and its accompanying compulsion to repeat, and by repetition, to master the world. As Yves Alain Bois explains, such extreme abstraction as Reinhardt's,

> [f]reed from all extrinsic conventions...was meant to bring forth the pure *parousia* of its own essence, to tell the final truth and thereby terminate its course. The pure beginning, the liberation from tradition, the 'zero degree' that was searched for by the first generation of abstract painters could not but function as an omen of the end. One did not have to wait for the 'last painting' of Ad Reinhardt to be aware that through its historicism (its linear conception of history) and through its essentialism (its idea that something like the

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[917] Ibid., 205-07.
[918] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 45.
[919] Strickland's designation of Reinhardt as a "rejectivist" (ibid., 42) is particularly appropriate, as it demonstrates that Reinhardt's appeal to the force of negation is active rather than structurally necessitated.
[920] Ibid., 51.
[921] Ibid.

essence of painting existed, veiled somehow, and waiting to be unmasked), the enterprise of abstract painting could not but understand its birth as calling for its end.[922]

Extending Yves Alain Bois' claim that abstraction is emblematic of aesthetic modernism,[923] might we not say that minimalism, by the manner in which is seeks absolute abstraction as its post intimate quantity, reflects once again a remarkable pull between the modern and the postmodern; between art as presentness and anti-art as pure presence.

The "Six Noes" infringe on the notion of an aesthetic purity conventionally guaranteed by the assumption of the critical and terminological norms established in the notion of a *movement*. However, we should not mistake Reinhardt's ban on realism for a decisive subversion of the Real – at least in the terms in which it is proposed in the present work – but rather as a progressive challenge to the subjugation of quantity to quality. This brand of minimalism claims as its imperative an absolute objecthood which opposes the so-called objectification of the aesthetic work through the clearly subjective processes of creative generation and interpretation. Probing the limit between formlessness and form, Reinhardt's work culminates in the negative presentation of the *poietic* process itself. Its domain is the minimal aggregation of the aesthetic qualities required for the senses to cohere upon the work, or, stated otherwise, the properly quantitative element of the work at its most radical. In view of this threshold, Reinhardt's concern with negation paradoxically constitutes a significant point of *poietic* affirmation, one which emerges from the minimal persistence required for an object to emerge in existence, in conception or actuality, and to be recognized as existent rather than non-existent. This minimal point – an austere but decisive gesture of generation – recalls the void, the charge of nothingness which seems to echo in every tracing of the passage between radical presence ("[a] work of art is always present") and absolute absence (nothingness). Such is the flavour of a minimalism which emerges by tracing the progressive intrication of abstraction and reduction in the work of Reinhardt. This is clearly evidenced by following the development and progressive abstraction in Reinhardt's career and work.

Along with much abstract art, Reinhardt's early work presents a sustained interrogation of space itself. In *Study for a Painting* (Figure 62),[924] line and shape constitute simultaneously the regular geometries of mathematics and the irregular shapes of biomorphic allusion. The effect is a dynamic alternation between a static two dimensionality and the depth of movement generated both by the chromatic composition of

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[922] Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," *Painting as a Model* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1990), 230-1.

[923] Ibid., 230.

[924] Ad Reinhardt, *Study for a Painting*, 1938. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

the work and the arrangement of its irregular constituent shapes. In contrast to the rapid alternation of the atonal black and white, Reinhardt's deployment of primary colour – red, in particular – renders irregular the pace at which the viewer perceives the work. The relation between figure and ground further exploits this movement. The central quadrilateral, outlined in black and which is bordered on the left by a tapering green band, recedes towards the right, but, simultaneously, by virtue of the placement of the elliptical figure on the right hand side of the painting, its top edge is brought towards us. At the same time, however, the irregular red shape retires to the rear of the field, leaning away from the viewer. Reinhardt reflects not only on space itself, but also on the competing perspectives which attend visual perception, each of which also institutes a particular temporal relation between subject and object.
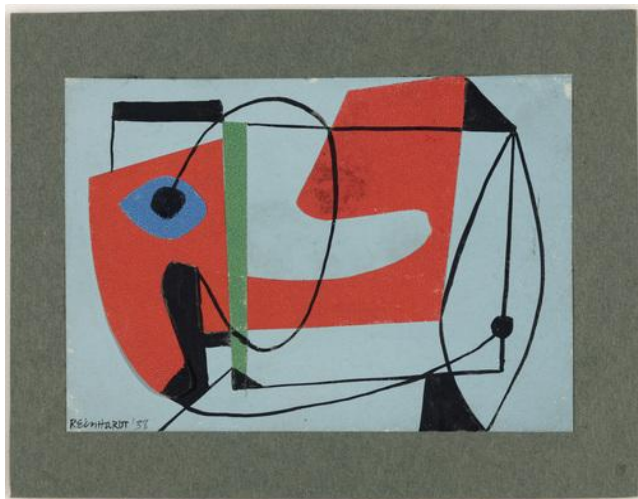
Figure 62: Ad Reinhardt, *Study for a Painting*, 1938.

Figure 63: Ad Reinhardt, *Collage*, 1950.

This abstract rehearsal of the fundamental aspects of our visuo-spatial experience – colour, depth, movement – is driven further in Reinhardt's later work. By the time of *Collage* (Figure 63),[925] completed in 1940, fluid biomorphic figures have given way to a cubist concern with simultaneism,[926] visual interruption and a stricter geometric approach to the division of space. Here we see the manner in which Reinhardt attempts to resolve the problems associated with the accurate distillation of spatial dimensions by working in relief. If *Study for a Painting* recalls the gestural tension between radical constructivism and abstraction exposed in the work of such painters as Miro, Kandinsky and Malevich, then *Collage* brings to mind the influence of cubism, Mondrian's neo-Plasticism and the work of American

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[925]Ad Reinhardt, *Collage*, 1950. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[926] The significance of *simultaneism* is highlighted in subsequent argumentation.

abstractionists Burgoyne Diller and Stuart Davis.[927] The frenetic composition of *Collage* reflects upon the process through which "circles and semicircles disappeared" in Reinhardt's art, "as organic shapes were rejected for rectilinearity and…polygons were gradually simplified into what he called 'bricks'."[928]

Complex composition increasingly gives way in Reinhardt's work to an austerity which pinpoints and contains the most fundamental elements of visual expression. He also preferred increasingly minimal titles,[929] removing all reference to technique and focusing instead on the sequence in which works were produced, numbering them meticulously, and on his significantly reduced palette – various tones of white and grey in the case of *Number 107* (Figure 64),[930] and of red in *Abstract Painting (Red)* (Figure 65).[931] The formal regularization progressively explored in terms of line and texture in his earlier work, is increasingly displaced into subtler gradations and contrasts of tone. Thus, the vestiges of a gestural abstract expressionism, which are still evident in the strong horizontal strokes of the lighter greys and whites of *Number 107*, are practically invisible in the later work. *Abstract Painting (Red)* is divided into seven rectangular horizontal bands of equal height. Every second band, beginning either at the top or bottom, is subdivided along its length into three squares. The work alternates between three shades of red: a deep maroon and a lighter orange which are distributed closer to the edges, and a brighter, vivid red which points towards a centre, noticeably absent inasmuch as it is struck through by a solid bar of the lighter orange hue. Reinhardt's monochromatic[932] canvas is cleverly constructed to effect through the containment of the work a self-referential stability without sacrificing the dynamism which keeps the eye unsettled, rendering the work aesthetically interesting. In this sense, the painting works transumptively to indicate *poiesis* itself: it provides a unifying locus, while simultaneously engendering a radical dislocation – a distribution between sense and concept which, finally, is *atopian*.

The vestiges of abstract expressionism are still clearly evident in the strong and frequent horizontal strokes of *Number 107*, the lighter whites affirming not only the remnants of Reinhardt's concern with gesture, but also the dominance of spatiality and depth in much early abstract art. In *Abstract Painting (Red)* these have given way to far stricter geometry, a regularization of frequency and movement. Thus

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[927] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 45.

[928] Ibid.

[929] The reduction of referential elements – both within the composition and in the title chosen for minimalist works – is a significant concern for many artists, composers and writers alike, and reflects the tendency of the minimalist aesthetic away from complication and towards simplicity and facticity.

[930] Ad Reinhardt, *Number 107*, 1950. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[931] Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting (Red)*, 1952. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[932] It should be recalled that the term *monochrome* can be used to designate single or multiple shades of a particular colour.

Reinhardt explores a subtler and more austere understanding of space and time: these are intrinsic quantities, Real in themselves, and immanent to the work rather than revealed in terms of its specific qualities. The exposition and containment of the Real as *poietic* force by means of formal and technical minimalism, is intensified by Reinhardt's increasing production of black monochromes, *Abstract Painting* (1957) (Figure 66)[933] being exemplary amongst these.

Figure 64: Ad Reinhardt,
Number 107, **1950.**

Figure 65: Ad Reinhardt,
Abstract Painting (Red), **1952.**
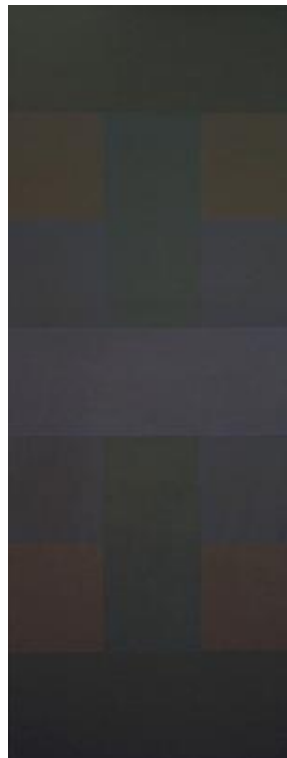
Figure 66: Ad Reinhardt,
 Abstract Painting, **1957.**

The persistent *lessness* of Reinhardt's art is exemplified well in the black monochrome, *Abstract Painting* (1957) in which the tonal variation is even finer, and the geometry more ambiguous, than in the earlier monochromes, despite the work not sacrificing any of its regularity. A close examination of this work – for although Reinhardt's painting has a certain immediacy, it also characteristically draws out perception by its chromatic subtleties[934] – reveals that its constituent rectangular bands run both horizontally and vertically. A central vertical band – only hinted at in the bright red of *Abstract Painting (Red)* – emerges clearly in Reinhardt's black work. With its top and bottom tucked behind the painting's darkest shade of

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[933]Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, 1957. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[934] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 48-9.

black, and its centre forcefully interrupted by a lighter band of a reddish hue, Reinhardt constructs a masterful monochromatic weave which renders practically indistinguishable stasis and movement, non-illusionistic flatness and dimensional fluctuation. It is no longer clear that the grounds for such aesthetic judgements can be deduced from a patient analysis of the work in terms of either its formation or its referential significance. Such minimalism[935] readily relinquishes the currency which the artist historically possesses. Should we wish to regard Reinhardt an abstract expressionist,[936] his would be an expressionism which buries the traditional mediation of genius by a coordination of inspiration, intention, gesture and effect, and moves to subject such expressionistic techniques as the brush stroke, sculptural or musical texture, to a stringent containment of its parts and processes.

Despite pushing our understanding of colour, pictorial illusion and the presentation of space significantly towards a point of negation, Reinhardt's minimalism in fact pivots on the containment of all content, space and even time. Moving towards an absence of tonal variation altogether, the later black works of Reinhardt, as also of Brice Marden, reject all formal properties and relation in order to commit to a tireless approach to the Real – this, despite the protestation of the first of Reinhardt's *six noes*. At the heart of this "most austere reductivism imaginable"[937] returns sublime presence – a *now* which "dismantles consciousness,"[938] in Lyotard's estimation, exhibiting that the "art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unpresentable."[939] Our task, henceforth, is one of discovering the means by which minimalist negation and containment are able to pursue their sublime vocation of heightening our access to the persistence of the Real.

b) Negation, sublation and lessness

As regards the numerous possible aesthetic techniques of negation, Barrett Watten's account proves particularly instructive:

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[935] It should be noted that there are those minimalists, painter Agnes Martin amongst them, who retain a view of *inspiration* (and hence the mediatory role of the artist) somewhere between the theories of Greco-Roman classicism and the tradition of the romantic: "I don't have any ideas myself. I have a vacant mind, in order to do exactly what the inspiration calls for. And I don't start to paint until after I have an inspiration…Every new thing in the world is common upon by inspiration" (Agnes Martin, *Interview* (with Chuck Smith and Soyo Kuwayama), Nov. 1997. http://vimeo.com/7127385. 20 November 2011).

[936] Rose, *ABC*, 286.

[937] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 44.

[938] Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 90.

[939] Ibid., 101.

negativity is common to a range of concepts that include non-identity, antagonism, nihilism, revolt, defamiliarization, rupture, opposition, dissociation, conflict, delusion, void, emptiness. Negativity as it occurs 'in the field' so to speak, with the radical forms and interventions of the avant-garde, partakes of one or all of these modes – even as its final horizon, a denial of positivity, locates each instance as a potential of critique.[940]

It is certainly possible to match a considerable number of minimalist works to each of these negative concepts or procedures. If monochromaticism is most obviously associable with radical notions of "non-identity...nihilism...dissociation...void, emptiness," there are also works within the ambit of minimalism and post-minimalism which expose negation in a more assertive light. Bruce Nauman – whose endeavours span the numerous media of visual and conceptual art – habitually draws us back to the violent tension between resistance and injunction indicated by the word "*no*." This is nowhere more forcefully exhibited than in his *Clown Torture* series.[941] These are thoroughly disturbing works – variously combining projections and stacked colour monitors, each with a separate soundtrack which, together, produce through their highly obstructive sonic interaction an effect as startling as it is discomfiting.[942] These explore the tragi-comic figure of the clown in various of its visual, historical and allegorical manifestations. Hyperbolic mannerisms and obsessively repeated words, phrases and catches of narrative are ceaselessly looped to effect a "poetics of confusion, anxiety, boredom, entrapment, and failure."[943] These works are allied to the best Beckettian tradition of negation and failure as accomplishment. In fact, I believe it is no exaggeration to suggest that Nauman's work intensifies and condenses Beckett's already highly minimalist vision by instantiating literary sonic occurrences of considerable immediacy; maxims for unremitting existential repetition, one might say. In relation to Beckett's writing, we are witnesses to existence in the sense that we come to recognize in the disintegration of conventional narrative language the birth of a new language, more faithful to the *lacuna*

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[940] Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003), 240.

[941] Nauman's *Clown Torture Series* (Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture Series*, 1987) is installed in various locations, including the Art Institute of Chicago.
See http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/146989. The startling effect of Nauman's work is presented well by the excellent auditory map of the *Raw Materials* exhibition of 2005 made available on the Tate Modern website: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/nauman/default.shtm (Bruce Nauman, *Raw Materials*. 12 October 2004-2 May 2005. Tate Modern, London).

[942] Art Institute of Chicago. Notes. *Clown Torture Series*, Art Institute of Chicago. http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/146989.

[943] Ibid.

at the centre of experience.[944] We must pass right through this process of negation in order to arrive within the austere *poietic* positivity which characterizes Beckett's *oeuvre*.[945]

By contrast, Nauman confronts us with aesthetic work from which we either recoil, or which draws us into the position of voyeurs. In the *Clown Torture* works, in particular, we confront the most intimate pathologies in a disturbing and fascinating public spectacle. In many of Nauman's video and sound installations repetitions and loops of distinctly minimal material effect what is unquestionably a self-referential poetics – the maddening self-prescription of *Pete and Repeat/It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* (Track 18)[946] is exemplary in this regard. Yet the more intensely self-referential Nauman's work becomes, the more resistant it seems to interaction with the perceiver, and in this sense impresses itself upon us as an object solely of voyeuristic consumption. Particularly remarkable amongst such pieces is *No, No, New Museum (Clown Torture Series)* (Track 19/Figure 67/Clip 1).[947] The work consists of looped footage of two clowns in the traditional attire of the jester – head to head, for they appear on separate monitors, the uppermost inverted. Each rehearses a stubborn and singular litany, generating from minimal means an unsettling and asynchronous rhythmic counterpoint with only one word – *no.* This gesture of negation, verbal as well as physical (they stamp and jump defiantly), exposes with traumatic immediacy the questions of violence, cruelty, frustration, anger, absurdity, redundancy and resistance. Of more immediate interest, is the manner in which the verbal act of negation – the articulation of "no" – in fact resists elimination. To say *no* repeatedly effects neither the destruction of an active nihilism, which Critchley describes in terms of an *overcoming*,[948] nor does it amount to an irreversible progression towards the void, to an absolute absence conceivable only in terms of pure destruction. Indeed, we cannot know precisely what is being denied, resisted or refused in Nauman's *No, No, New Museum*, but we can be certain that in the very act of this negation, "something is taking its course,"[949] to recall the phrase which Beckett repeatedly employs in "Endgame" in pointing to the sheer facticity of finitude and the passage of time in existence.

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[944] This is an adaptation of Agamben's remarkable formulation which, recognizing the incompletion of any act of testimony (Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002), 33-4), suggests that language, "in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness" (ibid., 39).

[945] According to Agamben, the witness is "a person who has lived through something who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it" (ibid., 17).

[946] Bruce Nauman, *Pete and Repeat/It Was A Dark And Stormy Night*, 1987/2004.

[947] Bruce Nauman, *No No, New Museum*, 1987. Private Collection.

[948] Critchley, *Very Little*, 9.

[949] Samuel Beckett, "Endgame," *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1990) 98, 107. Hereafter *CDW*.

Figure 67: Bruce Nauman, *No, No, New Museum***, 1987.**

Blanchot – arguably the writer closest in spirit to Beckett in terms of his thematic concern with the confrontation between thought and the generative act; with the writer faced by nothingness, and the encounter of the subject with death[950] – captures this sense magnificently when he claims of art that "the work...is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively that: that it is – and nothing more. Outside of that, it is nothing. Anyone who tries to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing."[951] Anything which the work potentially *could* mean is always lost to its contingency, and so what is left in terms of the essence of the work is nothing but the facticity of the work itself – *that* the work exists *qua* force rather than as an entity – and that this is the precondition for the taking-place of any contingent situation upon which meaning or significance could be predicated.

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[950] Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1999), 27.

[951] Maurice Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1981), 64. Collection hereafter *GO*. Here the remark of Alain Robbe-Grillet, his estimation of the significance of formalism, seems apposite: "[t]he existence of a work of art, and its weight are not at the mercy of an interpretative screen which may or may not coincide with its contours. A work of art, like the world, is a living form: it *is*, it needs no justification" (Robbe-Grillet, "Some Outdated Notions," 71-2).

Here I believe it is possible to recognize an aesthetic outline of the ontological position which Meillassoux adopts in relation to facticity. Facticity can no longer be simply understood in terms of the existence of facts, for facts themselves cannot be adequately modelled in terms of knowledge of the entities which exist in a given world.[952] Nor can facticity be unravelled by necessary or contingent correlation between thought and an entity.[953] Both return us to an anthropocentric vision which fails to acknowledge the essentially chaotic state of being *qua* being,[954] mistaking events for moments of transcendence,[955] and points of origin for causes. Instead, facticity must be understood as the force of the absolute itself: that which affirms that "[t]here is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuitousness of the given – nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence, or persistence."[956] In this light, facticity refers to "the absolute necessity of the contingency of everything"[957] which functions according to a principal of *unreason* – "that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is."[958] Although to claim that minimalism actively pursues this factical logic would be an exaggeration, it presents few intrinsic impediments to knowing the aesthetic entity such as it is. In its most transparent examples, minimalism discovers a mediation of the contentless facticity of Blanchot's vision of art, and Meillassoux's conviction that "it is the contingency of the entity that is necessary, not the entity."[959]

Art's persistence lies in the manner in which, even at its most nihilistic, it activates within itself a field of resistance to the possibility of absolute negation. "[T]he writer will continue to remain dependent on the very language that is to be dissolved,"[960] writes Weller of Beckett's essentially constructive relation to negation.[961] It is tempting to recognize in this the echo of Hegelian determinate negation, according to which every entity is determinate[962] as the result of a process of differentiation and implicit negation:

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[952] *AF*, 53-4.

[953] Ibid., 54.

[954] Ibid., 64-5.

[955] According to Meillassoux, philosophy stubbornly clings to "an unfathomable purpose underlying the origin of our world. This reason has become unthinkable, but it has been preserved *as* unthinkable; sufficiently to justify the value of its eventual unveiling in a transcendent revelation" (ibid., 63).

[956] Ibid., 63.

[957] Ibid., 62.

[958] Ibid., 60.

[959] Ibid., 65. In absolutizing facticity, Meillassoux does not "maintain that a determinate entity exists, but that it is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist" (ibid., 60).

[960] Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda, 2005), 59.

[961] Similar remarks might be made of artists working with as diverse materials and media as do Reinhardt, Nauman, Feldman and Blanchot (amongst many others).

[962] "In order to exist, something must be determinate: of the completely undetermined it is impossible to say or to know anything" (Franco Chieregin, "Freedom and Thought: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness," *The Blackwell Guide to* Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,*"* ed. Ken R. Westphal (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 62).

"whatever individuates something distinguishes it from all others by contrast."[963] "The 'different' is just this," Hegel tells us, "not to be in possession of itself, but to have its essential being only in an other."[964] The inside is affirmed not only through its opposition to an outside, however. "Spirit becomes object because it is just this movement of becoming an *other to itself*."[965] What is negative in relation to a determinate entity is also its innermost quality.

Recognized as confluent, intrinsic self-contradictoriness and extrinsic differentiation effect the dynamic, positive calculation of the dialectic process Hegel identifies in terms of the negation of negation, or *sublation*.[966] "The fact that in the affirmation of something we must also comprehend its negation does not constitute a contradiction that results in nothingness. It permits us to reach a higher content where both the abstract affirmation of something and the necessary relation to that which negates it flow together in unity."[967] In the dialectic emergence of a determinate entity, the contraries[968] which inhabit any identity are simultaneously preserved and abolished; modified through their interaction, "render[ing] them no longer contraries, and therefore no longer self-contradictory in virtue of their reciprocal containment."[969] If Hegelian dialectics[970] always involve finite entities predicated on a series of negative relations, then there can be no stable, independent, unmediated ground upon which such entities can be forwarded other than these relations of negation themselves. This appears to legitimise the otherwise counter-intuitive claim that "absolutely nothing may thus be found at the level of finite determinations."[971]

Yet, while it may be possible to agree with the proposition that the knowledge of identity takes shape through a structurally negative process, this process should not be mistaken for identity itself. Badiou explains that for the Hegelian argument to hold, any determinate entity necessarily witnesses "[t]he passage from the pure limit…to the frontier…[which] forms the resource of an infinity directly *required*

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[963] Ibid.

[964] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 124.

[965] Ibid., 21

[966] Michael Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method," *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 132.

[967] Chieregin, "Freedom," 62.

[968] "If the many determinate properties were strictly indifferent to one another, if they were simply and solely self-related, they would not be determinate; for they are only determinate in so far as they *differentiate* themselves from one another, and *relate* to themselves *to others* as to their opposite." Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 69. See also Forster's description of the general structure of the Hegelian dialectic (Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method," 132-3).

[969] Ibid., 133.

[970] Not coincidentally, Hegel traces his dialectical method through the scepticism of Plato's *Parmenides* (Chieregin, "Freedom," 62).

[971] Ibid.

by the point of being."[972] In the face of "absolutely nothing," the pure negative relation of being, something rather than nothing marks a pure limit, a stable and determinate One.[973] Nonetheless, we cannot ignore that any apparently stable limit exists simultaneously as a dynamic frontier of relations and negations.[974] From within this alternation of limit and frontier, Badiou claims that for Hegel "the point of being, since it is always intrinsically discernible, *generates* out of itself the operator of infinity…Infinity becomes an internal reason of the finite itself, a simple attribute of experience in general."[975] Norris argues convincingly that this decision stems from Hegel's suppression of the relation between mathematics and concept.[976] Quantitative, bad infinity (a mindless law of quantitative repetition[977]) is opposed to qualitative, good infinity – the infinity necessarily at work in the passage from limit to frontier, in any process which ends in determinate negation. Sublation, in this light, is the predication "that would finally transform the bad into the good, or the quantitative into the qualitative mode of infinity."[978] In accordance with this understanding, the repetition of negation which we evidenced above in Nauman's work, for instance, presents the shift from an accumulative negation, which might indeed imply destruction or elimination, to the negation which marks good infinity – the sublation involved in the mere facticity of repeatedly saying *no*.

Yet the quantitative question is not so easily suppressed in favour of the qualitative: "Hegel's notion of the 'good' infinity not only bears a curiously close resemblance to the 'bad', but also counts as 'good' on his own submission…[simply because] it remains within the compass of the dialectical schema."[979] Accepted as the predetermined theoretical target, the mechanisms which support sublation are strategically elevated above those which render it problematic. Minimalism in this light might historically have been delineated in terms of nihilism, and limited to effecting tropes of various structures of sublation. As it happens, it is the irreducibly positive aspect of *form* which most influences the minimalist aesthetic, yet this should not distract us entirely from the fact that sublation, as constructive negation, is crucial to understanding several of the characteristic structural and semantic austerities of aesthetic minimalism.

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[972] *BE*, 162.
[973] It is of less immediate significance whether or not this unity is interpreted as a transcendental One or the product of an ontological calculation, the count-as-One.
[974] Ibid., 163.
[975] Ibid.
[976] Norris, *Badiou*, 144-5.
[977] Ibid., 146-7.
[978] Ibid., 147.
[979] Ibid., 146.

In minimalist literature, negation is as often related to structure as it is to content (insofar as these can be separated in the first place). In Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays,* for instance, the novel's numerous events are legitimately interesting taken individually. Yet, finally they dissolve into an increasingly featureless continuum, itself reflective of the growing vacuity of its principal character, Maria Wyeth, when viewed as part of the quasi-epic journey undertaken by her ceaselessly driving the highways of California. Similarly, the plethora of descriptive information offered by the fictions of Raymond Carver and Alain Robbe-Grillet – the former most often in terse, clipped dialogue;[980] the latter in exhaustive description – seldom feed into the standard principles of narrative organization. For Robbe-Grillet the mimetic accuracy of his painstakingly detailed physical descriptions of objects and actions are separated decisively from the usual teleological thrust and linearity of prose fiction.[981] In the opening of *The Voyeur*, for example, numerous phrases derived from the sensory perception of the central character, Mathias, are repeated in fragments – gradually adapted and asymmetrically looped,[982] shifting between various real and imagined scenarios,[983] negating, even as it traverses, the temporal course and linear expectations conventional to narrative. Even so, we do not encounter a chaotic maximalism, but a distinctively literary minimalism: a lean plot presented obliquely in a prose stripped of any affective excess, but replete with vivid, descriptive detail of objects and their material contexts, and rapid shifts in perspective.[984]

Such minimalist techniques[985] condition the oblique presentation of the murder at the centre of the novel, to which we might append Robbe-Grillet's significant and self-conscious description of narrative objectivity as constructed from "exact but false memories."[986] The tissue of such minimalist objectivism

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[980] A clear example of Carver's dialogical minimalism is demonstrated in the short story, *Popular Mechanics*, in which the breakdown of a relationship is concretized within the aggressive but minimal exchange of a couple regarding their child. What is at first only a rhetorical struggle soon manifests in a shockingly real manner, as the couple begin physically to pull their child between them (Raymond Carver, "Popular Mechanics," *Stories*, 262-3).

[981] Of his own novels, Robbe-Grillet suggests that "the movement in the writing is more important in them than that of emotions and [plot]" (Robbe-Grillet, "Some Outdated Notions," 64). The genre is not bound, in other words, by the conventional ways of marking narrative *telos*, although this does not imply that the works are without action and plot (ibid., 64, 72-3), or significance – "[t]herein lies the difficulty...of creation: the work must convince people that it is necessary, but not necessary *for* anything" (ibid., 73). This resembles the Kantian proposition of "a purposiveness without a purpose" (Kant, *Judgment*, 65) exemplified by those situations and objects which appear to derive from an intentional act, yet for which no intension, or agent of this intension, is identifiable.

[982] Compare, for example, the variations of the phrases "it is raining/rainy day" and "very dark" (Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Voyeur*, trans. Richard Howard (London: John Calder, 1958), 10-4); and the recurrent image of the rusted, and apparently inadequate, mooring rings (ibid., 10, 27).

[983] Ibid., 28-9.

[984] This has analogies with the often rapid and dramatic harmonic modulations which characterize Philip Glass' later music, developing the originally cerebral, static and rather strict early compositions (Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 15; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 217, 239, 288; Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 311-3, 327, 335).

[985] Warren Motte offers a useful account of Robbe-Grillet as a proto-minimalist (Motte, *Small Worlds*, 27).

[986] Robbe-Grillet, *Voyeur*, 17.

is composed of signifiers progressively emptied of their symbolic content – a literary tradition which might be traced through the work of the Futurists and Cubists, through the phonemic poetry of Khlebnikov as much as through Stein's emphasis on the sufficiency of the written thing, the "nouns [which] are the name of anything"[987] which, as unavoidable as they are uninteresting,[988] compel us towards the distinctly minimalist vision of aesthetic composition in which "[b]eginning again and again is a natural thing."[989]

The narrating voices of Beckett's *oeuvre*, forever in self-reflective doubt of their own efficacy,[990] habitually manifest an alternate vision of sublation in the face of negativity. A near symmetry is maintained between proposition and negation in the recognition that "something is taking its course,"[991] yet finally it is towards a compound negation that art tends – that which we might term a *minimal sublation*, or the minimal positive element of a diminishing art object. It is this sense which lies behind the repeated succession in "Ill Seen Ill Said" of the neutral phrase, "neither more nor less" by the imperative, "Less!"[992] Beckett's fatigued but unwavering search for existential *lessness*[993] effects an intense minimalism in which radically reductive strategies at once contain and distend the media through which the aesthetic work is instantiated, and, in some cases, even *transume* the work from one medium to another.[994] Beckett delineates an ideal minimalism in terms of the pursuit of "[l]ess. Ah the sweet one word. Less. It is less. The same but less."[995]

The "[s]ilence at the eye of the scream"[996] – the disappearance of the voice which marks the incomprehensible moment of our own organic finitude – is countered by vocality as an affirmation of existence, for "once there is speech, no need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life."[997] Here it is profitable to touch on Agamben's conception of Voice[998] as that which is most intimate to humanity

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[987] Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909 -1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 139.

[988] Ibid., 126-7; 137.

[989] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *Look at Me Now*, 23.

[990] Samuel Beckett, "Texts for Nothing," *CSP*, 116.

[991] Beckett, "Endgame," 98, 107.

[992] Samuel Beckett, "Ill Seen Ill Said," *Nohow On* (New York: Grove, 1996), 80, 84-5.

[993] This is the title of a short prose work of 1970 (Samuel Beckett, "Lessness," *CSP*, 197-201).

[994] In "Quad," for example, a literary text is in an important sense *distributed* between the capturing technology of the camera, the movement and colour which is captured, and its recombination in the televised visual image.

[995] Beckett, "Ill Seen," 81.

[996] Ibid., 64.

[997] Beckett, "Texts for Nothing," 116.

[998] Agamben's conceptualization of Voice is elaborated below.

precisely because it marks the distinction of utterance from meaning,[999] but moreover in the manner it calls us beyond itself, to "thinking language as such"[1000] beyond the "scission of voice and word."[1001] In this space, where the Voice falls silent, existence as it is presented in language confronts death. Only when we are able to dwell in pure language,[1002] beyond any reference to time or persistence, do we move beyond the radical trauma of being thrown into Being,[1003]and beyond the condemnation of existence to a passive persistence stripped of activity and its valences with the infinite.

In this light, to *go on*[1004] might be understood in terms of an ateleological persistence, a compulsion even within an atopian existential situation which excites no valences – "neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further away."[1005] Although we can agree that it is *more of the same* which concerns Beckett, it is all too easy to neglect the sublative *more* with which Beckett clearly is concerned when he writes of the narrator's footfalls in "Heard in the Dark I," that "many more will be necessary. Many many more."[1006] Indeed, the question of physical footfalls – the repeated pacing backwards and forwards of the character May – shapes Beckett's eponymous play.[1007] This remains one of his most significant statements regarding the predicative character of repeated and cyclical movement, both physical and formal. It is thus that "the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet however faint they fall."[1008] The impetus provides "clearly audible rhythmic tread,"[1009] is increasingly subject to pauses as the work progresses, attempting to "dramatize deterioration with visual and aural diminuendo."[1010] Yet even the thought of negation reinstates a minimal requisite intensity of existence, as demonstrated by the tentative persistence of the work's closing: "Will you never have done? [*Pause.*] Will you never have done...revolving it all? [*Pause.*] It? [*Pause.*] It all. [*Pause.*] In your poor mind. [*Pause.*] It all."[1011]

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[999] Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 95. Hereafter *LD*.
[1000] Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*, (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 21.
[1001] Ibid.
[1002] "To exist in language without being called there by any Voice, simply to die without being called by death, is, perhaps the most abysmal experience; but this is precisely, for man, also his most habitual experience" (*LD*, 96).
[1003] *LD*, 56.
[1004] This phrase is employed most famously by Beckett as the motif from which the closing sequence of *The Unnamable* is composed (Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), 381-2).
[1005] Samuel Beckett, "For to end," 246.
[1006] Samuel Beckett, "Heard in the Dark I," *Complete Short Prose*, 147.
[1007] Samuel Beckett, "Footfalls," *CDW*, 397-403.
[1008] Ibid., 401.
[1009] Beckett, "Footfalls," 399.
[1010] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 201.
[1011] Beckett, "Footfalls," 403.

In Beckett's "Quad,"[1012] a formal symmetry between appearance and disappearance marks a minimally positive account of negation. The structure of the work unfolds with the movement of its four players, who appear one by one, differentiated by the primary colours of the robes they wear, and mirroring one another in symmetrical movements which bisect and triangulate various possible courses from corner to corner of the square space within which the action of the play is contained. Approaching the centre of the square, they take a small circular, clockwise deviation, both to avoid collision as their paths cross one another, and also to mark symbolically an inarticulable void at the centre of the aesthetic work, which can only be indicated obliquely. Thus, both in concept and in form, a positive element continues to be derived from negativity.

Comparable models of formal sublation are evident in minimalist music and visual art. In terms of the former, Steve Reich's compositions which take shape through the cyclical phasing of melodic material present excellent examples. Separate sound sources, initially synchronized and which present identical melodic material, are gradually moved out of phase with one another. During this process, each source negates the initial integrity of the other, while simultaneously bringing about new, albeit contingent, melodic singularities. The process is cyclical, and the composition eventually returns to its initial state so that, much like a Beckettian narrative, we might say that despite the considerable number of discrete states which are discernible in the work, these remain part of an ateleological distension of its basic material. The aesthetic means by which we encounter the subtle, minimalist survival of negation extends into the sculptural realm in works such as Carl Andre's *Cedar Piece* (Figure 68),[1013] which is constructed of identical wooden units, "laid on top of one another on the floor,"[1014] "as if to stress that there is no hierarchy of position or relationship among the parts of his sculpture."[1015] Andre's emphasis is on the physicality of his material,[1016] emphasized by the "repetition of modular units"[1017] and declining a transcendental understanding of sculptural space.[1018] The negotiation of positive and negative space in this work – the tension which exists between the *X* formed on every side of the piece, the receding space towards its central axis and the large concave oval at its corners – must therefore be viewed in its most literal light as a rehearsal at its most elementary level of the emergence of art from space, of the subtraction of form from formlessness.

[1012] Samuel Beckett, "Quad," *CDW*, 449-54.
[1013] Carl Andre, *Cedar Piece*, 1964. Oeffetliche Kunstammlung, Basel.
[1014] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 111.
[1015] Baker, *Minimalism*, 42.
[1016] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 127.
[1017] Ibid., 111.
[1018] Ibid.

Figure 68: Carl Andre, *Cedar Piece*. 1959, reconstructed 1964.

If many of minimalism's most significant works call us to trace the positive passage from what is "absolutely negative" in negation to the subtractive element of negation – marking the most essential part of an aesthetic entity's emergence – others explore more directly the relation between aesthetics and destruction. With *Splashing* (Figure 69),[1019] Richard Serra turns minimalism towards that which is "chemically elemental,"[1020] using molten lead, "synonymous with weight,"[1021] and hurling it at the intersection of various walls and floors. Such effort defines a minimalism which stages the meeting of the expressionistic gesture of the artist, the urban environment, matter at its most brutal, and natural forces such as gravity, Newton's third law (action-reaction) and the rate and manner of the solidification of liquid metals.[1022]

[1019] Richard Serra, *Splashing*, 1968. Temporary work.
[1020] Baker, *Minimalism*, 112.
[1021] Ibid.
[1022] Marzona, *Minimal Art*, 86.
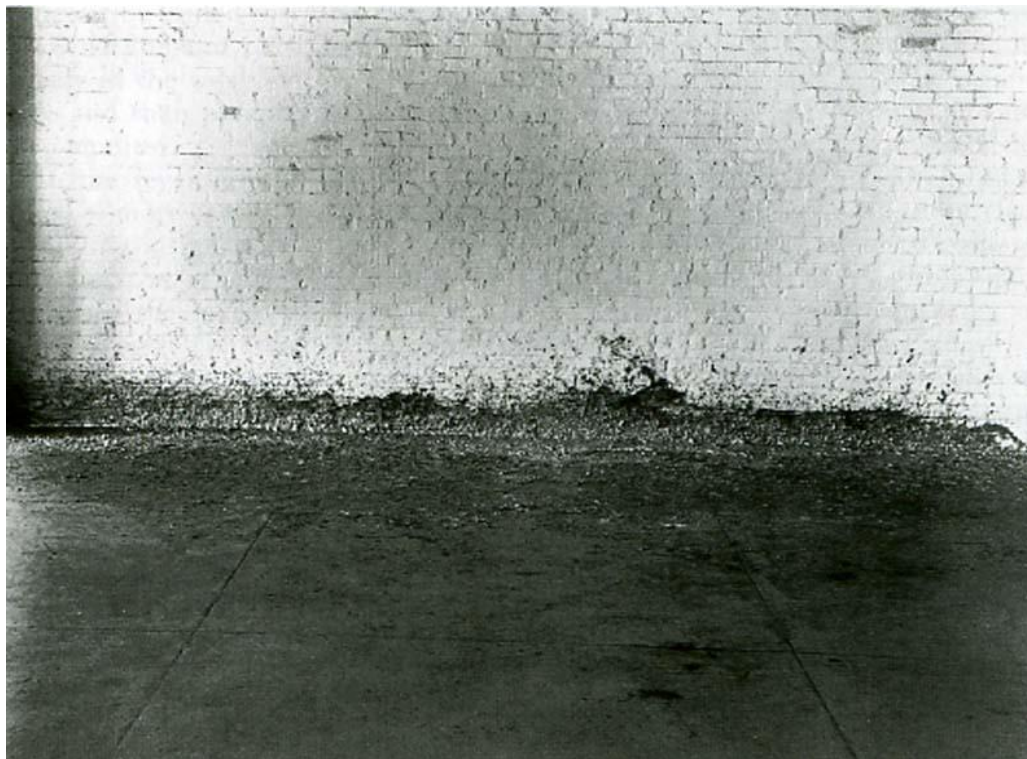
Figure 69: Richard Serra, *Splashing*, 1968.

The effort of the artist unquestionably requires a certain physical force – much as is the case with the acid action painting of Gustav Metzger – and critics have recognized in Serra's work something "inherently more kinetic and menacing"[1023] than earlier minimalism. Chave goes so far as to suggest that "it is more often the case with Serra...that his work doesn't simply exemplify aggression or domination, but acts it out."[1024] A similarly extreme sense of negation is apparent in some concrete poetry: parts of Hanjörg Mayer's "fortführungen" (Figure 70)[1025] present lines so densely overlaid that all sense is destroyed except the bare facticity that it is some form of typescript; Gappmayr[1026] goes further still, almost entirely

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[1023] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 290.

[1024] Chave, *Minimalism and Rhetoric*, 36. Chave's reference is to Serra's massive and often perilously balanced lead sheets and steel stacks, some of which are part of his ominously titled *Skullcracker* series of sculptures. The installation of Serra's sculptures has caused several injuries and even a death (Ibid., 35; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 290). In Strickland's estimation, this perilous art connects it to a minimalist tradition of the sublime traceable to Barnett Newman (ibid., 270, 291). However, we should emphasize, with Kant, that if the feeling of the sublime arises from a "momentary inhabitation of the vital forces" (Kant, *Judgment*, 98) it is affirmed when this is "followed immediately by an outpouring of [these vital forces]…that is all the stronger," (ibid.) which cannot be the case if danger spills into destruction, as has occurred in the case of Serra.

[1025] Hansjörg Mayer, From "fortführungen," *ACP*, 202.

[1026] We might recall the similar work, *ver*, cited above.

negating text by superimposing a large black block over his writing, from behind which only the most minute marks are visible (Figure 71).[1027]

Figure 70: Hansjörg Mayer, from *fortführungen***, 1964.**
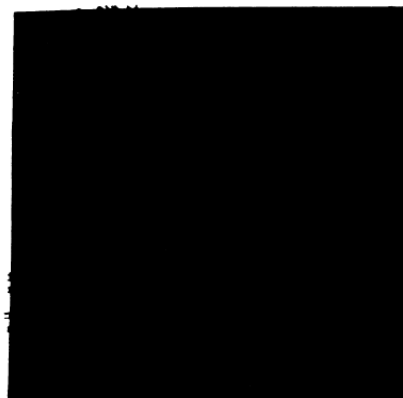
Figure 71: Heinz Gappmayr, *Untitled***, 1964.**

c) Taking-place

In the face of such extremes, it is necessary to recognize that despite any sublative (hence structurally negative) process through which identity emerges, that identity itself, in its taking-place, is fundamentally positive. No matter how minimal the distinction between self-affirmation and auto-erasure, it is only sheer destruction which negates the banal, existential positivity that "something is taking its course,"[1028] to recall Beckett.

Giorgio Agamben offers an intriguing account of how the teaching of the thirteenth century theologian, Amalric of Bena, reclaims transcendence – indeed, the infinite – from within the very taking-place of existence, despite the almost overwhelming pull of existential situations towards limitation, finitude or even annihilation. According to this doctrine (subsequently declared heretical), it is in the most intimate moment of the present tense that we encounter infinite perfection: "The transcendent…is not a supreme entity above all things; rather, the *pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing*."[1029] Accordingly,

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[1027] Heinz Gappmayr, "untitled," *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism*, ed. Eugene Wildman (Chicago: Swallow, 1967), 39. Anthology hereafter *CRAC*.
[1028] Beckett, "Endgame," 98, 107.
[1029] *CC*, 14-5.

what is good "is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority," while what is evil is "the reduction of the taking-place of things to a fact like others."[1030] What is radically positive is that which habitually is overlooked – the facticity of existence; *that* entities exist. Meillassoux, to recall, grants a similar privilege to facticity, albeit from the perspective of post-naïve realism, as opposed to the pantheistic transcendentalism Agamben recognizes in Amalric's thought. The most intrinsic part of an entity is its *persistence* – its taking-place as a contingent quantity across a period of time within and as the Real. It is the facticity of persistence which renders existence always positively charged – potential, yet immanent.

The coincidence of the Real with the proposition offered by Agamben in terms of transcendental immanence/immanent transcendence – that which is "not somewhere else…[but rather] the point at which…[entities] grasp the taking-place proper to them, at which they touch their own non-transcendent matter"[1031] – emphasizes that being in itself is decisively prior to any specific relation of being. Entities which exist return to themselves *qua* existence, and it is in their being just *as they are* that they participate in the pure multiplicity of being without themselves being pure multiples (Badiou would call such entities examples of a multiple-one).

Is it possible to suggest that in its taking-place an entity counts *itself* as one? Through the generation of aesthetic objects which testify to the taking-place of the Real, minimalism exemplifies that which is immanent, and which is prior to any relation – of meaning, effect, or significance. Minimalism offers a *tabula rasa* on which nonrelational and independent aesthetic entities come unto themselves – the transumption of an entity from its material topos to its *poietic atopos*. In this way the radical material of a quantitative ontology is established *apart* from quality as such, while still acting as ground for the emergence of the same. Qualities emerge and are incorporated into elaborate, meaningful sequences on the basis of the Real, which, in turn, is informed by a quantitative understanding of Being.

The taking-place of quantity, so central to minimalism, presses us into the problematic aesthetic region where the difference between conceptual and actual negation is easily missed. Should the negative shape which accompanies the process of identification become indiscernible from the threat of the actual annihilation of an entity, then the price which such a practice demands from us is undoubtedly too high. Aesthetic minimalism frequently traces the extreme boundaries of this distinction, pressing us towards the

[1030] Ibid., 15.
[1031] Ibid.

often uncomfortable proximity of pure quantity and pure destruction. It summons us to vigilance: to an awareness of the simplicity of taking-place, to the facticity of an entity's persistence, and to an unambiguous positivity at the heart of that which is Real. Regardless of whether we aspire to minimum through a process of progressive abstraction and simplification, or regard minimum as integral ground upon which an entity might be defined, minimalism reflects a concern with this parsimonious facticity. If the distinction between existence and inexistence is minimal, it is nonetheless paramount.

This is an essential characteristic of Samuel Beckett's work. He presses the difficult interaction of structural negation and destructive negation in a direction quite distinct from Hegelian sublation, towards the transcendental change central to the negativity of Schopenhauer's philosophy. This, Weller notes, is the moment "in which the very distinction between subject and object is overcome"[1032] through a real abolition which exposes a "nothing other than nothing"[1033] which can be mediated positively only by a type of ecstatic or rapturous quasi-transcendence.[1034] Importantly, such quasi-transcendence does not actually leave the field of Being in relation to which it gestures its transcendence. Much as in the case of Amalric's *taking-place*, transcendence is immanent to existence. For Beckett, writing describes the theatre of thought. Thought, in its turn, is both our point of access and final barrier to the stuff of existence. As is well acknowledged, Beckett is particularly concerned with the most minimal intensities of existence: the moment of death, and those situations in which death seems imminent, but in which we persist nonetheless. These are moments of extraordinary self-reflexivity. Yet it would be an error to regard Beckett's work as conventionally metafictional. He is not writing about writing, or even directly about the creative process, although much might be implicit in this regard. Beckett writes about thought, or more specifically he writes about thinking about thought. More accurately still, Beckett, at his best, is writing about thinking about the intense struggle between thought and the absence of thought as analogues for Being and non-Being. Language and its mediation through the voice and writing might be our most obvious points of access to this struggle, but they are not necessarily our most immediate, hence the significance of physical movement, theatrical staging and the mediation of the voice by sound recording and radio, and of the body and its movement by television and film.

As Meillassoux astutely notes, the phenomenological assertion that it is impossible to gain knowledge of the intrinsic nature of Being is predicated on the assumption that Being is inextricable from thought:[1035]

[1032] Weller, *Taste for Negative*, 82.
[1033] Ibid., 83.
[1034] Ibid.
[1035] *AF*, 5.

the dogma that "[w]e cannot represent the 'in itself' without it becoming 'for us.'"[1036] For the most part, Beckett's work offers a significant radicalization of this relation between Being and thought, but remains subdued by its own phenomenology insofar as it refuses or fails to disengage from thought. Yet occasionally, and only momentarily, we encounter in this remarkable writing a *poietic intuition* of the Real: the work acts as the minimal place-keeper of that which is independent of either thought or existence. At this point art assumes the responsibility of presenting generic being, which is to say, of presenting the force of generation itself as the singular point entirely exterior to existence. This is the mode of generic being which Beckett gestures towards in terms of death, and which Agamben refers to as *whatever* being, "what is most difficult to think: the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority."[1037] For Beckett, although writing is itself a gesture subject to the weakness and transience of its own inscription of Being, and one that cannot ordinarily effect the fantasies of exteriority that it reports, it nonetheless traces the severe limitations of its powers with such patience and persistence that it becomes a strange source of consolation. To be certain, Beckett understands well that it is not only eminently possible, but necessary, for all living organisms to die. What writing witnesses is the struggle of consciousness to render pure exteriority an object of knowledge by recognizing the minimal point at which the entity expresses itself as a vanishing trace of its own existence.

The mere taking-place of the voice, language and writing, partner the persistence of the body and the material world, and condition, however tentatively, the possibility of a recuperative gesture. Beckett's *no* is thus not negative, so much as it is *subtractive*, to use the term central to Alain Badiou's thought. It is vital here to recall the difference between Being and existence. The former, in Badiou's formulation, is a field of pure multiplicity. Existence, the particularity of an entity or situation, is subtracted from being, but without in any sense diminishing its multiplicity. Subtraction discerns something positive within existence from that which, in every sense, is indifferent to either positivity or negation. Subtraction is thus simultaneously negative and positive: the former insofar as it negates through existence the illusion that multiplicity is a totality, and hence a particular quantity rather than quantity in-itself; the latter inasmuch as that which is subtracted is indeed a positing and sustaining of new entities.

We might say that Beckett's work devotes itself to subtractive points of existential transition between exteriority and interiority. At one point, subtraction problematizes the relation between minimum and nothingness, as well as any possible representation of the instant of vanishing from existence. At another

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[1036] Ibid., 4.
[1037] *CC*, 67.

point this transition is that at which an entity begins in its persistence within the Real, that is, enters into the progressive temporal situation according to the contingent laws through which it coheres. In both cases, this transition presents an attempt to come to grips with quantity, as a point of minimal negativity: the *least possible* for existence to persist, and the *least necessary* for existence to persist.

We might say that minimalism persists insofar as it is complicit with the Real. While what is Real is necessarily independent of any particular entity, and so also indifferent to the qualities of such entities, it is not indifferent to the quantitative facticity of the taking-place of these entities themselves. This point is perhaps clearest in the case of Hegelian dialectics, where saying *no* converts itself into the minimal positive facticity of "something taking its course,"[1038] to recall Beckett's existentially pointed phrase. As we have seen, the manner in which structural negation recuperates positivity is well accounted for in the Hegelian dialectic. The properly procedural element of taking-place – that act and facticity are confluent in describing *that* something takes place – further pulls the positive from the flames of negation, and seems also to attest to the re-ascendency of quantity in the consideration of Being.

Even in extreme cases of negation it is necessary to recall this residual procedural positivity. Beckett's "Texts for Nothing" pursues pure absence relentlessly – "Is it possible, is that the possible thing at last, the extinction of this black nothing and its impossible shades, the end of the farce of making and the silencing of silence."[1039] As is often the case in Beckett's work, the human voice – "a voice murmuring a trace," the fading intensity yet stubborn persistence of consciousness[1040] – mediates not only between existence and non-existence ("extinction"), but also between being *qua* existence (entities) and being *qua* being (pure multiplicity). If negation and the fantasy of its absolute predication in nothingness accentuate, in the words of Levinas, the "weariness which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself…the weariness concern[ing] existence itself,"[1041] it also returns us to the procedural aspect of our being.

Poiesis might manifest in consciousness as the "the farce of making,"[1042] but its ontological significance – the production of novelty, perhaps even something out of nothing – retains a radical significance. Of this existential pull between affirmation and negation, Beckett asks the following: "And whose the shame,

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[1038] Beckett, "Endgame," 98, 107.
[1039] Samuel Beckett, "Texts for Nothing," 154.
[1040] Ibid.
[1041] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1988), 11. Hereafter *EE*.
[1042] Beckett, "Texts for Nothing," 154.

having to say…so many times the same lie lyingly denied, whose the screaming silence of no's knife in yes's wound, it wonders."[1043] In existence, if presence is always weakened by the apparently negative structure of identification, that negation is itself the primary stuff of Being is cast into radical doubt by the sheer presence of our quantitative being. There is no denying that this presence is weakened, indeed injured, by the "same lie lyingly denied" – our stubborn denial of the fact that we remain unable to articulate the moment of our disappearance – whether passive or active, violent or non-violent. The impossibility of finitude, in a significant sense, conditions our possible responses to finitude.

10. THE TENSION OF NOTHINGNESS AND MINIMUM

a) Nihilism and an approach to minimum

There are many ways of saying *no*, and although such *saying* is itself existentially positive, this should not lull us into the fantasy that its consequences cannot involve genuine destruction or elimination. Several of these concerns play out in the various species of nihilism, "in its origin [as]…a failure to accept the world as it is, resenting the fact that the world is devoid of a goal, unity or meaning,"[1044] and discovering ways "to endure the meaninglessness, the chaos of the world."[1045] For Simon Critchley the experience of constitutive absence is permeated by an overwhelming sense of disappointment: political disillusionment in the prospect of universal justice, and religious disenchantment provoked by the pervasive failure of universal meaning or transcendental truth.[1046] So entwined is nihilism with the emergence of philosophical reason, that it is no exaggeration to see it as the implicit operator in the work of Socrates, which places at the heart of the dialectic the pull between the consistency of existence and the desistance of nothingness. Negativity is intimated equally in the immanence of Being – uncovered through both formal and informal procedures of dubitation – as it is in the possibility of transcendence, which negates the ordinary situation of being.

[1043] Ibid.
[1044] Bülent Diken, *Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 15.
[1045] Ibid.
[1046] Critchley, *Very Little*, 2-3.

Nihilism and the *via negativa* of apophatic theology often reveal deep concordances insofar as they are plaited together in much scholastic thought. The summit of the latter is reached in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, which maintains that if the existence of God is in-itself unknowable to us, it is still possible to affirm this existence – either through revelation, which positively circumvents the field of knowledge entirely, or through oblique means, which are both *a posteriori* and structurally negative.[1047] Aquinas articulates the latter in terms of the *quinque viae*[1048] – the five paths or arguments which he develops from Aristotle in affirming the existence of God. He argues that knowledge is conditioned on the limits presented by material existence, and that it is therefore impossible to grasp the essence of God or to deduce the relation between the transcendental and immanent (material) from the vertiginous absence of knowledge regarding this divine essence. Rather, we are obliged to begin any such inquiry into the existence of God immersed in the field of effects themselves and, through negative interrogation, patiently to eliminate uncertainty. This constitutes a significant strategy in the apophatic or negative theological tradition, influencing not only subsequent generations of theologians and philosophers, but also those who engage more directly with nihilism.

It was the German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi who first employed the term *nihilism* to oppose what he saw in the transcendental idealism of his contemporaries[1049] as a dangerous reduction of the conceptual and the existential to a single field of absolute solipsism.[1050] As Critchley reports, "for Jacobi, Fichtean idealism is nihilism…because it allows the existence of nothing outside or apart from the ego and the ego is itself nothing but a product of the 'free power of the imagination.'" [1051] Jacobi, a man of conservative faith, held that the philosophical systematicity of both idealism and atheism end in nihilism. His (Jacobi's) opposition to nihilism is at least in part vindicated by the activity of the Russian nihilists of the 1860s and 1870s. The transposition of nihilism from the sphere of metaphysics to the field of anarchic and often violent political practice occurs in the context of social disillusionment and the failure of the

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[1047] Ralph McInerny, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/. 20 November 2011.

[1048] The following are the five ways which Aquinas asserts prove the existence of God: the unmoved mover – "a first cause of change not itself being changed by anything" (Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. Timothy McDermott (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 200); first agent cause (ibid., 200-01); necessity – "we are forced to postulate something which of itself must be, owing this to nothing outside itself, but being itself the cause that other things must be" (ibid., 201); degree of perfection – "there is something which causes…whatever…perfections they have" (ibid.); teleology – "everything in nature is directed to its goal by someone with understanding" (ibid., 202).

[1049] Amongst them the late Enlightenment defenders of rationalism, Kant, Fichte and Schelling.

[1050] George di Giovanni, "Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/friedrich-jacobi/. 20 November 2011.

[1051] Critchley, *Very Little,* 3-4.

systematic programme of idealist thought to instigate decisive change.[1052] An essential field of conflict becomes apparent between the nihilistic politico-aesthetic disposition of Chernyshevsky, the poetry of Lermontov, and the novels of Turgenev[1053] on the one hand, and what Dostoevksy, in an oppositional mode apposite to that offered by Jacobi, decries as "the nihilisms or indifferentism of the Russian educated classes…[in which] suicide is the only logical conclusion."[1054]

The coordinates of Russian nihilism remain within the greater constellation marked axiomatically by Jacobi in which one either opposes nihilism by affirming the existence of God, or embraces atheism, annihilation and Nothingness.[1055] It is Nietzsche – arguably the most penetrating modern thinker of the relationship between nothingness, thought and being – who steps decisively beyond the field of mere consolation or disappointment in relation to religion:

> *The new fundamental condition: our conclusive transitoriness. I –* Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine *origin*: this has now become a forbidden way…One therefore now tries the opposite direction: the way mankind is *going* shall serve as proof of its grandeur and kinship with God. Alas, this, too, is vain! At the end of this way stands the funeral urn of the *last* man and gravedigger (with the inscription '*nihil humani a me alienum puto*'[I judge nothing that is human as alien to me – the words of Roman playwright Terence]).[1056]

Insisting that religion is the cause of nihilism, rather than its antidote, Nietzsche moves decisively apart from the prevailing social, political and theological thought of his time. Our principal task becomes one of recognizing that "nihilism is a failure to accept the world as it is."[1057] Responding adequately to the religious nihilism, which "posits some values superior to life and negates life in the name of those 'higher values', values that are a condition of all other values" requires a radical reconsideration of the transcendental. "[T]he will for a moral interpretation or valuation of the word now appears to be a will to untruth."[1058] Yet the drive to a horizon which "at last…seems to us again free, even it is not bright"[1059] is undiminished. If our highest values have been rendered inoperative – if "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him"[1060] – we can in no sense legitimise a melancholic, inertial drifting in existence. To the contrary, if what was mistaken for absolute truth is indeed a world in which fable has effective

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[1052] Ibid., 5.

[1053] Ibid., 5-6.

[1054] Critchley, *Very Little,* 5.

[1055] Ibid., 4.

[1056] Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader*, trans. R. J. Hollindale (Oxford: Penguin, 1977), 199.

[1057] Diken, *Nihilism*, 15.

[1058] Critchley, *Very Little,* 7.

[1059] Nietzsche, *Reader*, 209.

[1060] Ibid., 203.

capacity,[1061] we are enjoined to participate, to press towards the discovery of our "innate disposition to seek in all things that which must be *overcome* in them."[1062]

The central promise of Nietzsche's philosophical agenda resides in overcoming the destitution which emerges when we capitulate to the destructive element of negation: that strictly void part of being which cannot be presented as such except through annihilation. From a sustained resistance to a simplistic understanding of value, meaning and truth it becomes possible to recuperate some of those pivotal elements of thought itself. In the understanding of existence this engenders, the emphasis shifts from stable Being to unstable becoming. "Nihilism," Vattimo maintains, "is still developing."[1063] In this light nihilism cannot be asserted plausibly as an accomplished task – either in historical or in metaphysical terms – and it unceasingly obliges us to redefine our relation to it.[1064] The accomplished nihilist is the one for whom the challenge of discovering "new categories and new values that will permit us to endure the world of becoming,"[1065] is ongoing.

Both the existentialist and the hermeneutic heirs of the Nietzschean legacy see this clearly. The affinities between the versions of nihilism offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger become unavoidable, according to Vattimo, as soon as we accept that the transformation of value lies at the heart of any nihilist equation.[1066] Likewise, the work of Sartre or Levinas, only imaginable within the orbit of Nietzschean existentialism, concerns itself with the transformatory potential of a consideration of nothingness[1067] and *nihilation*.[1068] Equally, the pervasive mood of postmodernism – doubt regarding the prospective predication of universality by the paths opened by humanism[1069] – cannot be comprehended merely as reactions against the apparent failures of modernity, but must also be understood, so asserts Vattimo, as a positive field,

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[1061] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 24-7; Critchley, *Very Little,* 7.

[1062] Nietzsche, *Reader*, 209.

[1063] Vattimo, *End*, 19.

[1064] Ibid., 19.

[1065] Critchley, *Very Little*, 8

[1066] "For Nietzsche the entire process of nihilism can be summarized by… 'the devaluation of the highest values.' For Heidegger, Being is annihilated insofar as it is transformed completely into value...[F]or Heidegger, it seems possible and desirable to go beyond nihilism, while for Nietzsche the accomplishment of nihilism is all that we should wait and hope for" (Vattimo, *End*, 20) – recalling that accomplishment must be understood in terms of the transformation of value, rather than destruction in its rawest form.

[1067] Much of Levinas' early thought centres on an existential counterpoint with that part of being which in its raw facticity is prior to any possible conceptualization, which he terms the *il y a* (there is).

[1068] Sartre identifies the transition from that part of an entity which is *in-itself* to that part which is *for-itself* – the dialectic movement between abstract metaphysics and a practical (existentialist) ontology – by asserting that a process of (quasi-dialectic) *nihilation* occurs within what is in-itself.

[1069] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 6-7.

inaugurated by Nietzsche. According to Vattimo, the particular project of Nietzschean nihilism inaugurates the postmodern era.[1070] However, this project also proves a problematic proposition, since it advocates the view that nihilism is something to be overcome, drawing it back into constructive discourse and preventing its delivering up the *nothing* it seems to promise.

The task of defining nihilism is intimately bound to the transformation rather than the destitution of value: a *trans-valuation*. "[N]ihilism is the consumption of use-value in exchange-value,"[1071] suggests Vattimo. Such situations of existence are increasingly decoupled from either transcendence or *telos*, feeding into a dystopian Marxism in which we experience a "generalized reification…the reduction of everything to exchange-value,"[1072] and what remains in circulation is the force of forcing without any real direction, or the energy of instruments without any real instrumentality. "Nihilism does not mean that Being is in the power of the subject,"[1073] as many, including Jacobi and the Russian nihilists, insist. "[R]ather it means that Being is completely dissolved in the discoursing of value, in the indefinite transformations of universal equivalence."[1074] *Nihil* or nothingness – doubtless the most slippery of all concepts – requires of us a patient discernment of the most plausible amongst a series of possible responses. Critchley identifies five possible responses. The first is a refusal of nihilism, reaffirming an essentially naive, even religious, metaphysics,[1075] while the second is an indifference to nihilism, which habitually resolves itself in an annoying agnostic cheerfulness.[1076] Perhaps most pervasive in the contemporary west, is a passive nihilism which accepts the diagnosis of meaninglessness and makes no great effort to reconstitute these conditions.[1077] By contrast, active nihilism embraces "a violent force of destruction…which imagines itself as the propaedeutic to a revolution of everyday life."[1078] Finally, Critchley believes it is possible to delineate nihilism – a delineation which rests on a broadly deconstructive approach that "keep[s] open the slightest difference between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be…Hope against hope. Austere messianism. Very little."[1079]

[1070] Vattimo, *End*, 164.

[1071] Vattimo, *End*,. 22.

[1072] Ibid., 26.

[1073] Ibid., 22

[1074] Ibid.

[1075] Critchley, *Very Little,* 10-11.

[1076] Ibid.,11.

[1077] Ibid.

[1078] Ibid.

[1079] Ibid., 24; See ibid., 11-12 where the problem of delineating nihilism is stated; and ibid., 13-24 for Critchley's exposition of the philosophical nuances involved here.

b) Nothingness and existence

Rescuing nothingness from nihilism is an activity which affirms that the least which is possible – minimum – remains a positive phenomenon. Accomplishing this extraction requires the reiteration, following Badiou, of a central ontological position of the present work: Being itself is explicable only in terms of pure multiplicity, and is *non-identical* to existence.[1080] The latter arises within pure multiplicity, is itself composed of multiples, but does not eliminate multiplicity. We might clarify the existential field by schematizing it according to the three principal ways it is given within a general situation of Being: *existence* – the positive arising or appearance of entities; *inexistence* – the disappearance of entities; *nonexistence* – the non-appearance of entities. The last is necessarily difficult to grasp, as it attempts to approximate non-Being from the perspective of Being, or, stated otherwise, to represent the situation in which the very potential that an entity could emerge is entirely impossible. Returning in this light to the distinction between existence and Being, it becomes clearer that pure ontological *nothingness* can be admitted, even as an impossibility, only if we capitulate to that most totalizing and religious of all dogmas: *that the One is*. For, if pure nothingness is synonymous with non-existence, then it belongs to pure multiplicity, which is something;[1081] but if it participates neither in existence nor in Being, then as non-Being, it has no part in multiplicity. In this light, it is necessary to dispense with non-existence as a possible key to comprehending nothingness, for this would effectively revive the apophatic dogma that God is Nothingness.[1082]

The absence of a simple equation between nothingness and non-existence returns us to the patient, if often paradoxical, interrogation conducted within the ambit of existentialism. Here the tension between existence and non-existence is habitually at its greatest. In this regard, we might recall firstly that, for Heidegger, nothingness cannot be despatched by any metaphysics. In fact, nothingness proves to be the proper subject of a metaphysics freed from precisely such an ontotheological limitation of Being as mentioned above, which Heidegger's project sets itself to dismantle.[1083] In so doing, he recentres the

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[1080] Alain Badiou, "Existence and Death," trans. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, *Discourse* 24.1 (2002): 68.

[1081] Recalling that existence is in every instance a contingent stabilization of the multiplicity of pure Being.

[1082] This would obliterate even the possibility of a model of causation not derived finally from an absolute assertion of the force of divine will.

[1083] Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," *Basic Writings: Nine Essays, plus, the Introduction of* Being and Time," ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 108; Abraham Stone, "Heidegger and Carnap on the Overcoming of Metaphysics," *Martin Heidegger*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 222; 239.

question of nothingness in a manner which remains stubbornly unsatisfied by any recourse to the familiar dialectic formula of Hegelian thought, that "becoming is the *transition* between being and nothingness."[1084] Neither does Heidegger accept that nothingness can be rendered impotent by the manner in which it is rejected by science – which refuses it on the basis that it can distil from nothingness no object which it is able to quantify or scrutinize[1085] – or by logic[1086] – which locates nothingness at the furthest extreme of a process of negation, as a "formal concept of the imagined nothing"[1087] resting on "nonbeing pure and simple."[1088] "[T]he nothing is the nothing," Heidegger contends, "and if the nothing represents total indistinguishability no distinction can obtain between the imagined and the 'proper' nothing." Nothingness is by this estimation most certainly real.[1089] As to whether we arrive at nothing by a process of negation, or whether nothingness is a point of departure, Heidegger is unambiguous: "nothing is more original than the 'not' and negation."[1090]

By claiming for the notion of *Angst*[1091] the status of a *Grundstimmung*, a fundamental pre-cognitive mood marked by an "indeterminate unease or dread,"[1092] Heidegger believed he had uncovered a reliable point of contact between nothingness and the finitude of *Dasein*.[1093] "Being and the nothing do belong together,"[1094] he suggests, "because Being...reveals itself only in the transcendence of *Dasein* which is held out into nothing."[1095] In *Being and Nothingness* – the opening of which is an extended meditation on the contradiction at the heart of Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics?* – Sartre understands nihilation as the

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[1084] Stephen Priest, "Nothingness," *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London and New York: Routledge), 2001, 135.

[1085] Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 95-6.

[1086] Ibid., 96-7, 99.

[1087] Ibid., 99. On the relation of this point of logic to ontology, Heidegger might easily be misread, or judged inconsistent, as he is by Paul Edwards (Paul Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusion*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), 108-111.

[1088] Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 97.

[1089] Stone, "Heidegger and Carnap;" Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusion*, 101.

[1090] Heidegger intends 'not' and negation synonymously (Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 97): the former indicates the prefix which marks a negated substantive; the latter is more clearly associable with a process.

[1091] It was Kierkegaard who first fixed *Angst* at the heart of the existentialist enterprise (Stone, "Heidegger and Carnap," 225).

[1092] Ibid.

[1093] "Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility – that is, in a finite way – come to themselves" (Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 108). In this way he seeks to address the very moment of entrapment in metaphysics which, he believes, Nietzsche fails to apprehend in seeking to overcome nihilism (Critchley, *Very Little*, 13-6).

[1094] Here Heidegger adapts an Hegelian formula (Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 108).

[1095] Ibid. Claiming that for Heidegger "we may think of Being only as *gewesen*, only as what is not present (any longer)," Vattimo confirms that structural necessity of a negative transcendence is evident also from the perspective of existence (Vattimo, *End*, 174).

necessary manner by which negation makes differentiation, and consequent identity, possible,[1096] and that this is an intrinsic operation insofar as "only *Being* can nihilate itself."[1097] It is difficult not to counter this claim with the essentially Kantian observation – simple but compelling – that there is no manner of reaching this conclusion unless some sort of transcendental consciousness is presupposed. Certainly, an existential position sensitive to the situatedness and circularity of any hermeneutic by which it might seek to unravel its own nature,[1098] exhibits an awareness of this problem, but such an awareness is far from an adequate resolution. For instance, from the outset of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre demonstrates an admirable grasp of the difficulties which consciousness brings to the examination of nothingness.[1099] Nonetheless, we can proceed only by an axiomatic decision – an extension of the Parmenidean axiom of the One – which finally diminishes the claim of consciousness in this regard: either nothingness is, or it is not. Having decided in favour of the former, there are considerably fewer impediments to accepting that nothingness possess a paradoxical agency – "the nothing itself nihilates;"[1100] "nothingness is not"[1101] – which somehow circumvents either external- or self-reference. Fundamentally ineffable, such agency conditions the irreconcilable situation in which "[n]othingness can be conceived neither outside of Being, nor in terms of Being."[1102] Thus, not only is it possible that "[n]othingness beyond the world accounts for absolute negation" – since the agency of nothingness and that of *Dasein*, defined in terms of the appearance and subsequent directedness towards finitude of beings within a world, are viewed as inextricable – but also that we are able to endure the *caesura* which Sartre contends is a "permanent possibility"[1103] in any relation of a questioner to the question of nothingness.[1104]

[1096] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An essay in phenomenological ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1969), 7-9. Hereafter *BN*.

[1097] Ibid., 22.

[1098] Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 1, 5. In the shadow of Dilthey, Heidegger and Sartre (the latter by his adoption of a Heideggerian position in this respect) regard the posing of questions regarding ontology as adequate evidence of the facticity of Being (Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 96-7; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 4, 23-4; Priest, *Nothingness*, 135).

[1099] *BN*, 3-4. In properly phenomenological terms, this problem might be paraphrased in terms of the constitution of *intentional objects*.

[1100] Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 103. Heidegger writes, "*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*," retaining *nicht* at the root of both noun and verb, the latter which has been translated as *nothings* or *noths* in addition to *nihilates* (Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusion*, 102).

[1101] *BN*, 22. It is important to stress in this phrase *is* refers to the active being of nothingness, and does not rest merely on the linguistic ambiguity this phrase evidently evokes. There is a subtle but important intensification of negation in Heidegger's claim – "the nothing is the nothing" – which is quoted above.

[1102] Ibid.

[1103] Ibid., 23.

[1104] Such a situation is not structurally dissimilar to the Husserlian *epochē* (see page 143 of the present work). In a remarkable passage, which provides a rapid and incisive summary of this work, Sartre identifies this *caesura* as "a double movement of nihilation…[in which the questioner] nihilates the thing questioned in relation to himself by placing it in a neutral state, between being and nonbeing – and that he nihilates himself in relation to the thing

In clear distinction from the earlier account of Being as essentially quantitative, the representation of nothingness offered by Heidegger and Sartre is noteworthy for its qualitative contours. After all, it is by various processes of qualitative distinction, differentiation, negation and synthesis that nothingness is pursued. A quantitative account of nothingness would need to retain a degree of indifference – of *ungivenness* – foreign to both thinkers. Two particularly interesting interventions in this difficult field arrive in Emmanuel Levinas' elaboration of the *il y a*[1105] – the "impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depth of nothingness...[which,] inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is 'being in general'"[1106] – and in Giorgio Agamben's formulation of a metaphysical "ungroundedness"[1107] which reveals an unmediated belonging in language.

Agamben's thoughtful work on the great struggle within which our metaphysical, cognitive and linguistic relations to nothingness embroil us, continues to receive considerable and deserved attention. We restrict our present commentary to a few remarks regarding the manner in which Agamben has sought to redress the Heideggerian legacy in which nothingness is taken as the *ground* upon which the essential activity of Being takes shape as a relation to finitude. In *Language and Death* Agamben traces this "fundamental ontological dimension"[1108] to the occurrence of *Voice* – a disposition "[*n*]*o longer* the experience of mere sound and *not yet* the experience of a meaning,"[1109] between "the voice as sound...or the animal *phonē*,"[1110] and the production of linguistic meaning.[1111]

Of a particular resonance here is the affective presence which marks Meredith Monk's minimalist-inflected vocal music. Exemplifying the composer's search for "clear and simple structure[s] that would allow for primal yet transparent vocal qualities,"[1112] Monk's "Arctic Bar" (Track 20)[1113] is a potent instantiation of minimalism's affective capacity – habitually glossed over, but undeniably significant to its popularity and critical success. Simple, direct and exuberant, this work exhibits the peculiar

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questioned by wrenching himself from being in order to be able to bring out of himself the possibility of a non-being" (ibid.).

[1105] I have preferred the original *il y a* over the English *there is* for the sake of consistency and ease of distinction.

[1106] *EE*, 52.

[1107] *LD*, xiii.

[1108] Ibid., 32.

[1109] Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Language," *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 42.

[1110] Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 17.

[1111] Ibid.

[1112] Meredith Monk, "From Liner for *Facing North* Album, 1992," *Meredith Monk*, 167.

[1113] Meredith Monk, "Arctic Bar," *Facing North*. ECM, 1992.

combination of predictability and angularity which characterizes the minimalist approach to harmonic rhythm,[1114] constituting the ground upon which Monk's singularly "expressive personal style"[1115] takes shape. At once atavistic, passionate and rational,[1116] "Arctic Bar" evokes "the elemental, bracing clarity of the northern landscape."[1117]

Although its words are of no actual language, their emotional immediacy is undeniable. This is a *happy* song, with no small hint of affective inebriation (its setting is, after all, a bar). The work explores a radical vision of vocality *qua* breath, as a most immediate performance of *eudaimonia* – a human life of goodness, virtue, fulfilment and happiness.[1118] Monk's minimalism does not sidestep the voice as a mimetic intermediary: it imitates the rhythms and intonation of Inuit speech, and most certainly the barks, yelps and howls of husky dogs or northern wolves, and the play of plosives with dotted whining diphthongs is intoxicating in its vivacity. Similarly evocative is the hocketting of breath-effects between Monk and Een – the inhalation and exhalation of panting voicelessness, which is a radical marker of organic processes of vocality, also evoking the hardships and toils typical of the northern cold, and strengthening the sense of kinship between the two characters in *Facing North*. The physicality of the landscape is equally audible: apparently barren, but in fact pulsing with life,[1119] its vital expanses echo in the sustained octaves towards the end of the work.

As a counterpoint to the starkness of the music which surrounds it in *Facing North*, "Arctic Bar" offers a moment of intimacy and vulnerability in a landscape of extremes. Here the interplay, between the contained simplicity of the repetitive piano obbligato and the buoyant, improvisatory vocal lines, renders maximally transparent the tension between regularity and unpredictability[1120] which characterizes the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum elaborates the classical view according to

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[1114] Harmonic nodes appear asymmetrically but consistently, and within a straightforward diatonic frame, offering points of partial convergence within the overall structure, over which a quasi-improvisatory vocal line expresses a sense of controlled freedom which is characteristic of much ethnic and folk music. As with most minimalism and postminimalism, repetition here is modular with minor additions to the original module contributing to the propulsiveness of the composition. In terms of perceptible structure, the work consists of two sixteen-bar cycles alternately repeated seven times, subtly asymmetrical in themselves and in relation to one another.

[1115] Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 190.

[1116] According to Schwartz, "[t]here is a beguiling enchantment and endearing ingenuousness to everything she [Monk] does – a quality that might be described as naïve if that word didn't have pejorative connotations" (ibid.)

[1117] Monk, Liner Notes, *Facing North*, 167.

[1118] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), xii.

[1119] Monk captures these numerous aspects of the work beautifully in her liner notes in terms of a "barren wilderness and the fortitude and tenderness of two people surviving within it" (Monk, Liner Notes, *Facing North*, 168).

[1120] "There is a real gap between being good and living well; uncontrolled happening can step into this gap, impeding the good state of character from finding its fulfilment" (Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 334).

which *eudaimonia* is predicated very precisely upon accepting or overcoming the vicissitudes and unpredictabilities which mark existence. *Eudaimonia* necessarily involves activity: "[t]he good condition of a virtuous character…is a kind of preparation for activity; it finds its natural fulfilment and flourishing in activity."[1121] My claim is that "Arctic Bar" is affective of happiness precisely to the extent that it prompts both an internal and external sense of activity:[1122] the former, structurally, in the momentum which the interplay of the subtly asymmetrical repetitive accompaniment and improvisatory vocal lines effect; the latter, in the affective relationship its vocality establishes with the listener. In both cases the minimalist exposition of Voice *qua* embodiment and as a passage to the pre-linguistic, is crucial. Indeed, Nussbaum maintains that "all human experiences are embodied, and thus realized in some kind of material process. This given, human emotions are finally embodied processes as well. However, the question is, are there any bodily states or processes that are constantly correlated with our experiences of emotion."[1123]

In this light, the question posed by Monk's "Arctic Bar" is the following: is there something in the physics of this music – the combination of its vocalic expressiveness and direct, repetitive figures – which is capable of triggering the relatively consistent affective material we identify as a type of happiness? If this is indeed the case, then it might be possible to suggest that Voice reaches beyond mere form and structure, to the most radical positive relation between material and affect. Regarding such an unambiguously affirmative existentialism Agamben is rather more cautious. For him, Voice tries to grasp the "event of language"[1124] within an "interstitial"[1125] *topos* – a place of "originary negativity sustaining every negation"[1126] insofar as it reveals a radical "ungroundedness,"[1127] the "negative ground of man's appearance in language."[1128] The conceptual trajectory is in numerous places proximate to the concerns regarding nothingness developed by Heidegger and Sartre:[1129] "Voice signifies...to become capable of

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[1121] Ibid., 324

[1122] Nussbaum provides a good summary of the relation between *energeia* and *eudaimonia* as it is represented by Aristotle (ibid., 325-27). White notes, "[i]f there's to be a structure [of happiness]…it needs to be a dynamic structure" (Nicholas P. White, *A Brief History of Happiness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 79).

[1123] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 58.

[1124] Agamben, *Idea of Language*, 42.

[1125] Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 17.

[1126] *LD*, 36.

[1127] Ibid., xiii; Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 178.

[1128] Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 17.

[1129] *LD*, 31, 56-7.,

another death – no longer simply a deceasing, but a person's ownmost and insuperable possibility, the *possibility* of freedom."[1130]

Yet, we ought not to miss that Agamben urges thought beyond this impasse. Certainly it is true that he regards Voice as the *topos* upon which the corresponding human faculties of language and death relate to one another.[1131] Through an interplay of structural negation,[1132] language and death interrogate one another: reflection on our linguistic capacity entertains a fascination with persistence, just as the reflection on existential persistence reveals that our most ready means of indicating the place of Being is through the event of language.[1133] However, persistence is clearly thwarted by finitude and death, even as our awareness of our own death is subject to a failed negotiation between language and the experience of existence.[1134] To the extent that Voice traverses this boundary between language and finitude, it indicates the taking-place of language *in* time. However, it is towards the "taking-place of language *as* time"[1135] – towards language *qua* language,[1136] or an Absolute which is beyond any "difference between showing and telling, being and entity, world and thing"[1137] – that Agamben's thought directs us. By "indicating the pure taking place of language without any determinate event of meaning," Agamben suggests "there is still the possibility of thought beyond meaningful propositions."[1138] Here is a significantly novel articulation of archaic nothingness which, in fact, makes room for the recuperation of the facticity of positive Being where it seemed most remote. To accomplish this, Agamben sets himself the ambitious task of identifying "the originary mythogeme of metaphysics in the silence of the Voice"[1139] – a tentative gesture beyond this silence, towards "language without Voice, a word that is not grounded in any

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[1130] Ibid., 86.

[1131] Ibid., xii; Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 11.

[1132] This negation is internal to language and death inasmuch as the interrogation of either is structurally negative – structuralism revealed this in a particularly concrete way as regards the former, while the latter offers us no positive object for contemplation – but, more significantly, it is proper to relation itself.

[1133] Agamben emphasizes that "[f]or Heidegger, as for Hegel, negativity enters into man because man has to be this taking place [of language], he wants to seize the event of language" (*LD*, 31).

[1134] Drawing attention to the manner in which in *Being and Time* Heidegger refuses the simple association of voice on Being on the basis of a distinction of a being from Being in general, of a differentiation of the "living being (with his voice) and man (with his language)" (*LD*, 55), Agamben claims that "Dasein – since language is not its voice – can never grasp the taking place of language, it can never be its *Da* (the pure instance, the pure event of language) without discovering that it is always already thrown and consigned to discourse" (*LD*, 56). In Agamben's estimation, Voice enters Heidegger's conception of negativity in "What is Metaphysics?" (*LD*, 60) and more decisively still in his later conception of the *eventality* of Being in terms of *Ereignis* - "the co-belonging of Being and time" (*LD*, 101) – which demonstrates how Heidegger finally comes to view the Voice as "that which gives and attunes Being and time" (*LD*, 102).

[1135] *LD*, 99.

[1136] Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 21.

[1137] *LD*, 92.

[1138] Agamben, *Idea of Language*, 43.

[1139] *LD*, 94.

meaning,"[1140] and which "remains to be thought as the most human dimension."[1141] It seeks the aperture to a manner of existing outside of our bondage to absolute negativity – to make of this ungroundedness an "*ethos* of humanity by grasping the simple fact of our 'having' language."[1142]

Here, where the connection between the aleatory frailty but persistence of the human voice becomes apparent, Beckett's writing – its growing silence and increasing disembodiment by various technologies of reproduction and mediation – exhibits a increasing discomfort in relation to the apparent compulsion to exist. Voice marks our spectral, linguistic citizenship of a *poietic* atopia even as it retreats, in this withdrawal intimating precisely the aesthetic *thought beyond meaning* which, no longer bound in a relation to finitude, recognizes its infinite vocation of presenting the taking-place of the Real. In their opposition to the Heideggerian measurement of Being as a relation to finitude, Agamben and Badiou share a commitment to discovering the radix of pure Being *qua* infinitude, albeit Badiou's formulation of multiplicity takes its shape from mathematics, while Agamben asserts the primacy of language. For the latter, it is *in-fancy*[1143] – the radix prior to language[1144] that is necessary for Being to emerge through language – which we approximate in trying to grasp language *qua* language. Language, insofar as it carries meaning, presents the vehicle for an existential maximalism. Language *qua* language, on the other hand, seeks to expose that, prior to meaning, language exists as pure *means*[1145] – an admirable minimalism, for certain. In aesthetic terms, might we not recall Perreault's claim, cited above, that "[w]hat is minimal about Minimal Art...is the *means* not the end,"[1146] extending it to suggest that perhaps

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[1140] Ibid., 95.

[1141] Ibid., 96; See Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 12.

[1142] Ibid., 21.

[1143] *In-fancy* is "a primary experience...[which is] before language: a 'worldless' experience in the literal sense of the term, a human *infancy* [*in-fancy*], whose boundary would be marked by language" (Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 54). Hereafter *IH*. As Deranty emphasizes, what is *before language* finally must be understood pragmatically, as "prior to language use and not to language in general" (Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Witnessing the Inhuman," *The Agamben Effect*, ed. Alison Ross, spec. issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107.1 (2008): 170), since *in-fancy* "coexists in its origins with language" (ibid., 171): the prelinguistic must be thought from the midst of language. Of infancy as "'transcendental-historical'" (ibid.) condition of the emergence of the subject, Agamben speculates: "perhaps this age is also the age of man's in-fantile dwelling (in-fantile, that is, without Voice or will, and yet *ethical*, habitual) in language (*LD*, 92). Also see Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 91-3; Mills, *Philosophy of Agamben*, 24-7.

[1144] This is properly "'never spoken language,' yet still real" (*IH*, 57).

[1145] Agamben uses the term *means* to reopen the potentiality inherent in notion of a gesture precisely to the extent that it is possible to understand *poiesis* as immanent to its process – an "exhibition of mediality" (Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 58), or the "communication of communicability" (ibid., 59) – rather than in the retrospection fixed from the perspective of end or *telos*.

[1146] Perreault, "Minimal Abstract," 260.

what is minimal is that in minimalism we discover *pure means, without ends* – an art which understands itself as a gesture towards its own immanence?

Art has not been shy in attempting to grasp the aesthetic situation through which we encounter language *qua* language, albeit this has seldom been discussed under the rubric of minimalism. Gertrude Stein's *Sacred Emily* is a particularly fine literary exemplar of several of minimalism's most poignant techniques of reduction. Both identical repetition and incremental addition and subtraction powerfully communicate *poietic* distension – the transfiguration of the poem from its status as a container of meaningful references towards existing as a self-referential concrete entity composed *of* and *within* a language barely able to cohere by the sheer weight of its presence. From this poem comes Stein's most celebrated line – "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"[1147] – a symbol of her concrete relation to language and of the pretensions of language to a universalist nominalism. "[W]hen language was new," she claims "...the poet could use the name of the thing and the thing was really there."[1148] To the modern writer, it is apparent "the excitingness of pure being ha[s] withdrawn from [language]"[1149] in which case we are left with the task either of revitalizing its exhausted nouns, or of recognizing something Real at the heart of language itself. To a critical interlocutor Stein once responded regarding her famous line: "Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying 'is a…is a…is a.'"[1150] Here repetition alludes not only to a faithfulness to phenomenological experience "whereby each restatement reflect[s] the flux of change"[1151] in the writer, but also to a *poietic* yearning for the decontamination of the relation between word and thing and to a language firm in relation to its own objecthood (language *qua* language). If this reiteration "demystif[ies] the emphatic nature of nomination and the evocation of being,"[1152] as Blanchot suggests,[1153] it is in order to rework the concrete ground upon which noun and word grasp one another.

[1147] Gertrude Stein, "Sacred Emily," *Geography and Plays* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), 187.

[1148] Gertrude Stein qtd. in Thornton Wilder, Introduction, *Four in America* by Gertrude Stein (New Haven: Yale UP, 1947), v.

[1149] Ibid.

[1150] Ibid.

[1151] Roston, *Modernist Patterns*, 124-5. Edmund Wilson memorably characterizes Stein's use of repetition as a "technique of mesmerism" (Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (London: Collins, 1967), 192), a sentiment often echoed in criticism of minimalist music (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 174-5; Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 204-6).

[1152] Maurice Blanchot, "A rose is a rose...," *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 343. This can be fruitfully compared to the claims regarding the name in *Literature and the Right to Death* (Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," *GO*, 46-8. Hereafter *LRD*.

[1153] It is not insignificant in this regard that Blanchot misquotes Stein, beginning this famous phrase with the indefinite article "a" rather than the "noun" rose, for Stein is after precisely the thing which Blanchot believes language, in its manner of indicating, fails to grasp.

Although in entirely different registers, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and Lettrists similarly regard their work as an exposition of the concreteness of language *qua* language. The poetry composed and improvised by Isidore Isou (Track 21),[1154] the seminal figure of Lettrism, identifies the *letter* as the most minimal element of language. By "always taking all the letters together; unfolding...the marvels brought about by letters...creating an architecture of lettric rhythms,"[1155] Isou believed he had discovered a means of presenting "transitions between feeling and saying"[1156] – a manner of "concretising silence; writing nothings."[1157] Often as brutal as it is primal, this work offers perhaps the most plausible poetic equivalent of the radical situation which Agamben conceives in terms of *in-fancy*.[1158] Shifting from letter to word, the couplets of Barrett Watten's "Complete Thought" are remarkable ciphers of the problematic relation of discourse and world addressed by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry – ideas explored initially in the eponymous journal – and also striking examples of minimalist *containment*:

I
The word is complete.
Books demand limits.
...
VI
Worn-out words are invented.
We read daylight in books.
...
XIII
Connected pieces break into name.
Petrified trees are similar.
XIV
Everyday life retards potential.
Calculation governs speech.
...
XVIII
Language ceases to be the future.
Thinking becomes a religious device.[1159]

The insight Watten provides in this work is to a language inextricable from thought, yet which is also buried by this same inextricability. That nothingness is that against which language tarries as its very destiny, is a point close to Watten's heart.[1160] For when language *qua* language loses its potential for an

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[1154] Isidore Isou, "Improvisation," *Poemes Lettristes 1944-1999*.
[1155] Isidore Isou, "Manifesto of Lettrist Poetry," *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2001), 545-6.
[1156] Ibid., 545.
[1157] Ibid., 546.
[1158] This concept is discussed in greater detail below.
[1159] Barrett Watten, "Complete Thought" <http://www.literairtijdschriftparmentier.nl/pop.php?id=65> 15 July 2012.
[1160] Watten offers a discussion of negativity in recent poetry as profound as it is incisive (Watten, *Constructivist Moment*, 238-290).

organic unity with thought, it is handed over to a situation in which "[l]anguage ceases to be the future," and we are once again subjugated by an ontotheological politics in which thought is reduced to a mere "religious device." Our political and economic being in language is increasingly governed by a "calculation," as we are pressured towards providing evermore accurate epistemological accounts of reality – the "books" in which "worn-out words" become the currency substituted, displacing existential immediacy. Watten identifies in Ron Padgett's quasi-sonnet, *Nothing in That Drawer*, a potent symbol of language *qua* language and the original relation it might have born to the Real. Repetition empties the poem of the essentially artificial fantasy that there need exist containers or nodes of meaning by effecting in the reader a certain existential amnesia: "[s]uddenly, the entire universe turns into the dark matter of nothing in that drawer: that's all we get."[1161]

> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.
> Nothing in that drawer.[1162]

While we cannot reasonably expect to find a more minimal expression than *Nothing in That Drawer* within a *conventional* poetic form – Padgett's own self-reflexive *Haiku,* "First: five syllables/ Second: seven syllables/ Third: five syllables"[1163] perhaps comes closest – there are many for whom the actual physicality of writing, etching, typing or inscribing appears a more radical exposure of the stuff of language. Cy Twombly's work[1164] is interesting in this respect, since often it is formed from the same scriptoral gestures as those of writing. Exemplary of his "language of indiscernible writing"[1165] are *Cold*

[1161] Watten, *Constructivist Moment*, 263.
[1162] Ron Padgett, "Nothing in That Drawer," *Great Balls of Fire*, (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1990), 5.
[1163] Ron Padgett, "Haiku," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1995), 6.
[1164] Twombly's output includes conventional painting and sculpture, but we refer here primarily to those works which consist of inscriptions with graphite, chalk and crayon on painted canvases and other surfaces, as well as various other graphic media hospitable to drawing and writing on paper, etching, and so forth.
[1165] Heiner Bastian, "Since It Shouldn't Be, Since It Happens," *Cy Twombly: Das Graphische Werk 1953-1984: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Printed Graphic Work*, ed. Heiner Bastian (New York: New York UP, 1985), 17.

Stream (Figure 72)[1166] and *Arcadia* (Figure 73).[1167] In the former we encounter a repetitive urgency,[1168] an inscription repeatedly looping across itself in a manic attempt simultaneously to uncover and recover the threatening nothingness of the pre-linguistic blank page and black canvas. The reticent marks of the latter, by contrast, expose "the intensity of the tremor of communication,"[1169] its diaphanous "calligraphic gestures...barely touch[ing] the page."[1170] Much as the letters which spell *Arcadia* are faint but unmissable, so, too, do Twombly's pieces evoke a complex *poietic* relationship with history and time,[1171] "revitalizing the tracings of the hand, to write in archaic symbols of temptation and possession."[1172] His aesthetic consciousness is moulded unambiguously from the stuff of Classical Greece and Rome,[1173] yet sacrifices none of its relation to the contemporary, or its capacity for negotiating a *poietic* path between the singularity of its aesthetic expression and its universality as *ur-script*.
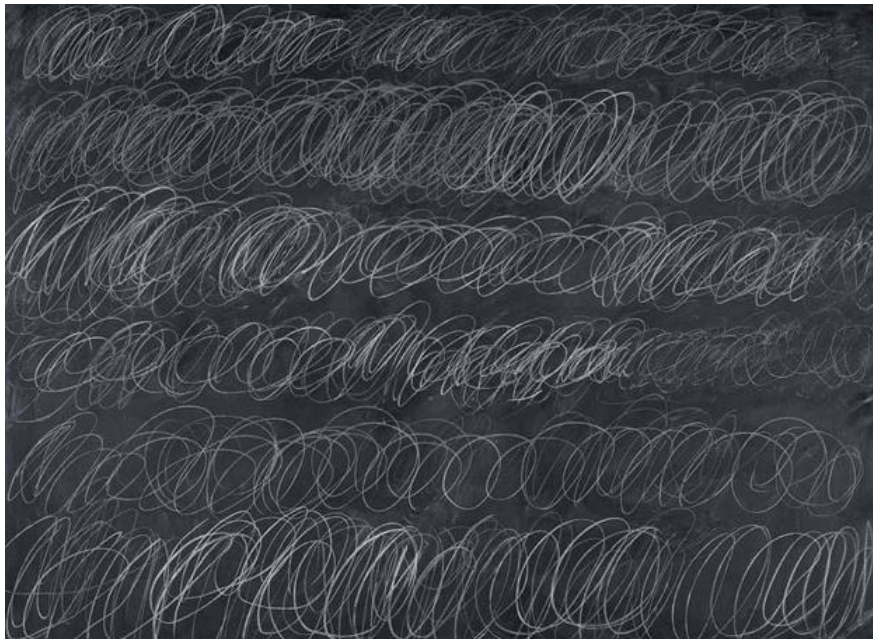
Figure 72: Cy Twombly, *Cold Stream*, 1966.

[1166] Cy Twombly, *Cold Stream*, 1966.

[1167] Cy Twombly, *Arcadia*, 1958.

[1168] Susan C. Larsen, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper 1954-1976," *Cy Twombly: Works on Paper 1954-1976: Newport Harbor Art Museum* (Newport Beach: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1981), 24.

[1169] Tacita Dean (Tacita Dean, "A Panegyric," *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate, 2008), 36.

[1170] Larsen, *Cy Twombly*, 20.

[1171] Ibid., 30; Dean, *Panegyric*, 37-8, 40-1; Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," trans. Annette Lavers, *Cy Twombly: Paintings and Drawings 1954-1977* (New York, Whitney Museum, 1979)*, Works on Paper, Sculpture*, ed. Harald Szeemann (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987), 16-9.

[1172] Bastian, *Since*, 15.

[1173] It is possible to deduce significant affinities between Twombly's work and that of Ian Hamilton Finlay, several works of whom are discussed elsewhere in the present work.

Roland Barthes, who paid significant attention to Twombly's *oeuvre*, identifies in his work a carefully disintegrated calligraphy of letters, handwritten words, and "marks of measurement...tiny algorithms."[1174] These are scriptoral *gestures* in the precise sense recognized by Agamben: here we encounter an exposition of aesthetic means without end, or means where the only end or *telos* is their radical resistance to any further decomposition.[1175] Writing fills the space of language in an attempt to think its depths *qua* nothingness. In this sense Twombly's scriptoral work[1176] presents the substance of a minimal quantity – a visual continuum[1177] "without [clear] beginning or end"[1178] – in which contingently unifying calculation comes from "combining the small and the smallest elements."[1179] What is most remarkable of this work, even at its most intricate, is that it maintains at its aesthetic centre an "absolute spaciousness"[1180] – a *rareness*[1181] and thought of absence,[1182] which mark a minimal radix from which we apprehend the *poietic* exhalation of the work – that it "*does not grasp at anything*; it is situated, it floats and drifts."[1183]

[1174] Barthes, *Wisdom*, 18.
[1175] Ibid., 15.
[1176] It is necessary to mention that Twombly used a number of techniques, many of them far more muscular and expressionistic than this subtle writing.
[1177] Ibid., 20.
[1178] Bastian, *Since*, 23.
[1179] Ibid., 23, 25.
[1180] Barthes, *Wisdom*, 12.
[1181] In this term, Barthes refers to "that which has gaps or interstices, sparse, porous, scattered"(ibid., 13).
[1182] Ibid., 21.
[1183] Ibid., 22.

Figure 73: Cy Twombly, *Arcadia*, 1958.

Musing upon Twombly's negotiation of matter and nothingness, Barthes offers a compelling metaphysical proposition: "the essence of things is not in their weight but in their lightness."[1184] From the perspective of the Real, however, it is certainly impossible to know whether or not language *qua* language – if this is what such an essence attempts to approximate – legitimately claims to encounter nothingness, except as an analogy. The evasiveness of pre-linguistic nothingness is equally evident in situations belonging to Voice as it is in those conceived in terms of writing, and slides away from definition regardless of which expressive medium these appropriate. It may well be that the Real is most intelligible in terms of existential lightness, but it is difficult to accept that any confrontation with nothingness is not simultaneously weighed down by pervasive ignorance. It is perhaps the vocation of minimalism to expose the Real by examining the aesthetic both of extreme rareness and lightness, as well as of weight and density. The task of contemplating nothingness as a nihilating heaviness in Being is an onerous one given that this thought must remain a response to that which is *ungiven* in existence – to that which is absolute, independent, Real. Setting our horizons beyond a Heideggerian *nothingness which nihilates*, beyond Agamben's *in-fancy* and its substitution of *pre*-givenness for an essential *un*givenness, this radix must be

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[1184] Ibid., 10.

a *presentation* which has no equivalent either in material or conceptual representation. It is *singular*, in Badiou's terminology – present without being represented.[1185] In language easily approachable by aesthetics, it is perhaps that which Levinas designates by the *il y a* which comes closest to this notion of nothingness as presence.[1186]

c) The minimal presentation of nothingness

The shift in Levinas' thought, which affirms the absolute alterity at the heart of the ethical relation as the means of transcending the finitude of Being,[1187] is perhaps over-documented. As a result, it is easy to underestimate the centrality of the *il y a* – which recognizes Being in general as a presence so relentless it cannot even be conceived in a dialectic relationship to absence – to the entire *corpus* of his work.[1188] Accompanying the intuition of the *il y a* is a privation which, for Levinas, induces a "weariness of oneself,"[1189] which prompts his search for the extra-ontological situation he identifies in terms of an ethics of absolute alterity.[1190] Yet, the *il y a* is perhaps not as mercurial as Levinas' somewhat hyperbolic descriptions might suggest. To understand what Levinas intends by the term, it is first necessary to understand his adaption of the ontico-ontologcial difference of Heidegger by distinguishing but not separating[1191] *existence* (Being) from *existents* (beings).[1192] In short, the *il y a* designates the totality of Being – being *qua* being which Badiou believes may be accurately apprehended by mathematics, but which, for phenomenologists such as Levinas, can be entertained in terms of knowability only as the

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[1185] *BE*, 100.

[1186] That Levinas adopts this "idea of nothing [as] an idea of being" (John Llewylyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The genealogy of ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 10) from Bergson is acknowledged, but parenthetic to the present argument.

[1187] "The comprehension of Being in general cannot *dominate* the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is…this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent*…precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), 47-8).

[1188] Levinas himself draws attention to the centrality of the *il y a* to his project as a whole (Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 47. Hereafter *IRB*.

[1189] Ibid., 46.

[1190] *EE*, 96.

[1191] "The relation between beings and Being does not link up two independent terms. 'A being' has already made a contact with Being; it cannot be isolated from it. It is" (*EE*, 1).

[1192] "*Sein* and *Seindes*, Being and being...I prefer to render as *existing* and *existent*" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other [and additional essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987), 44). Hereafter *TO*; *EE*, 1, 76; *IRB*, 131.

entirety of the *force* of Being.[1193] The problem, as Levinas detects, is that "thought slips imperceptibly from the notion of Being qua Being,[1194] that by virtue of which an existing being exists, to the idea of a cause of existence, a 'Being in general.'"[1195]

What can be *experienced* of this force of Being differs depending on whether we approach it in terms of existence – in which case the force of the *il y a* is one of pure *presentation*[1196] – or from the perspective of existents – where we can apprehend it only negatively,[1197] or obliquely in terms of a "modality of being."[1198] The *il y a* is that of Being which cannot be represented.[1199] It is a pre-conceptual,[1200] pre-reflective and pre-cognitive response to Being which defies equivalence;[1201] it is the pervasive atmosphere of horror[1202] which Levinas believes follows the threat of absolute existential anonymity;[1203] an experience of the weight of Being,[1204] the faint rumble falling towards complete silence,[1205] the insomnia of an endless night in which exhausted vigilance is perpetual;[1206] a dying within which there is no

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[1193] "The existing that I am trying to approach is the very work of being...Behind every negation this ambience of being, this being as a 'field of forces,' reappears, as the field of every affirmation and negation" (*TO*, 48).

[1194] The capitalization here is Levinas'.

[1195] *EE*, 1.

[1196] "[T]his universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence" (*EE*, 52). See also *EE*, 53-4; *TO*, 35, 65.

[1197] "[E]xisting cannot be purely and simply affirmed, because one always affirms a *being*...But it imposes itself because one cannot deny it" (*TO*, 48). See *TO*, 85-6; *EE*, 9, 52-3, 59-60.

[1198] *EE*, 84. Such modalities follow closely what Heidegger intends by *Stimmung* or mood (Critchley, *Very Little*, 57).

[1199] The *il y a*, paradoxically, is filled with "the absence of any being" (*EE*, 56); as a "loss of world" for both subject and object (Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999), 92), it escapes all means of representation. See Paul Davies, "On Resorting to an Ethical Language," *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 96; *TO*, 35-6, 75-6; Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 12.

[1200] Arguably, it is even a *non-concept*.

[1201] *EE*, 10-2, 55, 61; Benjamin C. Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 140; Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 5.

[1202] *EE*, 5, 55-8; *IRB*, 45; Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 92.

[1203] *Absolute existential anonymity* would refer to a situation in which no subject or object which exists has any effects in existence. The anonymity of the *il y a* – the counterpoint to identity, which marks the hypostasis of the subject – is a principal term in Levinas' writing. See Levinas, "Shadow," 9; *EE*, 23, 37, 44, 52, 82, 88; *TO*, 33, 47-8, 52, 62, 65-7. See also Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 176 and Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 5.

[1204] *TO*, 35, 62; *EE*, 51, 76; *IRB*, 46.

[1205] It is towards a "being in complete silence" (*IRB*, 212) that the "anonymous rumbling of existence" (*EE*, 23) seems to point us.

[1206] "I am going to characterize the *there is*...by a vigilance without possible recourse to sleep," (*TO* , 48-9), where sleep is not a state of unconsciousness, but a "modality of being" (EE, 84). See also *EE*, 55, 64; Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 94.

death.[1207] In its immanent ungivenness, the *il y a* "transcends inwardness as well as exteriority; it does not even make it possible to distinguish these...The subject-object distinction by which we approach existents is not the starting point for a meditation which broaches being in general."[1208] The *il y a*, existence such as it is, could be apprehended only if all existents were annihilated.[1209] This would be existence "full of the nothingness of everything."[1210]

That we are not consumed by pure presence, the "presence of absence...[which] embraces and dominates its contradictory,"[1211] owes, for Levinas, to the simple reason that Being, in any context we might potentially grasp, is always an *experience* of Being.[1212] "[T]he fact of being given is the world,"[1213] he asserts. "Through taking position in the anonymous [*il y a*] a subject is affirmed."[1214] Levinas terms this adoption of a position *hypostasis*, which, in short, amounts to the upsurge of an existent.[1215] Although the *il y a* "is the place where hypostasis will be produced,"[1216] it offers no conventional ground.[1217] It is rather a grounding force from which is subtracted another force – the hypostatic force by which a minimal concept[1218] takes shape, which suspends the non-conceptual indeterminateness of the *il y a* in which "anything can count for anything else."[1219] Hypostasis is thus a beginning,[1220] an instantiation[1221] through which a minimal consciousness emerges.[1222] From such consciousness is derived the directed experience which appears in terms of "the indissoluble unity between the existent and its work of existing."[1223]

[1207] The unremitting presence of the *il y a* defines existential persistence in terms of "an abyss between the present and death," a "the strangeness of the future of death" (*TO*, 81). See *TO*, 50-1, 69-73, 81-2; *EE*, 56-7, 77; Levinas, "Shadow," 11-2; Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 92, 96; Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 9.

[1208] *EE*, 52.

[1209] *TO*, 46-7.

[1210] *EE*, 53.

[1211] Ibid., 60.

[1212] In this respect, Levinas is a very conventional phenomenologist. If, however, we regard the *il y a* in terms of its facticity – and Levinas is unambiguous on this point (ibid., 3, 51, 61, 85; *TO*, 42,45-7,) – we should be cautious of overstating its relation to *experience* (*EE*, 52), either in Wall's terms as "our 'oldest' experience" (Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 29), or Critchley's (paraphrasing Blanchot) as the "experience of consciousness without a subject" (Critchley, *Very Little*, 58).

[1213] *EE*, 30.

[1214] *EE*, 82.

[1215] Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 7-8.

[1216] *TO*, 50.

[1217] Ibid., 47.

[1218] Here *concept* refers a non-physical substantive.

[1219] *EE*, 54.

[1220] *TO*, 67.

[1221] The instant describes the temporal point, without duration, at which an existent arises from existence (*EE*, 72).

[1222] "[L]ife in the world is consciousness inasmuch as it provides the possibility of existing in a withdrawal from existence" (ibid., 37-8). Elsewhere, Levinas describes such consciousness in terms of the *solitude* of the existent within existence (ibid., 84; *TO*, 54-5, 67).

[1223] Ibid., 43.

Hypostasis, however, reveals a significant tension in Levinas' thought between interiority and exteriority, and the manner in which these negotiate our understanding of subject and object. As the proper ingression of an existent into existence, hypostasis marks "the apparition of a substantive."[1224] Since hypostasis is also a "localization of consciousness"[1225] this process is predominantly associated with a process of human "subjectivization"[1226] which directs the incipient subject towards the specificity of identity.[1227] Yet, it is clear that activity is not simply withheld from ordinary things. A hypostatic entity holds together two points of definition: it is "that which is,"[1228] and also that which "is a subject of the verb to be."[1229] By *assuming* Being,[1230] by taking-up *beginning* in Being, an entity clearly marks its fundamental positivity *qua* activity. However, as differentiation within the indifference of the *il y a*, the activity of consciousness is in fact a "retrograde movement."[1231] It attempts to pin down "what cannot disappear"[1232] in that which has already taken place.[1233]

Here we might allow Harman's insight to the "unbridgeable gap between being in general and this being in general *as experienced*"[1234] to resonate on its own terms:

> The anonymous work of existence occurs in the sheer labor of things at being what they are, and not in any supposed *access* we might have to this labor, not even a noncognitive sort of access. The *il y a*...however devoid it may be of specific features, already stands at an infinite remove from the infernal work of objects. It is not being itself that is experienced...but only being *as* being. No two realities could be more different.[1235]

[1224] *EE*, 83.

[1225] Ibid., 67.

[1226] Ibid. By *subjectivizing*, Levinas means the process of producing a subject, and so this term is roughly equivalent to *subjectivating* which, following Badiou, is generally preferred in the present work. On Levinas' anthropocentric bias regarding hypostasis, see Graham Harman, *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2002), 242.

[1227] *TO*, 67.

[1228] *EE*, 83.

[1229] Ibid.

[1230] Ibid.

[1231] Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 8.

[1232] Ibid.

[1233] As far as our retrospective comprehension of the *il y a* is concerned, Levinas is unambiguous: it "is a relationship only by analogy. For the Being which we become aware of when the world disappears is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that *there is*" (*EE*, 8).

[1234] Harman, *Tool Being*, 239.

[1235] Ibid.

The very possibility of recognizing the subjectivating activity of hypostasis arises only because of an asymmetry which persists in the relation[1236] of every existent to *alterity* (that is, radical externality). In one sense, the balance of existence always favours the plenitude of objects – "to be in the world is to be attached to things;"[1237] "human life in the world does not go beyond the objects that fulfil it"[1238] – but at the same time, existents ceaselessly tip towards the subject, are at the subject's "disposal,"[1239] precisely because even the minimal intervention of consciousness excites from the subject an extraordinary valence.

Thus, while there is every reason to contend, as does Harman's daring analysis, that Levinas' thought centres on the "improved status of concrete things"[1240] – after all, "Being...is scattered across the full multitude of entities that inhabit the world,[1241] defining each as being just what it is"[1242] – it remains impossible to deduce from this that either subject or object can be associated with fundamental *activity* as such.[1243] Like Heidegger, Levinas locks givenness and facticity together – the "world is given;"[1244] but the "fact of being given is the world"[1245] – paradoxically rendering knowability subordinate to its own terms.[1246]

In short, every entity presents the quantitative dimension of the *il y a*, of pure Being, but, from a phenomenological perspective, this can be apprehended only by a qualitative subtraction from this fundamental quantity. It is upon this point that the present work departs from Levinas. It is no act of pre-cognitive, analogical approximation, or any tool of representation, that renders the *il y a* knowable. The *il*

[1236] In my view, it is unclear in Levinas' early work whether this relation is potential or actual, or whether *alterity* is finally located in the *il y a*, the Other, or both.

[1237] *EE*, 27.

[1238] *TO*, 63.

[1239] *EE*, 30.

[1240] Harman, *Tool Being*, 237. Llewelyn identifies in Levinas' work a "quest for concreteness" (Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 22).

[1241] This formulation seems something of an ontological equivalent to Edwin Hutchins' *distributed cognition* which aims "to put cognition back into the social and cultural world...[by] mov[ing] the boundaries of the cognitive unity of analysis out beyond...the individual person," (Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT, 1995, xiv), recognizing that it is distributed across social groups, between structures of internality and externality, and through time (Arthur M. Glenberg, "Radical changes in cognitive process due to technology: A jaundiced view," *Cognition Distributed: How cognitive technology extends our minds*, ed. Itiel E. Dror and Steven Harnad (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), 76).

[1242] Harman, *Tool Being*, 241.

[1243] Arguably, Harman goes too far in focusing his claim that all entities "take a stance within the world and command our attention" (ibid.) through the thought of Levinas.

[1244] *EE*, 38. "[T]he fact of being given is the world" (ibid., 30).

[1245] Ibid.

[1246] This would amount to a recursive epistemological position in which knowledge is always derived from the structures of knowledge which we are given in order to know.

y a is knowable because it is, in fact, nothing other than the Real which persists indifferently in any entity – its simplest quantitative being. Like the Real, the *il y a* cannot not take place in every entity: it cannot be declined, nor is it able to desist by any force of its own. These are absolute to the entity in the precise sense reserved by Meillassoux: an "outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is."[1247] The *il y a* and the Real similarly configure that which in every entity is proper to its persistence without furnishing it with any particular qualities. This is not too far from that which is noted above in Harman's terms as the "sheer labor of things at being what they are." "The key to the structure of reality would lie not *between* being and beings, but in beings themselves."[1248]

The Real is the depth, weight, and density of every entity *qua* self-relation.[1249] "Not grace but gravity characterizes the *il y a*,"[1250] as Llewelyn notes, which reverses Barthes notion of an essential lightness in existence. Such self-relation is not, as Robbins mistakenly suggests, contingent on any type of performativity,[1251] but rather subject to an inertness which bars it from identification even as it admits it to the Real. Yet, if the instant of hypostasis[1252] presents a point of suspension, there remains no simple exit[1253] from the burdensome impassivity of Being.[1254] Consciousness cannot fully withdraw from itself, and it is this curious impotentiality of the subject in relation to its own impotence that stimulates Levinas to probe the *il y a* in its manner of supervening upon vitality and death. In sharp contradistinction to the Heideggerian conviction that the care for Being is inextricable from an existent's relation to its finitude, for Levinas the mark of existence is precisely its relation to infinitude,[1255] to the "the eternal futurity of

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[1247] *AF*, 7.

[1248] Harman, *Tool Being*, 240. Llewellyn emphasizes "internal dialectic of [a being's] internal engagement with its own existence" (Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 32).

[1249] Although of a different phenomenological register, there is a certain similarity here to the manner in which Merleau-Ponty suggests of reality that we must "delve into the thickness of the world" (*PP*, 204). See also Taylor Carman, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 180, 190-2.

[1250] Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 28. In aesthetic terms, this is a significant alternative to the standard modernist fare regarding an epiphanic, transfigurative as the truth of Being, especially as revealed in art. Particularly as regards the connection of minimalism to the *il y a*, we might oppose to Levinas' "gravity" the final phrase of Fried's quintessentially modernist reproof of minimalism in *Art and Objecthood* : "presentness is grace" (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 147).

[1251] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 99. See also Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 13-4.

[1252] Here it is important to note Llewelyn's distinction of monist hypostasis – subjective substantiation – from plural hypostasis – substantiation by the Other (ibid., 182-3).

[1253] *EE*, 57; *TO*, 50.

[1254] As Llewelyn usefully points out, we should not mistake the "*transcendence* to a new state of existence," which is shaped, for Levinas, by alterity, with "*excedence* that would be the exit from existence." (Llewellyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 11).

[1255] I should like to point to several agreements between the ontology of Levinas and Badiou. In resisting Being as a question of finitude, both commit to a vision of ontological infinity: the *il y a* attempts to grasp the same

death,"[1256] so that in existing we are fixed in perpetuity to the "duration of the interval – the *meanwhile*...[which is] never finished, still enduring."[1257] This "time of dying,"[1258] presents the temporal intuition that "[n]othingness is impossible,"[1259] and particularly so from the perspective of an existent. Consequently, "death *qua* nothingness"[1260] is simply a fantasy of no longer being bound to the immanence of Being and its revelation of the bankcruptcy of any future event of metaphysical redemption. Death is the most banal of all existential occurrences – this is above all the lesson of the *il y a* – and the *time of dying* becomes a marker for the manner in which an existent reaches for its minimal existential intensity.

Critchley encapsulates the situation well in suggesting that "representations of death are *misrepresentations*"[1261] The laconic[1262] prose of Maurice Blanchot – exemplifying a "carefully constructed dynamic of eschewal and restriction,"[1263] the austere markers of a certain brand of minimalism which he shares with several prominent *nouveaux romanciers*[1264] – exhibits its consciousness

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fundamental multiplicity Badiou describes as *being qua being* (*MP*, 81), although where Levinas asserts that the infinite aspect of the subject owes to the incommensurable encounter of a subject existing within the *il y a* and absolute *alterity*, introduced via intersubjectivity (*EE*, 99-100), Badiou is adamant that the process of subjectivation is a positive localization, a finite expression tied to the production of an infinite truth (*BE*, 396-9). Both endorse a notion of an *event* through which subjectivity arises, but whereas for Levinas this is a hypostatic *instant* which gives rise to subjective consciousness (*EE*, 70-1; *TO*, 52), for Badiou the event is a *trans-ontological* eruption of pure novelty in Being, and has nothing to do with consciousness (*BE*, 189-90, 397; Alain Badiou, "The Event as Trans-Being," *TW*, 100). Rather, an event presents the possibility of realigning the contents of a situation – a *process* of subjectivation, or what Badiou calls the pursuit of an *infinite truth* (Badiou, "Truth," 129). Alterity, for Badiou, is thus located solely in the event which actively sets in motion a process of subjectivation, whereas for Levinas, it is in practical terms an encounter which takes place subsequent to the emergence of a subject – admittedly of any such encounter we will be able to say that alterity must always already have been a possibility from the outset for this encounter to have taken place. These philosophers respond to similar intuitions regarding Being, but whereas Badiou formalizes these in relation to set theory – that is, a language which resists self-referential paradox – Levinas remains caught within what Meillassoux describes as the "correlationist circle" (*AF*, 5) of phenomenology, in which every intuition of externality inevitably undermines itself by the fact that it is, finally, offered on the basis of a point of access, from the perspective of consciousness as positive phenomenon (the subject remains rooted to itself).

[1256] *TO*, 71.

[1257] Levinas, "Shadow," 11. See Critchley, *Very Little*, 32, 70-2; Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 24.

[1258] Levinas, "Shadow," 11.

[1259] *TO*, 73. "It is nothingness that would have left humankind the possibility of assuming death and snatching a supreme mastery from out of the servitude of existence" (ibid.).

[1260] Levinas, "Shadow," 11. See also *TO*, 50-1.

[1261] Critchley, *Very Little*, 73.

[1262] Leslie Hill notes of Blanchot's narrative a significant reversal, "of suspense as completion and completion as suspense" (Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 145.

[1263] Motte, *Small Worlds*, 26.

[1264] In addition to its stylistic paucacity, it is replete with "[m]oments of repetition, recurrence, or return," (Hill, *Blanchot*, 154), which are similarly and obsessively deployed both by Robbe-Grillet and Beckett, foremost amongst others.

of this point by offering a powerful vision of the *time of dying*.[1265] Exemplary in this respect is "Death Sentence," the two distinct narrative sections of which attest to the significant conceptual consonances between Levinas and Blanchot, albeit the latter arrives at these through a primarily *poietic* field[1266] to which the former is not particularly sensitive.[1267] Indeed, from the first, Blanchot specifies that here is an act of *writing*[1268] – a necessarily circuitous presentation of the generative conflict which plays out in literature between the *poietic* production and the *mimetic* imitation of the Real.[1269] In the first part, which centres on the *dying* of J., we are presented with the following startling exchange between J. and her nurse:

> I know that...[J.] sometimes talked to her at night for quite a long time: she asked her to describe some of the suffering she had witnessed as a nurse; and she asked her, 'Have you ever seen death?' 'I have seen dead people, Miss.' 'No, death!' The nurse shook her head. 'Well, soon you will see it.'"[1270]

J. dies awaiting the arrival of the writer, a confidant who has witnessed her protracted illness, subsequently undergoes a miraculous resurrection, and then a second death two days later, but seems to remain bound within an *atopos* of nightmarish ambiguity – a persistent cycle of decline, death and resurrection.[1271] The true terror of this interminability[1272] – of this "infinity of a timeless instant"[1273] – is revealed in a growing awareness that J.'s prophetic utterance – "soon you will see [death]" – is directed not to the nurse, but to the reader, and is fulfilled, although finally frustratedly, in the climactic attempt of

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[1265] Through a set of oppositions which tails off, perhaps not inappropriately, into ambiguity and vagueness, Hill suggests that for Blanchot death is "both extreme possibility and extreme impossibility, finitude and infinity, limit and limitlessness, experience and anonymity, meaning and meaninglessness" (Hill, *Blanchot*, 151).

[1266] See Maurice Blanchot, "The Gaze of Orpheus," *GO*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1981), 99-104; Maurice Blanchot, "From Dread to Language," *GO*, 7.

[1267] Even in his discussions of art, Levinas shows little interest in , and less comprehension of, the creative process itself.

[1268] For this reason I refer to the figure we might ordinarily call the narrator as the *writer*, also recalling that in Blanchot's ontological genealogy (Critchley, *Very Little,* 45) language is radical, within which original space, *writing* emerges as the process – concrete yet evasive – by which we encounter "the pure exteriority, worklessness and absence towards which inspiration and desire tend" (ibid., 46).

[1269] I take conflict to be at the heart of a memorable line close to the work's start – "I am almost sure that the words which should not be written will be written," (Maurice Blanchot, "Death Sentence," *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999), 131), and those which begin its "metatextual epilogue" (Hill, *Blanchot*, 145). Hill notes how this epilogue was removed in the text's republication (ibid., 145, 255) – "These pages can end here, and nothing that follows what I have just written will make me add anything to it or take anything away from it. This remains, this will remain until the very end" (ibid., 187).

[1270] Blanchot, "Death Sentence," 141-2.

[1271] As Fynsk notes, this second death "may not finish anything: her second death is offered only as a citation of the first" (Christopher Fynsk, *Language and Relation: ...that there is language* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 248).

[1272] See ibid., 250.

[1273] Hill, *Blanchot*, 150.

writing to transgress its own medium[1274] in a gesture of *poietic* self-extinction, marked when J. points to the writer with the words "[n]ow then, take a good look at death."[1275]

"Death Sentence" attempts to exemplify that the "language of literature is a search for th[e] moment which precedes literature."[1276] Fynsk describes Blanchot's quest in writing for a "literature [which] communicates an uncommunicating presence that is not quite self-presence and never quite posits itself but nevertheless stirs and persists."[1277] To reach for this position, writing needs first to confront "the materiality of language...the fact that words are things."[1278] Inasmuch as writing affirms in its very materiality the exact point at which language substitutes itself for the concreteness of whichever entity is its referent, it equally witnesses in this moment of representation, the fact that this entity is capable of being annihilated.[1279] In this mimetic movement, language binds itself both symbolically and actually to death.[1280] Yet, if the referents of language cease to exist – or if language is deployed to things which do not exist but which could exist, or could have existed – language does not cease as a force (of signification). This persistence, a "reawakening of the interminable,"[1281] is indicative of the manner in which Blanchot reaches for the *il y a* by an argument structurally identical to the one Levinas offers.[1282] Fynsk submits that for Blanchot, beside any particular reference, "the persistence of the word as word...becomes the indication or expression of the *il y a*...The self-reflection or self-offering of language becomes the showing of the *il y a*."[1283]

It is certainly accurate to describe this disposition of language as a species of conceptual minimalism: by a severe self-limitation, language reflexively affirms its status as thing, and so exemplifies a mimetic economy which is distinctly minimal, since language no longer refers to an external world, but rather to the self-referential field of *poietic* force. The force of writing effects "existence without being existence

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[1274] Hill declares this to be a "narrative of the very limits of narrative" (ibid., 151).

[1275] Blanchot, "Death Sentence," 149.

[1276] *LRD*, 46.

[1277] Fynsk, *Language and Relation*, 233.

[1278] *LRD*, 46. Blanchot goes on: "[a] name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence…[with] rhythm, weight, mass, shape and then the paper on which one writes the trail of ink, the book" (ibid.).

[1279] Fynsk, *Language and Relation*, 232.

[1280] *LRD*, 47.

[1281] Maurice Blanchot, "Sleep, Night," *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 267.

[1282] *TO*, 46-7; *EE*, 51-2. See Fynsk, *Language and Relation*, 233-4. Hill, however notes divergences regarding the relation of neutrality to the *il y a*: Levinas considers the neutrality of Being to be synonymous with its absolute self-identification, a formulation Blanchot refuses (Hill, *Blanchot*, 138-9).

[1283] Fynsk*, Language and Relation*, 234-5. This is "[n]ot a language full of images, but a language that has become the image of language, figuring by this nonreflection the dissimulation of being itself" (ibid., 236).

which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation without beginning or end – death as the impossibility of dying."[1284] The second part of "Death Sentence" addresses in somewhat brutal terms, this relation between *poietic* effort – in the present context we could perhaps label this the narrative malconstruction of reality – and the manner in which the inconsistencies and vacuities of *literature* obliquely approach the *il y a* , or what I here term the Real. Close to the end, the writer discovers – with a horror which is finally directed at his own willing of an amnesic state, the "forgetfulness of things,"[1285] since, in fact, he already knows what N. is about to reveal – that she has had her head and hands cast by a sculptor,[1286] consenting to the production of a spectral double, manifested where the *poietic* act of the sculptor and her own *auto-mimetic* desire bisect one another. Of this uncanny proto-mimetic entity, Blanchot writes: "[a]nd now that thing is over there, you have uncovered it, you have looked at it, and you have looked into the face of something that will be alive for all eternity, for your eternity and for mine! Yes, I know it, I know it, I've known it all along."[1287] The Image of N., emptied of all its content yet charged with presence, marks the manner in which the *poietic* enterprise simultaneously exceeds its creator, any prototype to which it may be coordinated, and, finally, itself. It invokes a preconceptual eternity, and provokes within us the horrifying confrontation of existent with the sheer indifference of existence.

Blanchot's identification of writing as the medium most capable of presenting the *il y a*[1288] is based not on any particular effective or affective power it possesses – in fact, if anything is clear, it is that writing is singularly powerless – but on the ease with which its self-reflexivity can be determined and confirmed.[1289] What Blanchot tends to ignore, is that any medium through which we might encounter the *il y a* as *datum* is itself already mediated by consciousness. In fact there lies no revelation whatsoever in saying that we encounter the presence of the *il y a* in a particular existent, for the *il y a* is precisely the Real, a minimal condition for the existence of an entity, prior to and indifferent to the givenness of this entity. The movement from this banality to the claim that art, and writing in particular, can in fact manifest the *il y a* in itself is, as Fynsk notes, "more on the order of a slippage than an argumentation."[1290] Still, it is an intuition at least partly endorsed by Critchley[1291] and Robbins,[1292] and the latter's claim regarding "an

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[1284] *LRD* , 47.
[1285] Blanchot, "Death Sentence," 183.
[1286] This is the same sculptor who casts J's hands in the first section of the story.
[1287] Ibid., 185.
[1288] Fynsk, *Language and Relation*, 236.
[1289] It would be problematic, however, to claim that it is solely writing, amongst the various aesthetic fields, which exhibits this relation to the *il y a*.
[1290] Ibid,, 235.
[1291] Critchley, *Very Little*, 63-5.

utter intrication of art and the *il y a*" is obvious at least as regards the presence of Being in any existent, but incorrect in assimilating this intrication to the manner in which we are apparently compelled to approach the *il y a* in aesthetic terms.[1293]

d) Aesthetic facticity – disappearance and persistence

Here it is necessary briefly to trace Levinas' position on art.[1294] Art's relation to the existential position that it is "impossible to die"[1295] opens a significant question which, to my mind, is habitually ignored: what, if anything, lies *between* hypostasis and the *il y a*?[1296] I agree with Harman's assertion that the *il y a* "refer[s] not to a special event, but to a permanent and universal feature of reality as a whole,"[1297] yet emphasize amidst this agreement, that we hope in vain actually to *encounter* the *il y a* through any substantive object or thing, for the simple reason that the *il y a* is a "field of forces."[1298] From Levinas we have gathered that it is through hypostasis that a subject emerges into a world of things[1299] – that is, entities unpolarized in Being – by establishing a relation with these things. In a significant sense, this relation converts these things from mere things into objects.[1300] Yet it would be inaccurate to claim that through this process subjects and objects entirely forsake their fundamental *thinghood*: this would demand a decisive scission of thing, object and subject from the *il y a* – an empty proposition, for the very fact that anything which *is*, affirms in the first instant *that* there is.

Thus, between the hypostatic instant – which indicates the emergence of subjects and objects – and the *il y a* – Being as the field of forces indifferent to any particular existent or process – resides the *thing*. Such

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[1292] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 93, 97-9.

[1293] Robbins states that this "intrication is irreducible…because of the seeming necessity for Levinas to employ numerous literary examples and illustration in his presentation of the *il y a* and because Levinas' very access to the *il y a* is via an aesthetic category, the imagination" (ibid., 93). However, this is finally more of a dogmatic statement regarding such an intrication, than it is a reason explaining it. Robbins makes no distinction here between concept, cognition, consciousness and imagination, and between these in relation to a material existent, making the error of collapsing "the unbridgeable gap between being in general and this being in general *as experienced*" (Harman, *Tool Being*, 239).

[1294] Admittedly there may be disagreement as to the extent to which Blanchot and Levinas' views on the *il y a* can be conflated. Here I have understood the former to be an exemplary elaboration of the latter, a view endorsed by Critchley (Critchley, *Very Little*, 32) and Fynsk (Fynsk, *Language and Relation*, 233).

[1295] *TO*, 51.

[1296] I propose here the material equivalent of what Levinas refers to as the *meanwhile* of the *time of dying* – neither the forceful self-possession of the subject nor the fully unmediated presence of the *il y a* (Levinas, "Shadow," 11-3).

[1297] Harman, *Tool Being*, 240.

[1298] *TO*, 48.

[1299] "A subject takes on things" (*EE*, 69).

[1300] Levinas, "Shadow," 3.

a *thing* marks equally the facticity of the *il y a* and potential for the taking-place of hypostasis. To the extent that certain art exhibits a drive towards autonomy[1301] in terms of a constitutive resistance to reduction which would render it a meaningful object at the disposal a subject, it might embody precisely such an intersticial *thing*.[1302] Art exposes the "very inwardness of things."[1303] Such is the case with much minimalism, which presents itself in terms of thinghood (for the sake of terminological consistence, we might prefer to call this *objecthood*).

Levinas' "ontology of art"[1304] takes shape in the space opened by Kantian aesthetics, albeit negatively. It attempts to apprehend art in "what one might call a 'non-aesthetic' dimension,"[1305] in which the sublime and formlessness exercise ontological precedence over beauty and form.[1306] Not that art cannot consist of beautiful forms, but these do not constitute its essence, which is discovered in its curious exoticism to the experience of ordinary existential situations.[1307] Hence, Levinas pays particular attention to the abstraction which characterizes much modern art:[1308]

> [In modern art,] objects attest their power as material objects, even reach a paroxysm of materiality. Despite the rationality and luminosity of these forms when taken in themselves, a painting makes them exist in themselves, brings about an absolute existence in the very fact there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry. Here is a notion of materiality as opposed to thought and mind...For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare and ugly...Behind the luminosity of forms, by which beings already relate to our 'inside,' matter is the very fact of the [*il y* a].[1309]

[1301] Levinas emphasizes that this does not amount, however to endorsing the academic notion of art for art's sake which makes the error of placing art above reality (ibid., 2).

[1302] This seems to me implicit in Levinas' conception of art outside of objective utility. See ibid., 5; *EE*, 47.

[1303] *EE*, 49.

[1304] Hutchens, *Levinas*, 141.

[1305] Gerald L. Bruns, "The concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas' writings," *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 213.

[1306] Levinas, "Shadow," 8; Edith Wyschogrod, "The Art in Ethics: Aesthetics, Objectivity, and Alterity in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adrian T. Peperzak (New York and London, Routledge, 1995), 138-9.

[1307] *EE*, 48-9; "Even the most realistic art gives this character of *alterity* to the objects represented which are nonetheless part of our world" (*EE*, 46); Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 92.

[1308] *EE*, 46-51.

[1309] Ibid,. 51.

Levinas' aesthetics is unusual in its claim that art withdraws from objects what is usually seen as the prerequisite for their apprehension – form.[1310] "Art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation,"[1311]contends Levinas. The latter proposition – one which the present work disputes – is offered to strengthen the case for the hypostasis of the subject and its encounter with alterity as world-producing events. The former (regarding revelation) attempts to extract art from its conventional complicity with an economy of mimesis.[1312] Indeed, Levinas insists that art exhibits an "absolute existence," a radical materiality with all the "impassive presence" which discloses that which emerges from behind rather than through the "luminosity of forms" through which reality is represented.

We understand the situation more accurately when we discern that even when art represents the world faithfully, its manner of augmenting the Real is not *mimetic*,[1313] but rather it returns to objects their character as *things* – their radical objecthood which "extracts them from th[eir] belongingness to a subject."[1314] Art "presents things in their *materiality* and not as representations."[1315] "Art does not know a particular type of reality,"[1316] Levinas stresses, but, rather, clarifies the "very obscurity of the [R]eal."[1317] I cannot agree with Levinas that, in its "deconceptualization of reality,"[1318] the aesthetic realm should be conflated with the ineffability of the shadow.[1319] This hands the being of art over to the same epistemic conditions he claims it resolutely opposes.[1320] In this respect, I wonder whether the facticity of the *il y a* – *that there is*[1321] – does not reveal its indifference rather as overwhelming presence of inexhaustible potentiality – undirected, perhaps, but not simply oblivious to the objects through which it courses.

Thus, I cannot go so far as to say that art *presents* the *il y a*. This is certainly implicit in various remarks offered by Wall, Bruns, Critchley and Robbins[1322] – arguably by Levinas himself.[1323] Conflating art and the *il y a* in terms of identity – what else could be the basis of such a presentation? – misses that their proximity is defined by their shared presentation of non-identity, of non-conceptuality, and that this

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[1310] Wyschogrod, "Art in Ethics," 138-9.
[1311] Levinas, "Shadow," 3.
[1312] It dubious whether Levinas truly accomplishes this.
[1313] *EE*, 46.
[1314] Ibid., 45.
[1315] Bruns, "Concepts of art," 211.
[1316] Levinas, "Shadow," 3.
[1317] Ibid.
[1318] Ibid., 4.
[1319] Levinas, "Shadow," 6, 8-9, 11.
[1320] Ibid., 10.
[1321] *EE*, 3-4, 8; *TO*, 46, 53; Wall, *Radical Passivity* 28-30.
[1322] Ibid., 28; Bruns, "Concepts of art," 212, 215; Robbins, *Altered Reading* , 93.
[1323] Levinas, "Shadow," 11.

proximity is sufficient. This mode of presentation Levinas identifies in terms of the *image*: the existential residue from the passage of pure Being into existence, yet which transgresses the identitarian limits of both subject and object as they arise through hypostasis. While the "phenomenology of images insists on their transparency,"[1324] they do not merely "point [...] towards objects; instead, images are the doubles of objects, resemble them, in the sense that shadows resemble things."[1325] In this manner, an image acts as an "allegory of being."[1326] Art offers the image "in place of the object itself"[1327] as well as of concepts[1328] – as a "disincarnation of reality,"[1329] at once extracted from the ordinary flux of temporal passage,[1330] while simultaneously exemplifying the facticity of the Real (*that there is*). The image appears by a force of *resemblance*, which is the process by which art transfigures[1331] the ordinary qualities, properties and likenesses of its objects into existential quantities in which "the very *existing* of a being, is doubled up with a semblance of existing."[1332] Through the image, which "neither yields the object nor replicates it in an ontological sense,"[1333] we encounter art in its ambiguity: it both disengages from and draws us into an altered relation with Being;[1334] its existence exemplifies fixity without stability[1335] and "communicativity"[1336] without a particular message.

Returning to Blanchot's "Death Sentence," it is at this point clearer all that is at stake in the *image*, spectral but Real, of the plaster casting of J. and N. Here is a situation where art *exemplifies* the *il y a*. Neither subject nor being *qua* being, art "places in parenthesis the fugivity of the Real,"[1337] evoking the intersticial *time of dying*, the image of which appears between the existent and its existence. Art testifies *that there is* – to the facticity of the *il y a* or the Real. The more minimal its aesthetic, the more transparently we apprehend the lacuna which, as Agamben argues, is situated at the centre of any act of testimony. Like Blanchot, Beckett thematizes our relationship to the Real in terms of death and the nearly intolerable tension between the shocking ease with which death strikes living entities and the inability of consciousness to master finitude. Characters are habitually reduced to their most rudimentary modes of

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[1324] Ibid., 5.
[1325] Wyschogrod, "Art in Ethics," 139.
[1326] Levinas, "Shadow," 6.
[1327] *EE*, 45.
[1328] Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 26.
[1329] Levinas, "Shadow," 5.
[1330] Ibid., 6, 9-11; Wyschogrod, "Art in Ethics," 139.
[1331] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 168.
[1332] Levinas, "Shadow," 8. See ibid., 6.
[1333] Wyschogrod, 139.
[1334] Levinas, "Shadows," 12; *EE*, 46-7,
[1335] Levinas, "Shadow," 10.
[1336] Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 9.
[1337] Ibid., 21.

existence – to inert bodies merely occupying space, barely capable of movement; to disembodied instances of self-reflexive thought, proverbial figments of their own imagination; to voices and visions struggling through their sensory being against the inescapability of the raw facticity of their existence.[1338]

Exemplary in this respect is "Rockaby," Beckett's short dramatic work in which a "[p]remature old"[1339] woman in a rocking-chair interacts with her own voice – a recording, presumably intended to be the product of her imagination – rehearsing, perhaps even negotiating, her death in an "essential, minimalist poem."[1340] The relationship of the embodied voice to its disembodied counterpart is rather ambiguous. It is uncertain whether the utterance, "More"[1341] – with which the embodied woman punctuates the text, each time setting in motion the mechanical movement of the chair[1342] and the recitation, by her uncanny double, of the eventless solitude of her existence – is offered as supplication or instruction, whether it is intended to provoke pathos or resignation. The occasional convergence of the two voices, which chant together "time she stopped,"[1343] only reinforce the disparity with which any conscious act relates to its own disappearance – a gulf, of which death is the emblem, skilfully woven from a monologue of incremental repetition which competes with the best visual and musical minimalism.[1344] Precisely through the minimalism of this work we encounter existential persistence at its most quantitative: the call for *more* of Being.

The woman becomes increasingly dependent on this vocalic spectre,[1345] the technologically mediated condensation of her imagination and memory, and we become acutely aware that her refrain, *more*, paradoxically marks a progressive existential *lessness*.[1346] Increasingly reliant on its disembodied double, any remaining immanence fades to a bleak point in the work's final lines:

[1338] In order, we might consider the example of "Fizzle 5" (Samuel Beckett, "Fizzle 5," *The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995) 236-7); "Imagination Dead Imagine" (Samuel Beckett, "Imagination Dead Imagine," *CSP*, 182-5); and "Not I" (Samuel Beckett, "Not I," *CDW*, 373-83).
[1339] Samuel Beckett, "Rockaby," *CDW*, 433.
[1340] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 485.
[1341] Beckett, "Rockaby," 435, 436, 438, 440.
[1342] The woman herself is motionless, her feet on a footrest, and she exercises no physical force to set the chair in motion (ibid., 433-4).
[1343] Ibid., 436, 437, 439, 440.
[1344] I think here specifically of the early keyboard composition of Philip Glass (Philip Glass, *Music in Similar Motion*, 1969; Philip Glass, *Contrary Motion*, 1974), the serial sculpture of Sol LeWitt, and Donald Judd's serial rectangular reliefs.
[1345] See Connor, *Samuel Beckett*, 129, 131, 133.
[1346] Ibid., 134.

> *fuck life*
> *stop her eyes*
> *rock her off*
> *rock her off*
>   [Together: echo of 'rock her off,' coming to rest of rock, slow fade out.][1347]

The woman dies – at least, this is suggested by the slow inclination of her head at the close of the work[1348] – but, unsurprisingly, death is not a simple accomplishment here.[1349] Subjectivity, as in most of Beckett's work, is forwarded only indirectly and through a veil of ambiguities and rhetorical failures, through the ruptured relations of the text between its internal coherence, the immediacy of its physical performance,[1350] and the mediatory role it adopts between playwright and audience, and, most significantly, through its technological mediation. If, as Agamben argues, vocality mediates between being *qua* being and human existence, then this art – which, in the technological abstraction of the voice from the body imposes such a forceful field of containment upon subjectivity – exposes precisely the non-conceptual *topoi* to which the work of Agamben and Levinas similarly allude in terms of a nothingness which evades nihilation.

That technological reproduction might be more effective in prescribing reality – this is certainly a possible implication of the expiry of this woman at the instigation of her disembodied voice – and, moreover, in describing the Real, remains an unsettling proposition.[1351] As unambiguously concrete as it is symbolic, Beckett points to a situation which exceeds human subjectivity – a *time of dying* which is the "possibility of a future without me, an infinite future, *a future which is not my future*."[1352] This work also clarifies the proximity of the aesthetic relation of the facticity of the *il y a* – that there is – to minimalism: both take shape along a trajectory of reductionism, abstraction and rarefication which is easily mistaken for pure absence, nothingness and the void. Aesthetic and existential minimalism similarly evoke a profound recognition: that in the pursuit of minimum we are returned to that which is most Real – the taking-place of entities.

[1347] Beckett, *Rockaby*, 442.

[1348] Ibid., 433.

[1349] As Connor notes, the "tape seems to be caught in a series of self-recalling loops, each tending towards an end, but also stimulating an apparently infinite series of delays for recapitulation" (Connor, *Samuel Beckett*, 134).

[1350] See ibid., 128, 130, 159-60; Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 84.

[1351] On this power of technology, we might recall how in *Krapp's Last Tape* the consistency and authenticity is similarly granted by recordings of the voice to the failing reflexive identification of the subject.

[1352] Critchley, *Very Little*, 75.

In *A Zed and Two Noughts*,[1353] amongst Peter Greenaway's most theoretically demanding films, the balance of negativity and positivity in such taking-place is meticulously interrogated. Exploring the intersection of mythology, science and art, the film centres on the attempts of two brothers, Oliver and Oswald – scientists at a zoo – to explain and mourn the death of their wives in a car accident by pseudo-scientific means. Oliver becomes obsessed with the moment at which being passes into existence, repeatedly watching a "pseudo-BBC film series called *Life on Earth*,"[1354] while Oswald, using time-lapse photography, begins to document the process of decay itself. Having revealed to Alba, their lover (separately and together),[1355] that they were born joined at the hip, the physical appearance of Oliver and Oswald becomes increasingly indistinct, and their project becomes a "cinema poised...at the exact moment between life and death."[1356] The film attempts to grasp the point of death by recasting post-mortem existence itself as a type of life – a *time of dying*.

Their documentation of decomposition appropriates Darwinian taxonomy in an "evolution of death"[1357] which begins with a rotting apple and progresses through the decay of a prawn, angelfish, a crocodile, a swan, a dog, and a zebra. Using stop-motion photography, they break this process down to its most minimal elements – the image of an instant, but a dead instant, a potent aesthetic reflection of the tension between hypostasis and the *il y a* if ever there were one. Rapidly played in sequence, these narrate an *alterior* life – a life-of-death – "stop-motion allows us to see changes that would be imperceptible in real time...Applied to nature, this process has a pronounced alienation [sic] effect. Corpses act out a macabre 'living' death, one that seems grotesquely unnatural"[1358] as they bloat, shrink, are consumed and rot to nothingness. Here the resonance with Rancière's identification of the *sentence-image* in cinema is clear, as we witness the "change of regime between two sensory orders,"[1359] by which conventional narrative logic is disrupted by the image, but yet subject to the ungainly sequencing of a "paratactic syntax."[1360] Rather terrifyingly, this cinema adopts a deadly work of its own, its completion "demand[ing] fresh bodies in order to construct a climax and a kind of closure."[1361] This culminates in the brothers' attempt to capture their joint suicide and decomposition by the same technology through which they endeavoured to

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[1353] Peter Greenaway, *A Zed and Two Noughts*, 1985.
[1354] Amy Lawrence, *The Films of Peter Greenaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 93.
[1355] Alba loses a leg in the same accident that kills the wives of Oliver and Oswald, and is pivotal in exposing the film's principal themes as intersections of taxonomy, medical science, mathematics, art, belonging, sex, procreation, loss, death and decay.
[1356] Lawrence, *Greenaway*, 97.
[1357] Ibid., 93.
[1358] Ibid., 95.
[1359] Rancière, *Future*, 46.
[1360] Ibid., 48.
[1361] Lawrence, *Greenaway*, 95.

arrest the essence of persistence from decay. This plan is thwarted when their bodies and equipment are overwhelmed by snails – they execute their plan on Alba's aptly named country estate, *L'escargot* – causing the latter to break down. We are brought to the disheartening realization that all the effort of science and art is finally for nought.

Given the complexity of Greenaway's vision, it is perhaps surprising how many elements of aesthetic minimalism are discernible in *A Zed and Two Noughts*. Apart from the use of serial repetition in the stop-motion photography – which, as noted, ties together aesthetic reductionism and physical decay – Greenaway often uses his screen as a canvas on which to rehearse chromatic relationships, particularly between black and white,[1362] but also primary colours[1363] and the fundamental visual processes of casting light and shadow.[1364] An interesting formalism is discernible in key images of the film, perhaps most notably in the blue neon sign of the opening scene (Figure 74) – *zoo*, literally a zed and two noughts – and which fades, letter by letter, as Oliver kneels, weeping, on the street where the fatal accident occurred.

Figure 74: Still from opening of *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Peter Greenaway, 1985.

[1362] For example, the prostitute, Venus de Milo, always appears in black and white.

[1363] The images above from the opening sequence show, from left to right, the blue of the zoo's sign, the yellow of the Esso advertisement, and the red of the hazard warning tape.

[1364] Near the film's start, we encounter (recalling Vermeer) the dazzling illumination of van Meegeren's operating theatre from the glass rear wall as an automated blind rises, (Clip 2; Peter Greenaway, "Surgery scence," *A Zed and Two Noughts*, 1985), while towards its end, as the camera zooms out at the close of the scene in which the brothers are confronted in their laboratory by the shadowy van Hoyten, the darkness paradoxically revealed by the irregular, intermittent rhythm of camera flashes which are documenting the various processes of decomposition in progress, condenses all the uncaniness of the film's subject (Clip 3 Peter Greenaway, "Time-lapse lab scene," *A Zed and Two Noughts*, 1985.

Here we discover the spectrum of the film's concerns condensed into a single vanishing image. It evokes the physical space of the zoo in which "the artificial, arbitrary bringing together of incompatible species"[1365] takes place. This arbitrariness is what makes taxonomy necessary, and the several systems to which the film appeals converge in the letter *zed*: alphabetic ordering, the zenith of the Darwinian ascent (albeit the decaying *zebra* is surpassed in the progressive animalization of the human body). The fading of the zed (Figure 75) foreshadows the inability of these systems to stabilise order, or to offer satisfactory connection of decay to loss and grief, and the two brothers – the two noughts, *OO*, Oliver and Oswald[1366] – are left without consolation.

[1365] Lawrence, *Greenaway*, 92.
[1366] Ibid., 79.

Figure 75:Sequence of two stills from opening of *Zed and Two Noughts*, Peter Greenaway, 1985.

The disappearance of the second nought, reduces the conceptual cinematic *topos* to the single *O* (Figure 76). Visually, this distinctly recalls the light art of Dan Flavin or Olafur Eliasson, and the sculpture of Ronald Bladen. This solitary nought installs *zero* as an existential target of sorts – the absence to which all existence seems to tend. At the same time, however, we are reminded that the nothingness which we might associate with death or disappearance is not void: we witness that the progress of decay installs another, uncanny, second life – a life without consciousness, but which is still marked by physical process and effect.

Figure 76: Sequence of stills from Peter Greenaway, *A Zed and Two Noughts***, 1985).**

e) The argument regarding minimalism and perception

The point at which this final *O* disappears (Figure 76) marks not nothingness, but the minimal distinction of the static instant from the passage of time. This is not only evident from Greenaway's use of stop-motion animation, but is also implicit in the soundtrack for the film composed by minimalist Michael Nyman. As indissociable as Greenaway's images might be from Nyman's memorable melodies, the genesis of this music usually occurs independently, with minimal initial reference to visual themes.[1367] Yet there exists a rare synergy in this work which draws into a provocative proximity the significant temporal, existential and scientific concerns exposed above, and an aesthetic field upon which the lucid, formalist austerity of minimalism meets the opulent formality of the Baroque.[1368] This is clearly audible in "Time Lapse," (Track 22),[1369] the composition which accompanies the opening sequence cited above as well as many of the laboratory scenes. Its rhythmic, repeated chords make clear reference to the predilection for homophonic texture which characterizes several musical genres of the Baroque[1370] – here Nyman draws on a "Dies Irae" of Heinrich Biber[1371] – and well complements scenes which exploit the regular punctuation of stop-motion photography,[1372] offering in its vigorous yet stately pulse a counterpoint to Greenaway's uncanny evocation of decay as a *time of dying*.

Indeed, a surprisingly productive field of comparison exists between minimalism and the Baroque, the exploration of which has tended to distinguish between their formal similarities, their reception and consumption as cultural products, and their affective consonances. From a formalist perspective, there are certainly legitimate points of contact. In the first instance, minimalist and Baroque music are comparable in their use of sequences, or repeated patterns – harmonic, melodic or rhythmic – which, through their repetitions and variations, are a principal structuring force of the music. Both are also concerned with rendering the compositional process transparent.[1373] This could not be more unambiguously presented than in Glass' "Floe," (Track 23),[1374] which patiently states and then combines each element of its ecstatic content most conspicuously. Responding respectively to the exaggerated complexity of late Renaissance

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[1367] Pwyll ap Siôn, *The Music of Michael Nyman: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts* (Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate: 2007), 81, 85-6.

[1368] Ibid., 81, 88, 92, 95-103.

[1369] Michael Nyman, "Time Lapse," *The Essential Michael Nyman Band*. Argo, 1992.

[1370] This fact is often overlooked by those who mistakenly equate baroque composition with contrapuntal invention, which represents only one area of its remarkably embracing and experimental creative spirit. Almost all vocal music is predominantly homophonic, and most orchestral and chamber work incorporates homophonic sections.

[1371] Ibid., 101.

[1372] Ibid., 102.

[1373] See Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 184-6.

[1374] Philip Glass, "Floe," *Glassworks*. CBS, 1982.

polyphony and the serialism developed by the Second Viennese school and their successors,[1375] Baroque and minimalist composition sought to reanimate the most fundamental material from which harmony and harmonic progression are derived. The *basso ostinato*, or ground bass, in baroque music – a repeated bass motif which outlines cyclical patterns of harmonic movement[1376] – finds close parallels in minimalism.[1377] More recognizable, still, is the presence of melodic sequences, isorhythms[1378] and the extensive use of arpeggiated lines.[1379] We might only compare a celebrated passage from the opening movement of Vivaldi's *La Primavera* concerto (Track 24)[1380] to one from Glass' "Knee-Play 2" from *Einstein on the Beach* (Track 25)[1381] to adduce this proximity. The arpeggio offers a suitable vehicle for the simultaneous exposition of harmonic and melodic material, and while we exercise just caution in resisting, with Fink, the equation of minimalism and baroque music through any one such vehicle – stylistic marker, theoretical principal, or compositional process[1382] – we do equally well in recalling that the search for aesthetic novelty often begins with a sustained re-examination of aesthetic foundations.

By definition, any radical aesthetic proposition revisits the possibility of defining its own essence. In this sense every aesthetic period exposes some sort of minimalism – doubtless one could contend that the sparseness and transparency which characterizes late eighteenth century classicism is somewhat minimal. However, where classicism's innovations are clarified by the manner in which material is coordinated by hierarchical forms and structures, those of the baroque are apprehended in the very midst of process and procedure. Taking seriously Reich's proposition that the minimal heart of music is located in the very production of its constituent sounds,[1383] we might note similarly that it is through the performance of baroque music that one becomes a witness to the intimate process by which transparent simplicity and opaque complexity are held together, generating in their dialectic interplay a dynamic sonic field from

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[1375] Ben Yarmolinksy, "Minimalism and the Baroque," *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*, ed. Claudia Swan (New York: Eos, 1997), 61.

[1376] Siôn, *Music of Nyman*, 95-6.

[1377] Yarmolinksy disputes that the ground bass may be interpreted as a proto-minimalist device (Yarmolinksy, "Minimalism and Baroque," 66). To address this, we might compare Purcell's use of the ground bass in Dido's famous lament to the descending line of Glass' "Knee Plays" in *Einstein on the Beach*. Purcell is one of Nyman's principal inspirateurs – the latter frequently quoting the former's work – while Reich acknowledges the influence of Bach (Steve Reich, "Texture, Space, Survival," *Writings on Music*, 140 (139-144); Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 171-2).

[1378] Isorhythms are identical rhythmic patterns or proportions repeated to strengthen a sense of musical unity.

[1379] Jonathan Sheffer, "Foreword," *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*, ed. Claudia Swan (New York: Eos, 1997), iv (i-v).

[1380] Antonio Vivaldi, "Allegro," *Concerto No. 1 in E major*, Op. 8/RV 269, 1725.

[1381] Philip Glass, "Knee-Play 2," *Einstein on the Beach*. Nonesuch, 1993.

[1382] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 170-1.

[1383] "The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously" (Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," *Writings on Music*, 34).

which music takes its shape. Both monodic immediacy and intricate polyphony reach back to the very radical taking-place of a sonic entity in terms of its melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, dynamic and timbrel elements. Harmony and melody constitute one another in a single musical occurrence. We search patiently for that elusive point at which sound reveals itself as music: between will and body, inhalation and exhalation; between presence and absence, existence and nothingness – between hypostasis and the *il y a*.

Fink downplays such speculative thought. "Seeing a link between minimalism and Baroque music does not mean casting back two centuries for some elusive tonal essence the two styles share,"[1384] he claims. He contends that we look instead to music's "societal function"[1385] and how music is consumed[1386] to explain such proximities. Rather than insisting on a transhistorical analysis of consumption – noting, comparing and decoding types of consumer and consumption of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the one hand, and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on the other – Fink suggests that the early postmodern pattern of consumption itself *produces* the proximity of minimalism and the Baroque in the sense that it is this "new culture of repetitive listening"[1387] which conditions our perception of resemblances in the first instance. That "the infancy of...[minimalism] was saturated in the actual material sound of a commercially driven technological transformation of [Baroque music]"[1388] is itself a contentious claim.[1389] Accepting the popularity of the so-called *barococo* revival and its inextricability from technologies of mass-dissemination which shape reception[1390] still leaves us at a considerable distance from affirming Fink's somewhat conservative uncoupling of production and reception, separating an impeccably educated composing elite from an apparently pedestrian and undiscerning listener-consumer.

Nonetheless, Fink's analysis of minimalism in terms of its status as commodity – its rise within a climate of accelerated capitalism marked by the symmetrical expansion of a culture of consumption and the consumption of culture[1391] – is one of considerable value. In his work we discover an important variation on similar insights reached by Kenneth Baker, who stresses in minimalism's emergence "the broad

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[1384] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 171.
[1385] Ibid., 172.
[1386] Ibid.
[1387] Ibid., 174.
[1388] Ibid., 171.
[1389] "Barococo was not training listeners for Beethoven; it was training them for minimalism" (ibid., 182). This seems to me a view of cultural consumption at once somewhat exaggerated and inflexible.
[1390] Ibid., 180-1.
[1391] Foster, *Return*, 60-62, 66, 107-115.

background of American mass production," in which artists "responded to the cynical superabundance of industry by using its services to produce objects calculatedly unlike what the cornucopia of mass production disgorges,"[1392] and Hal Foster, who contends that "[m]inimalism and pop often approximated a serial mode of *production* that related them like no previous art to our systematic world of commodities and images. With this serial mode of production came a different mode of *consumption*."[1393] Meyer provides considerable insight to the "'culture sell'"[1394] fashion, design, advertising and journalism achieve by coupling themselves to the minimalist avant-garde of the 1960s – "the logic of Novelty was the logic of consumption"[1395] – and Strickland,[1396] Chave[1397] and Mertens[1398] offer similar observations within a broadly materialist critique of cultural economy.

The danger of excessively labouring the point regarding minimalism's socio-economic moorings resides in the potential suppression of its aesthetic features. We easily miss that the principal means of recognizing resemblance resides in aesthetic perception itself, upon which minimalism places novel and paradoxical demands.[1399] Minimalism seems to harness the very force of the concept in exposing the immanence of its media and their relation to sensation and perception:[1400] neither obtains absolute primacy, and an attempt to isolate one always returns us to the other, alternating between 'intellect as determinative dimension...[and] the observer's bodily awareness as the standpoint from which he must construe an artwork's rationale and his own role in determining what he sees."[1401] The immanence which minimalism attempts to evoke in terms of "some sort of presence or concrete thereness"[1402] in its objects, abandons transcendence to a radical taking-place of matter.[1403]

[1392] Baker, *Minimalism*, 9.

[1393] Foster, *Return,* 108. In particular, Foster draws attention to the reconsideration of value prompted by an art of objecthood: aesthetic, use and exchange value transform and potentially negate one another depending on their mode and context of presentation (ibid., 111-2). See ibid., 60-62, 66, 107-115.

[1394] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 29.

[1395] Ibid., 215. See also ibid., 8-9; 25, 28-9. More hesitantly, we might note, with Foster, that "the avant-garde mimes the degraded world of capitalist modernity in order not to embrace it but to mock it" (Foster, *Return*, 15-6).

[1396] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 1-2, 9.

[1397] Chave, *Minimalism and Rhetoric*, 26.

[1398] Mertens suggests that minimalism might be understood within a libidinal economy (following Lyotard) which opposes the strictly dialectic understanding of historical capitalism (Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 116-120).

[1399] Foster, *Return*, 50.

[1400] Foster construes the principal dialectic movement in minimalism – between conception and perception – in terms of an "embrace of structuralism" (ibid., 62) as opposed to "enthusiasm for phenomenology" (ibid.).

[1401] Baker, *Minimalism*, 10.

[1402] Rose, "ABC," 291.

[1403] Ibid.; Foster, 36-7.

Donald Judd's contention is that minimalism manifests in terms of *specific objects*.[1404] Each of these is a unified quantity, a "thing as a whole"[1405] which is determined not by any internal or external relation of particular parts, but by the fact that it is expressly indifferent to resemblance, representation or illusion.[1406] The media or materials in which such an object consists are "simply materials,"[1407] and it is by this minimal being that "[t]hey are specific."[1408] Claiming that "[a] work needs only to be interesting,"[1409] Judd installs *interest* as the correlate of specificity, and an experiential cipher for the displacement which minimalism effects within traditional aesthetics. Not only is Kantian disinterestedness decentred by a concern with aesthetic intensity, presence or immanence, but many minimalists sought to circumvent the view that their aesthetic work involves reflective judgment at all. To recall Kant, reflective judgment defines the aesthetic situation in which our encounter with particular sensory data is normalized by the submission of this data to concepts. These concepts allow us to "ascend from the particular in nature to the universal,"[1410] so that, finally, aesthetic experience as it is encountered in a particular object *presupposes* the potential subjugation of its aesthetic qualities to concepts.[1411] By contrast, Judd's idea of *specific objects* demarcates aesthetic entities which themselves claim universality inasmuch as they are absolutely singular in their stark nonconceptuality. Thus they are interesting without commanding our obeisance to a transcendental principle.

In the celebrated essay, "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried takes an extremely forceful line against such minimalism – or *literalist* art,[1412] as he terms it – claiming that on the basis of its overly literal understanding of its vocation simply to exist, it negates *conviction* regarding art's historicity, substituting for the modernist "transcendental 'presentness' of art...the mundane 'presence' of things."[1413] Aesthetic perception appeals to a sense of "[e]ndlessness, being able to go on and on, even having to go on and on"[1414] – the "temporality of perception,"[1415] or "*duration of the experience*."[1416] It is this reduction of art

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[1404] Although in "Specific Objects" Judd makes no mention of his own three-dimensional work, it is nonetheless exemplary with regard to the paradigm he exposes. Foster refers to this essay as his manifesto (Foster, *Return*, 3).

[1405] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax and New York: Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, 1975), 187.

[1406] Ibid., 184.

[1407] Ibid., 187.

[1408] Ibid.

[1409] Ibid., 184.

[1410] Kant, *Judgment*, 19.

[1411] Ibid., 18-9.

[1412] In this essay Fried prefers the term *literalism* to minimalism (ibid., 117).

[1413] Foster, *Return*, 51.

[1414] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 143. "[T]he beholder is made aware of the endlessness and inexhaustibility if not of the object itself at any rate of his experience of it (ibid., 140).

[1415] Foster, *Return*, 40.

to "a mundane time"[1417] which Fried views as antithetical to the advancements of modernity.[1418] Such art functions by a sort of *theatricality* which divests it of any specific force by allowing the aesthetic object to drift, apparently "inexhaustibly,"[1419] between pure sensation and structuring perception on the one hand, and, on the other, generic conventions and aesthetic disciplines.[1420] Such inexhaustibility owes not to "any fullness [within the object]...but because there is nothing there to exhaust."[1421] In this sense, the *theatricality* which Fried places at the centre of minimalism – "the production of objects designed exclusively to produce a response"[1422] – suggests a hollow aesthetic sensibility. Theatrical objects claim as their own a sheer presence which, in fact, is coerced from the perceiver in the form of an anonymous but irremissible aesthetic awareness.[1423] Theatricality obscures the epiphanic promise that aesthetic modernism sought to conserve: that "[p]resentness is grace;"[1424] that externality and autonomy in their intricacy are inextricable from the possibility of freedom.[1425]

Minimalism understood thus deflects aesthetic integrity from the object to the vicissitudes of aesthetic perception as *experienced* by an embodied subject, while simultaneously transforming this subject from a simple viewer to a *beholder*.[1426] "The objects exists on its own all right; what depends on the beholder is only the experience,"[1427] notes Walter Benn Michaels in his assessment of Fried's argument. "But, of course, the experience is everything – it is the *experience* instead of the *object* that Minimalism values."[1428] The beholder performs a constructive role inasmuch as the objects of canonical minimalism are dependent on perception for their integrity; yet the beholder is simultaneously rendered passive, even impotent, as he is able neither to ignore nor fully to apprehend the work in its sheer quantity.[1429] In short, minimalism requires a new mode of perception: "to discover and project objecthood as such,"[1430] it must

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1416 Ibid., 145.
1417 Foster, *Return*, 52. See ibid., 40-1.
1418 Fried, 145-7; also ibid., 125, 142.
1419 Ibid., 144.
1420 Ibid., 141-2.
1421 Ibid., 140.
1422 Michaels, *Shape*, 89.
1423 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 127-9.
1424 Ibid., 147.
1425 Michaels, *Shape*, 88; Foster, *Return*, 41-2.
1426 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 140-4.
1427 Michaels, *Shape*, 89.
1428 Ibid.
1429 See Fried., 140.
1430 Ibid., 120.

recast itself as "an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*,"[1431] and, finally, "*belongs* to the beholder."[1432]

For Robert Morris,[1433] despite the ill-fated search for an absolute artwork – a work which would be constituted by a single quality or a single part[1434] – minimalism diligently generates *unitary forms* (Figure 77).[1435] These are "bound together...with a kind of energy provided by the gestalt...in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation,"[1436] eschewing the relation of any internal parts, as well as the possible reduction of their singularity to any quality which could be determined from a position of externality, or a relation to other objects.[1437] Thus, as Berger observes of Morris' *L-Beams*, "while the logic of the form's uniformity is understood, the visual inconsistency of their positioning precludes seeing them as the same."[1438] Remarkably, the unitary form remains indifferent – "neutral and austere" – even as it draws the beholder into an active perceptual relation by the sense of presence its scale commands, a bodily relation more usually reserved for our interaction with other people.[1439]

Every unitary form coheres *qua* its own paradigmatic exposition[1440] – its production of, and manifestation within, the para-ontological sphere[1441] of its own intelligibility;[1442] an imbrication of the self-reflexivity and reflective judgment which confirm the facticity of the work persisting *as it is* within the Real. Likewise, we might recognize in Morris' position the aesthetic paraphrase of what Badiou grasps ontologically when, accepting the fundamental axiom that the One is not, that which *seems* to be One,

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[1431] Ibid., 125.

[1432] Ibid.

[1433] Robert Morris – along with Judd, Le Witt and Stella – is one of the first generation of minimalist visual artists whose theoretical position is held almost in as high regard as his creative work.

[1434] Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 226.

[1435] Robert Morris, *Untitled (L-Beams)*, 1965-7. Whitney Museum, New York.

[1436] Ibid., 225-6.

[1437] Ibid., 225.

[1438] Berger, *Labyrinths*, 54.

[1439] Ibid., 49-56.

[1440] Agamben, "Paradigm," 23, 30-1.

[1441] We might schematize the manner in which the integrity of a phenomenon is guaranteed simultaneously by conception and perception, when we note that in determining the most proper part of an entity, it is as though internality and externality simultaneously turn back on themselves and upon one another: the most intimate part of the phenomenon is manifested *beside* (*para*) itself, and the externality we perceive of an object, in fact, contains the essence of what we cannot master through any act of perception or conception. Along with Agamben, we denominate this in terms of a "paradigmatic ontology" (ibid., 32) or *para-ontological* sphere (Giorgio Agamben, *What is a Paradigm?: A Lecture by Giorgio Agamben*, 20 November 2011. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html>.

[1442] Agamben, "Paradigm," 24.

must, in fact, be multiple. The unitary form is an aesthetic analogue for that which by its resistant engagement with perception is counted-as-One.

Figure 77: Robert Morris, *Untitled (L-Beams)***, 1965-7.**

Returning to the question of *presence*, Foster maintains that minimalism is best comprehended in epistemological terms[1443] – in his estimation its aesthetic sphere is defined by a self-reflexivity concerned with the conditions of its perception and intelligibility. I incline towards the proposition that minimalist presence is the para-ontological condition by which its objects exemplify their relation to the Real. By analogy, we might recall the manner in which Aristotelian categories simultaneously delineate and retain ontology, and ask whether minimalism might not be interpreted as a homological mirror – an oblique return to ontology offered by restraining epistemology by the very terms it values most? "[A] brute but

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[1443] While I take Foster's point, the qualifications offered seem insufficient to make a final judgment regarding minimalism's commitment to its epistemological dimension. In deciding in this regard, we might recall the manner in which Aristotelian categories are forwarded to restrain ontology, although themselves presented in ontological terms. Might minimalism be interpreted as an oblique return to ontology offered by restraining epistemology by the very terms it values most?

impassive presence,"[1444] Levinas reminds us, is the pivot of the existential understanding of Being itself. By the persistence of its emphasis on presence, minimalism exhibits its *passion for the Real* (adapting Badiou's phrase)[1445] – a reflexive exemplification of the "relationship art entertains with the real, or what the real of art is."[1446]Exposing this relationship, art must come to "exhibit its own process...[and] to visibly idealize its own materiality;"[1447] to generate by its "erasure of every content"[1448] the destruction neither of quality nor of meaning as such, but the recognition of their supplementarity to what of every quantity is Real.[1449] In this way it subtracts from its own material[1450] the "minimal difference"[1451] between the proper place of an entity and its taking-place, between its pure presence and the representation of presence.[1452]

We discover in this minimal difference the ontological elaboration of Foster's claim that, "[a]s an analysis of perception, minimalism prepared a further analysis of the conditions of perception."[1453] Dan Flavin's installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin is remarkable in this respect (Figure 78).[1454] A prime example of the transumptive logic of much minimalism, defining the proper *topos* of this work proves exceedingly tricky. Its constituents are *distributed* between several locations and dislocations, material objects and the organs and processes of perception: the iridescent material which each fluorescent fixture contains; the electricity which triggers the chemical reactions responsible for the luminescence of these fixtures; the actual light which the fixtures emit; the manner in which this light is apprehended, processed and transformed by the sensory and associated apparatus of our bodies; the materiality of the fixtures themselves, their way of occupying space and relating to the architecture of the hall – reflected, deflected

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[1444] *EE*, 51.

[1445] It should be noted that Badiou uses the example of Malevich's *White on White*, a well-known suprematist work which is noteworthy for its exploration of "the abstract difference of ground and form, and, above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same – what we could call the vanishing difference" (Badiou, *Century*, 55).

[1446] Ibid.

[1447] Ibid., 50.

[1448] Ibid., 55.

[1449] Here Foster's pertinent observation is useful, that "the stake of minimalism is the nature of meaning and the status of the subject, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in a physical interface with the actual world" (Foster, *Return*, 40).

[1450] Importantly, this takes place by a "construction" rather than a deduction: it is both "differential and differentiating" (Badiou, *Century*, 56).

[1451] Ibid., 55

[1452] Ibid.

[1453] Foster, *Return*, 59.

[1454] Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1996. Hamburger Banhoff, Berlin. Flavin's work is discussed in greater detail subsequently.

and limited by floors, walls, pillars, arches, windows and the ceiling; and finally from the perspective of a passer-by to whom the entire building might become a work of light art (Figure 79).[1455]

Figure 78: Dan Flavin - untitled (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin), 1996. Interior view.

Figure 79: Dan Flavin - untitled (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin), 1996. Exterior view.

[1455] Ibid.

That "perceptual presence"[1456] is distributed in such a way has led numerous minimalists to a brand of phenomenology loosely sympathetic to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's central proposition: that perception is a dynamic and constructive process,[1457] a practical synthesis of "lived-through correspondences"[1458] of sensory data and sensation which our embodied existence actively generates.[1459] Perception is the "original text"[1460] which donates purposiveness to reality by indicating "a *direction* rather than a primitive function"[1461] which conditions the interaction of a body with entities of the world by which it is surrounded, each of which has a particular existential *style*.[1462] In the process by which perception stylizes reality,[1463] art is of particular significance to Merleau-Ponty since, "[w]ith all its sensuous means, it is art which gives this dimension [of embodied perception] its fullest expression."[1464] If "elementary perception is already charged with a *meaning*,"[1465] how much more so might the specialized aesthetic perception be which exposes the full intensity of a specific medium? Recognizing that "no language ever wholly frees itself from the precariousness of mute forms of expression,"[1466] those of art nonetheless remain remarkable for the manner in which they intensify perception by the imbrication of the body with a particular medium.

The *autopoietic* definition of biological systems is instructive here, and fundamental to all living systems and those which operate homologically. "A creature endowed with a central nervous system must succeed in externalizing and constructing an outside world before it can begin to articulate self-reference on the basis of its own bodily perceptions…perhaps by a sort of transcribing of the brain's "double closure" into an inside/outside distinction within consciousness,"[1467] according to Luhmann. In this light, Merleau-

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[1456] Foster, *Return*, 60.

[1457] Merleau-Ponty faults the empiricist notions that "attention creates nothing" (*PP*, 28), asserting instead that "to pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them" (ibid., 30).

[1458] Ibid., 204.

[1459] In a renowned formulation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that "the theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception" (*PP*, 206); Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 42.

[1460] *PP*, 21.

[1461] Ibid., 12.

[1462] Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 43, 45-7.

[1463] Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 181.

[1464] *PP*, 54.

[1465] *PP*, 4. By comparison, Mikel Dufrenne asserts that it is "complete perception [which] involves the grasping of a meaning," although he similarly affirms that "[t]o perceive is to know – that is, to discover – a meaning within or beyond appearances" (Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey, Albert A. Anderson, Willis Domingo and Leon Jacobson (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), 333.

[1466] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voice of Silence," *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann, 1974, 75.

[1467] Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 5.

Ponty's insistence on the ontological autonomy of art, a field which is yet constituted of entities "accessible only through direct contact,"[1468] rehearses the existential conditions central to the maintenance of human consciousness in its *autopoietic* capacity. Here is a theoretical ground upon which the minimalist notion of unmediated presence might be forwarded. By the processes of perception, the objects of art are neither mediated nor represented, but, rather, constituted and presented. No rift exists between intention and reception in the medial continuity of the work *qua* perception. Merleau-Ponty's claim that art exists as a "nexus of living meanings"[1469] furnishes a radical vision of *all* art as implicitly anthropocentric.

In a similar register, Mikel Dufrenne acknowledges art as a physical articulation of perception[1470] within the "plane of presence"[1471] – the world as it is presented in its undefined encounterability and perceptibility – in which case art *presents* perception in a particularly concrete manner.[1472] It is in the sheer physicality by which the aesthetic imbrication of presence and perception is made manifest that "our body is comparable to a work of art."[1473] However, significant caution must be exercised in the relation of anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism: if the latter habitually implies the former, the assumption that the former necessarily leads to the latter is false. Perhaps this last point is what directs Fried to the contention that a "latent or hidden...anthropomorphism"[1474] preoccupies even the most *literalist* work. Recognizing the minimalists' concern with maximally effective scale, Fried tactically reduces minimalism's claims regarding unmediated presence to a question of scale, and scale to one of anthropomorphism. Fried's implicit phenomenology is one in which access to the existence, emergence and transformation – not solely of organisms, but of entities in general – is predicated upon anthropic gesture. The present argument departs considerably in this respect: without denying the constructive nature of perception, its primary concern lies with the manner in which the Real, by its sheer indifference, conditions the coherence of every entity *qua* its persistence. Thus, if for minimalism, "there can be no conceptual, or mediated, equivalent to laying eyes on something in its presence,"[1475] this is not due to its qualities, as such, but because minimalism institutes a "new regime of [perception, in which]...the

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[1468] *PP*, 150-1; Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 46-7.

[1469] *PP*, 151.

[1470] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 336-7, 340-3. Importantly, he recognizes that the significance of art cannot be fully contained (ibid., 343).

[1471] Ibid., 339.

[1472] Finally, Dufrenne claims that presence is an insufficient criterion for the definition of art (ibid., 344), the intricacies of which argument lie beyond the present discussion.

[1473] *PP*, 151.

[1474] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 129. See also ibid., 130. Fried is suspicious of all art which is not directed towards some sort of transcendence.

[1475] Baker, *Minimalism*, 24.

beholder's presence is not external to the art object, and that the object is partly determined by the beholder's presence and response."[1476] Thus minimalism's paradoxically engaging disengagement from questions of meaning[1477] stems precisely from a radicalization of questions of presentation and representation according to which "perception is made reflexive in...[its] works and so rendered complex" even as it struggles with nothingness.[1478]

f) Minimal intensity and existential appearance

The encounter of thought with nothingness reaches in three broad directions. The first is ontotheological: nothingness is understood in terms of *substance*, which is to say, as the instantiation of non-Being, or at least in terms of nonexistence. The second regards nothingness as a question of relation, or of the radical ground upon which relation is possible: a complex, unequal and finally non-dialectic relation between Being and non-Being, existence and nonexistence. Third, it is possible to view nothingness as a point of exit or of entrance between existence and Being. This is the view implicit in work as different as that of Levinas and Blanchot, Agamben, and Badiou. In the case of Blanchot and Levinas, nothingness is a point of exit – linked intimately to death, or rather the impossibility of death; for Agamben, nothingness becomes obliquely visible upon an inarticulable threshold[1479] between externality and interiority; for Badiou, nothingness is at once a sort of ground and a point of entry into existence. From the quantitative ontological mould adopted in the present work, and its consequent emphasis on positive manifestation, *nothingness* is more adequately accounted for as a point of *entry* to than *exit* from existence. In this sense, nothingness is simply a point of contact with being *qua* being, pure multiplicity – which is to say that nothingness points to Being as undifferentiated multiplicity, but also as pure potentiality.

Accepting Badiou's claim that it is solely mathematics which is capable of presenting Being *qua* pure multiplicity,[1480] does not proscribe the *poietic* instantiation of the aperture between nothingness and existence, or comprehension of the variable existential intensities which attend every such point of appearance or disappearance. Measuring the vocation of art against that of mathematics, it becomes possible to recognize something of an *ur-quantity*, which is to say the quantitativeness of any quantity.

[1476] Berdini, "Similar Emotions," 47.
[1477] Rose, "ABC," 281-2; 284-92.
[1478] Foster, *Return*, 36.
[1479] *CC*, 67.
[1480] Madarasz, *Introduction*, 7.

From this recognition is drawn that "every [existential] situation is infinite"[1481] – a claim grounded both in mathematics and in ordinary logic[1482] – and the logical observation that there is no manner of dividing or counting multiplicity that reduces multiplicity as such.

To exist is to participate in infinite multiplicity according to Badiou, which is significantly at odds with the Heideggerian understanding of *Dasein* as being towards finitude. This allows us to recognize that an existential situation, which arises from pure Being, is infinite to the precise extent that we understand it as a subtraction from pure multiplicity. "[E]xistence is the proper intensity with which a multiple inscribes itself into the infinity of a situation."[1483] To apprehend the Real at is most radical, it is necessary to recognize "the existence of a minimum [of intensity], which corresponds to non-appearance."[1484] Only against the possibility of non-appearance is the *poietic* force which in minimalism underpins the sheer facticity of appearance itself fully comprehensible.

[1481] *CC*, 68.
[1482] Ibid., 69.
[1483] Badiou, "Existence and Death," 68.
[1484] Alain Badiou, "Notes Toward a Thinking of Appearance," *TW*, 189 (182-93).

PART THREE: MINIMALISM AS TRANSUMPTIVE EXISTENTIAL LOGIC

11. THEORETICAL OBJECTHOOD

a) Objects in search of a theory

Several years ago, while preparing to give a class on literary value, I set about finding examples where the distinction between art and commonplace objects was less than clear, and which exposed the contingencies which accompany various judgements of value. A friend pointed me to a website which presents pairs of similar objects – one an actual artefact, the other an ordinary functional thing. What a wonderful leveller for those naive enough to suppose that aesthetic sophistication rests on knowledge, judgement, subtlety or taste! Having spent a substantial amount of time studying minimalist sculpture, I should have been less surprised that, even in the case of those objects which clearly appealed to a broadly minimalist aesthetic, I was able to hazard only the most tentative of guesses at the identity of the art object in many of these pairs. After all, one of the principal aims of many minimalists is to level the distinction between ordinary things and artefacts by reducing or eliminating the traces of artistic facture. These works offer little in terms of meaning or content, and so resist easy explication. In minimalism we encounter an aesthetic field scattered with objects in search of a theory.[1485]

Regarding the apprehension of objects, most models recognize that interpretation is practically, if not entirely, coincidental with the perception of the object in question.[1486] Our concern, however, lies less with the consequences of interpretation, than with adequately treating the objects of minimalism on their own terms.[1487] Minimalism's persistent regard for the object *qua* its objecthood prompts us to reconsider theory at its radix: when theorizing, do we begin with objects or do we begin with concepts? Waugh suggests that "[t]o theorize...is simply to exercise one of the most vital capacities of being human, for there can be no rational or reflective life without the capacity to stand back and to form second-order

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[1485] Here we might recall Lyotard's claim that "rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for." (Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 81).

[1486] On this point thinkers as different as Gadamer (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 306-7), Danto, *Transfiguration*, 124, and Paul Churchland (Paul Churchland: *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey Into the Brain*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1995), 11-3, 21) agree.

[1487] Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 8.

judgements about the world and our own behaviour in it."[1488] Waugh's point relates primarily to what Eagleton describes in terms of theory as "human activity bending back upon itself, constrained into a new kind of self-reflexivity."[1489] "Just as all social life is theoretical," claims Eagleton, "so all theory is a real social practice."[1490]

For Mieke Bal, a particularly promising means of synthesizing the material, theoretical and meta-theoretical spheres, is the *theoretical object*.[1491] Usually the predicate of some artistic practice, such theoretical objects are at once practical and conceptual, and habitually stimulating numerous and often highly contradictory responses across a spectrum of theoretically grounded situations.[1492] The theoretical object is able to bridge the material and the ideal[1493] in an attempt to come to grips with the urgent reappraisal of the role of objects,[1494] both in culture and more general existential terms. As the carriers of cultural memory,[1495] the singular capacity of theoretical objects is to draw together numerous otherwise incommensurable concerns.[1496] Indeed, many of the examples deployed above to weave together the ontological, existential and aesthetic concerns of minimalism constitute theoretical objects, engaging headlong the theory-praxis paradox which Bal paraphrases as follows: "only practice can pronounce on theoretical validity, yet without theoretical validity no practice can be evaluated."[1497]

At this point, given Bal's focus on "interdisciplinarity in the humanities,"[1498] we do well to recall, as does Waugh, that theory necessarily presents itself in the same axiomatic terms established by the institutional rift between the natural and the human sciences.[1499] Wolfgang Iser takes the position that the *hard-core* theories of natural science – systems of laws, deductively formed and applied as a means of predicting –

[1488] Patricia Waugh, "Introduction: criticism, theory, and anti-theory," *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 10.
[1489] Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 27. In his brief and insightful introduction to the topic, Jonathan Culler similarly emphasizes the reflexivity of theory, together with its interdisciplinary tendency, its acting as a critique of common sense, and its conjunction of analysis and speculation (Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 14-5).
[1490] Ibid., 24.
[1491] Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 185.
[1492] Ibid.
[1493] Often a theoretical object also marks an explicit engagement between the aesthetic and the political, although this, for the most part, is bracketed in the present work.
[1494] Ibid., 8-9. As an alternative, we might also consider the rise of *Thing Theory*, spearheaded by Bill Brown and the Chicago-based journal *Critical Inquiry*.
[1495] Ibid., 177, 201.
[1496] Ibid., 177, 185.
[1497] Ibid., 14.
[1498] Ibid., 5.
[1499] Waugh, *Introduction*, 8-14.

contrast strongly with the *soft* theories of the humanities – constructivist, flexible and adaptable.[1500] However, Iser presses this theoretical rift too far in insisting that the "humanities are not a problem-solving undertaking. Instead, their prime concern is to achieve understanding."[1501] The conservative hermeneut is the hero of the humanities only if we are willing to exercise a subtle but decisive ban on the freedom of conceptual movement. Yet surely thinkers of any discipline are equally concerned with establishing accurate parameters for their subjects in order to address what is as yet unknown or undifferentiated – solving the problems of a given subject – as they are with understanding the contents and significance of these problems. To miss this is to miss the polyvalence of thought itself.

A theory of minimalism would be neither properly scientific nor merely soft. Ultimately it would attempt to address one question only: can art allow objects to be just objects? Moving carefully towards an answer, we might consider generalizing to minimalism in all its media Waugh's recognition – that in the theorization of literature there is "a fundamental contradiction at the heart of its activities: that in the end its instrument of analysis, language, is one that is shared with its object of analysis."[1502] If the great desire of the minimalist object is for an absolute autonomy with no referential content, then a theory of minimalism must ultimately be determined by the terms offered by these very same objects. It is intensely difficult to contemplate a theory which does not rest on causality, yet this is precisely what minimalism asks of us. Our primary concern is therefore neither what causes minimalism, nor what minimalism, in turn, causes. These are, of course, interesting questions, but would hand the minimalist object over to terms which are not necessarily its own. In this rather dim light we are led to a very narrow corridor in which a working theory of minimalism is marked only by self-description and exemplarity.

b) The gains and risks of meta-theory

It is difficult not to recall two iconoclastic essays at this point: Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*,[1503] and Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michael's *Against Theory*. Both present a radical species of theoretical minimalism, albeit they mirror one another in almost diametric opposition. For Sontag, the great error lies in the reduction of art to content, since this content then encourages an univocal code of

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[1500] Wolfgang Iser, *How To Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 5-7.

[1501] Ibid. 7.

[1502] Waugh, "Introduction," 12.

[1503] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1964), 13-23.

interpretation[1504] which "impoverishes,"[1505] "tames,"[1506] and "violates"[1507] art, preventing us from undertaking the real task of criticism, which is "*to show how it* [the artwork] *is what it is,* even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*."[1508] Knapp and Michaels, on the other hand, target theory rather than interpretation or meaning. In their estimation, "the theoretical impulse...always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated: on the ontological side, meaning from intention...; on the epistemological side, knowledge from true belief."[1509] Theory should be abandoned because, finally, it amounts to no more than the set of strategies people have employed to evade their direct responsibility to the work itself.[1510]

Despite numerous and possibly irreconcilable differences between their approaches,[1511] Sontag shares with Knapp and Michaels a common desire to radicalize our relation to art, allowing art to resonate on its terms. They agree that it is theory – for Sontag, hermeneutic theory, for Knapp and Michaels, any systematic theory whatsoever – that attempts to appropriate the objects of art. For both, resistance emerges through a vehement anti-institutionalism, a suspicion of method, and an affirmation of the ontological autonomy of art.[1512] Art may have any number of effects, yet these are fundamental to its practice and not a theory which precedes and informs its practice. "Theory is not just another name for practice," note Knapp and Michaels. "It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without."[1513]Although the authors admittedly limit the context of their statement, it is difficult not to hear in such claims something of a maxim, that praxis obviates the need for theory. What, then, might we make of a self-limiting theory such as an "emancipatory theory...[which] has built into it a kind of self-destructive device."[1514]Aimed at producing concrete subjects, situations and objects which are free of some particular restriction, such theories might indeed

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[1504] It is important to keep in mind that Sontag's target is the manner in which interpretation becomes rapidly institutionalized and governed by normative protocols which she suggests have painfully little to do with that which they claim to interpret (ibid., 15).

[1505] Ibid., 17.

[1506] Ibid.

[1507] Ibid., 19.

[1508] Ibid., 23.

[1509] Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982): 742.

[1510] Ibid.

[1511] Their views on intention, hermeneutics and style are radically opposed. Sontag is finally a realist while Knapp and Michaels are confessed pragmatists.

[1512] The logical or epistemological autonomy of art is a more contestable arena.

[1513] Ibid. For Culler, theory does not evade its object. Rather, "the literary in theory...has migrated from being the object of theory to being the quality of theory itself" (Jonathan Culler, "The Literary in Theory," *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 38.

[1514] Eagleton, *Significance*, 33.

become practices. It is a dangerous moment when we are prepared to foreclose on potentiality itself – for such is the wager of an emancipatory theory – in the name of what already exists.

Is it not possible that minimalism envisages a situation in which, contra Knapp's and Michaels' doubt, theory is *internal* to an object? All this really requires is the simple recognition that a minimalist object *as it is* also affirms the fact *that it is.*[1515] This may be paraphrased in a familiar formula: theory is coincidental with praxis. This is illustrated in minimalism by the fact that minimalist praxis centres on objects *as they are*, and a theory of minimalism aims, in my view, for no more than the facticity of these objects, *that these objects are as they are.* It is Linda Hutcheon's description of poetics as an "open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures"[1516] which translates most closely the broad aim of the present work. "Poetics would not seek to place itself in a position *between* theory and practice," Hutcheon argues, "but would seek a position *within* both." [1517] The poetics of minimalism describes all those objects which instantiate a coincidence of theory and practice where both resonate the aesthetics we have previously defined as minimalist.

Still exceedingly provocative on the complicity of theory and practice is Paul de Man's thesis that what resists theory is nothing other than theory itself. It is not the refusal of hierarchy, system or method[1518] which renders theory problematic in de Man's view. That theory is dependent on the same mode of reading[1519] which it directs towards its objects to domesticate them, suggests an internal intricacy which manifests as self-referential resistance. As Waugh notes, de Man's "main interest in theory lies in...revealing the impossibility of defining theory."[1520] It is not theory *qua* theoretical practice which concerns de Man, but rather a *poetics* in the sense defined by Hutcheon: preserving those concrete singularities through which theory and practice might be instantiated simultaneously. Here is a meta-theory which stands resolutely, and self-consciously, against meta-theory! What greater resistance to

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[1515] The fact *that* something *is*, is to grasp the essence of facticity, to recall the arguments of Agamben and of Meillassoux, and such facticity, in its turn, is conceivably the essence of art in the estimation of Sontag (Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 23).

[1516] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 14.

[1517] Ibid., 17.

[1518] In fact the most concrete definition de Man offers of theory in this context is as "a controlled reflection on the formation of method," (Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986), 4.

[1519] *Reading* is here not a simple term, but refers the struggle between rhetorical and grammatical theorisations of texts or objects. The former is usually generative, the latter explicative, but neither presents a stable model by which a theory is capable of eliminating undecidability (ibid., 12, 14-5). "[R]eading will be a negative process in which the grammatical cognition is undone...by its rhetorical displacement" (ibid., 17).

[1520] Waugh, "Introduction," 15.

theory might we imagine than precisely this theoretical impasse, which opposes both any theoretical protocol that would neutralize praxis, as well as that rhetoric which would sacralise the aesthetic?

As noted earlier, what is designated by the term *meta* occupies a conspicuous threshold: in its thorough self-reflexivity, it is introspective and gives voice to that which is intrinsic and internal; yet, in promising an objective view it moves to a position of externality. That meta-theory is immersed in the very complexity from which it claims to subtract itself in order to act as arbiter,[1521] objectifying in the process the dynamics between theory and practice, is a point of tremendous significance. Failing to acknowledge its own contingency, such a meta-theory might be mistaken as being absolutely binding, in which case it not only installs itself as praxis, but in so doing withdraws its relation to actual praxis (which conceivably takes place entirely independently of any theoretical proposition).[1522] Such a meta-theory might conceivably objectify reality in such a way that actual practice, now uncoupled from a relation to any theory, would seem increasingly unpredictable and anarchic, while meta-theory presents itself as ever more self-evident. In such a case, the force of theory, falsely elevated, transmutes all too easily to pure coercion. It is to prevent such ominous situations from arising that the resistance of theory in relation to itself is eminently significant. "Just as resistance of objects is a necessary condition of the possibility of knowledge," notes Culler, "...so resistance to theory may be seen as a necessary force, which calls theory to account." [1523]

In seeking to understand precisely how theory holds itself to account, we turn to de Man's remarkable but difficult formulation: "[n]othing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance."[1524] To make significant sense of this, we must take as given that theory necessarily indicates practice, but only inasmuch as a practice presupposes a theory.[1525] A practice, to be considered as such, rather than as simply a phenomenon, already implies that it is the predicate of a theoretical field to which it overtly or tacitly appeals. It requires little insight to recognize that many competing theoretical propositions might legitimately explain a single practice, just as multiple practices can be related to a

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[1521] A good introductory account of this fact and its consequences is provided by Isabelle Stengers in her essay, "Complexity, A Fad?" (Isabelle Stengers, "Complexity: A Fad?", *Power and Invention: Situating Science* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 3-20).

[1522] Frank Kermode hesitates regarding meta-theory on a very similar count (Frank Kermode and Christopher Norris, "Music, Religion and Art After Theory," *Life. After. Theory.*, ed. Michael Payne and John Schad (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 117.

[1523] Jonathan Culler, "Resisting Theory," *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 80.

[1524] de Man, *Resistance*, 19.

[1525] This means not that every practice has already been theorised, but that it may potentially be theorised. On similar points, see Waugh, "Introduction," 15.

single theory. If, in this light, we might accept that the identity of any particular practice is contingent, it follows that such a practice would not appeal to a theoretical field as the source of an absolute account of itself. A theory only ever provides an incomplete account of a practice, but because it is only knowable as theory in relation to practice, we might say that it also provides an incomplete account of itself. In this sense, theory is the resistance to theory from the perspective both of self-presentation and of practice. In terms of the former, theory resists itself because it intrinsically implies a practice which it neither contains, nor for which it can fully account. From the perspective of practice, theory resists itself since any practice already contains theory to the extent that potentially it can be theorised.

The point to be taken for the present is the following: while theory and practice are logically coextensive – each implying the other in the very act through which each identifies itself – because theory resists itself, but practice does not, the actual pursuit of a *poetics* will always be weighted in favour of practice. Accepting this imbalance, we begin to see why – particularly in the case of minimalism which, above all, exemplifies an aesthetic practice of the Real – we can legitimately claim to encounter objects in search of a theory. Minimalist objects are knowable firstly in the transparency of their practice, through their instantiation, in the terms of Sontag, of "the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."[1526]

It is true, however, that a minimalism divorced from its objects, or pursued on a particularly abstract level, might seem to occupy a space perilously close to that threatening position in which meta-theory is installed as an absolute. Clement Greenberg famously criticizes minimalism for its failure to realize the apotheosis of modern abstraction it promises, through which the distinction of art from non-art might be eliminated.[1527] "Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else."[1528] In Greenberg's analysis, minimalism falls prey to its own "ratiocination,"[1529] to the extent that we are confronted not with the sheer presence to which minimalism pretends,[1530] but merely with the idea of presence, so that "what they want to mean betrays them artistically."[1531] The implication, that what is minimal about minimalism remains essentially an idea or concept, seems to hand the practice of

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[1526] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 23.
[1527] Greenberg, "Recentness," 182-3. In particular, he notes how "there remain the relations and interrelations of surface, contour, and spatial interval," (ibid., 183) and that "[t]he artistic substance and reality, as distinct from the program, turn out to be in good safe taste" (ibid., 184).
[1528] Ibid., 183.
[1529] Ibid., 185.
[1530] Ibid.
[1531] Ibid., 184.

minimalism over to a theoretical operation, reaffirming the rift between sensation and ideation at the very moment it pledges to bridge these.

Perhaps, because minimalism tends to draw attention so strongly to its objects themselves, rather than to explanations of their causes or consequences, its theorisation might appear drawn between its materialist commitment and meta-theoretical abstraction. Yet in its practice, minimalism reveals that there is no necessary reason why its objects should be predicated exclusively on either conceptual or materialist terms, or that one should exclude the other. Perhaps the key to understanding minimalism lies in recognising that there is no intrinsic opposition between the two. Holding together the most descriptive aesthetic theories and the most abstract meta-theoretical reflection might seem contradictory from within qualitative logic which dominates the appearance of minimalism's objects, but it is non-contradictory in relation to the quantitative radix of their Being. This affirmation is central to claiming that minimalism exemplifies the Real.

12. CONCRETE VISUAL ATOPIAS

a) Preamble regarding minimalism and concretism

Regarding the constellation of minimalism and concretism a brief preamble is necessary. The discussion which follows suggests not that the concrete aesthetic, described below, and the minimalist aesthetic – the historical and ontological contours of which are described above – can simply be subsumed under a transcendental thematic, nor that their intrinsic properties necessitate their conjunction. Rather, the present claim is that at its most minimal, the concrete aesthetic offers a particularly intense field of exemplarity within which the minimalist existential logic of transumption is visible. Indeed, we might say that, at its most intense, minimalist concretism is constituted precisely in terms of a meta-exemplarity: a field of exemplarity which demonstrates the functioning of the example, and which, in its turn, intensifies our apprehension of the taking-place of the Real. In this light, concretism presents a singular, transhistorical continuum – a field of potentiality from which might be drawn remarkable focal points upon which the confluence of expressive media, disciplines and genres is maximally visible precisely through the generation of concrete minimalist aesthetic objects. Simultaneously, the finest minimalist

concretism exemplifies not only minimalism, but also the Real: we might say that concretism itself constitutes a sort of iconology of the Real.

b) The visible traces of theurgical *poiesis*

Amongst the many instantiations of minimalism, the meeting of the concrete and the conceptual is staged with particular clarity in those genres of poetry which radicalise the interrelation of literature, music and the visual arts. Steiner goes as far as to claim that "the attempt to overreach the boundaries between one art and another is [...] an attempt to dispel (or at least mask) the boundary between art and life, between sign and thing, between writing and dialogue."[1532] Perloff recalls that poetry as we understand it emerges "from the Greek *poiesis*, a making or creation,"[1533] being focused further in the "Medieval Latin, *poetria*, the art of verbal creation."[1534] Thus conceived, *poiesis* asks us to probe the very stuff of poetry, to press beyond form and trope to the medium which itself carries creation, the radical stuff upon which the very potential of poetry's taking-place is conditioned.

Yet neither *poiesis* nor any medium through which it is conveyed seem to submit themselves readily to our scrutiny. This difficulty stems from Plato's "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry,[1535] an antipathy which may be extended to art in general inasmuch as the latter aspires to exceed its status as *mimesis*, the imitation of the apparent world which itself is only a representation of the true and perfect Forms which precede it.[1536] Art is often understood as the polemical ground upon which what is real

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[1532] Wendy Steiner, *The Colour of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1982), 2-5. In Bohn's estimation, Steiner's vision dissolves not only "the traditional barriers between the reader and text; it erases the boundaries between the text and the world" (Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 8). As regards the former, reading visual poetry naturally presents several challenges to the conventional relationship of reader to text by undermining verbal, grammatical and hermeneutic norms (presenting what is perhaps the interart equivalent of Barthes' writerly texts). As regards the latter, since in interartistic poetry the text is – by virtue of is intermedial constitution, which eschews the conventions of mimetic art – something which is presented, rather than merely represented, it belongs as much to the Real as does any other object.

[1533] Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, "Introduction: The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound," *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2009), 1. Collection hereafter *SP/PS*.

[1534] Ibid.

[1535] Plato, *Repubic*, 607b/1211.

[1536] "It is true then about some of these things that not only the Form itself deserves its own name for all time, but there is something else that is not the Form but has its character whenever it exists," to recall the Platonic doctrine of Forms (Plato, "Phaedo," trans. G.M.A. Grube. *Plato Complete Works*, 103e/89. Forms, which are perfect, true and good, are prototypical. The objects of ordinary experience are mere representations of these, while art merely imitates what the world represents of Forms and so is ontologically inferior, and morally dangerous insofar as it

battles with what merely appears to be real, where the *poietic* production of reality comes up against the mimetic reflection of reality.[1537] Culler relates how an historical bifurcation conditions any project of poetics: the Classical view asserts a "criticism...linked to generic categories based on mimesis...and to the rhetorical analysis of efficacious speech"[1538] in terms of the "norms of genre, verisimilitude, and appropriate expression;"[1539] Romanticism introduces the "concept of literature as expression"[1540] which "expresses the state of affairs, the language, the genius that gave rise to them."[1541] Danto observes a similar polarity in his epochal essay, "The Art World," between the *imitation theory* of art, in which art is fundamentally mimetic, and the *reality theory* of art, in which art materializes through radical *poiesis*. In terms of the latter, artists are "to be understood not as unsuccessfully imitating real forms but as successfully creating new ones, quite as real as the forms which the older art has been thought...to be credibly imitating."[1542] This considered, the question of medium becomes intricate with the disputed radix of art itself. If art is mimetic, its success in representing its subject is matched in proportion by the transparency of its medium.[1543] By contrast, the opacity of its medium is of considerable significance to *poietic* art, which, in claiming to produce the Real, refuses to reduce art to a question of its content (what it is about) as is the case with mimetic art.[1544] In the most austere cases of an art which makes *poiesis* its first concern – such works which are virtually synonymous with minimalism – the "artwork is only the material it is made from; it is canvas and paper, ink and paint, words and noise, sounds and movements."[1545]

At the end of this pursuit we discover poetry which is at once conceptual and concrete. In its conceptual dimension it is meta-theoretical, abstracting from itself the force of mediation or *transumption*. In its

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pretends to the absolute good of Forms. Danto's discussion is particularly insightful in this regard (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 7-9; 11-4), as is that of Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 253-9). Making a similar point, Montag offers the following (in a passage explicitly unsympathetic to Deleuze's analysis): "[t]he current description of art and culture as simulacra are quite simply Platonic in the most traditional sense...Plato argued that the particular is a representation of the form and that art is a representation of the particular and thus a representation of a representation...His denunciation of art as mere appearance is not based on the hypothesis of its immateriality but precisely the opposite: its irreducible materiality" (Warren Montag, "What is at Stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?," *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 98).

[1537] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 13.
[1538] Jonathan Culler, "Introduction: Critical Paradigms," *PMLA,* 125.4 (2010): 905.
[1539] Ibid., 906.
[1540] Ibid., 905.
[1541] Ibid., 906.
[1542] Arthur C. Danto, "The Art World," *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugon Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 28.
[1543] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 151-3.
[1544] Ibid., 159.
[1545] Ibid.

concrete dimension it consists of vision, sound and language in their rawest states, cognising itself in terms of pure medium. It is in recognising the persistent tension in any radical conception of *poiesis* – between imitation and the Real, between concrete and concept, between medium and mediation, and, finally between art and life – that Steiner's claim above gains momentum. With respect to the critical understanding of medium as poem, this tension manifests in the pull between the individuation and interpenetration of poetic media. One might legitimately emphasise the pursuit of these media in isolation, claiming that sound poetry, visual poetry, and language-centred poetry ought to be understood from within their individual trajectories.[1546] Equally, the transfiguration of medium to poem can be seen to rest on some stabilising *poietic* force which is designated, but not defined, by a generic aesthetic term such as *concretism*.[1547] The historical analysis of poetic medium as poem benefits most from the stratification of separate media, while the aesthetic approach to understanding these, benefits from the development of operative terms and concepts.

It is disappointing that, despite its ubiquity, poetry centred on vision, sound and language as media should remain undervalued: "the critical response to visual poetry over the years has been disappointing,"[1548] announces Bohn, and Perloff remarks similarly of sound poetry, that, "however central the sound dimension is to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected."[1549] If the concerns shared by minimalism and various types of aesthetic concretism are significant, the interrogation of these remains beset by historical problems. "Concrete poetry is a small part of a larger picture," claims pioneering experimentalist, Dick Higgins. "[I]t would...be a misprision to discuss it in isolation from sound poetry, aleatory poetry, and the other intermedial poetries with which it shares many strategies, purposes and much of its history."[1550]

[1546] To regard each in isolation – initially as a qualitative constituent of poetry; subsequently as a medium in itself – recalls questions of ontological quantity, and thus a sphere which this poetry shares with minimalism.

[1547] Mary Ann Caws provides a useful overview of this term. First deployed in the 1930s, it covers both an attitude of abstraction – of "the object from all attachment to reference" (Mary Ann Caws, "Concretism," *Manifesto*,

518 – and of manifestation, installing the aesthetic medium *as* work. As a "formal modernism" (ibid) it might be closely related to a number of its abstract precursors, and, as it is deployed in the present work, it includes the experimental modes of sound and visual poetry described in terms of Concrete poetry in the 1950s, as well as many of the works of smaller groups such as the Spatialists (Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Henri Chopin), Lettrists, and a miscellany of works currently being produced under the banner of new media and intermedia art (ibid., 518-9).

[1548] *AVP*, 1.

[1549] Perloff and Dworkin, "Introduction," 1. While Perloff's are general comments on sound in poetry, they also act as the prelude to a series of discussions on sound poetry as genre.

[1550] Charles Bernstein, Willard Bohn, Claus Clüver, Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, E.M. de Melo e Castro, Johanna Drucker, Ana Hatherly, Dick Higgins, Susanne Jorn, Eduardo Kac, Wladimir Kryksinski, Steve McCaffery, Philadelpho Menezes, Luciano Nanni, Caoi Pagano, Marjorie Perloff, John Picchione, Harry Polkinhorn, John Solt, Lello Voce, Eric Vos. "The Yale Symphosymposium on Contemporary Poetics and Concretism: A World View From the 1990s," *Experimental – Visual – Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the*

The conscious combination of text and image begins not with poetry, however, but with the invocations of purportedly magical amulets. These have functions ranging from incantations against malicious spirits to the treatment of illness, in which cases the pictograph was both the prescription and the cure.[1551] This essentially talismanic use, progresses, according to Bowler, to a more mystical view of calligraphy in which writing is "connected not only with ...technique, skill and art, but also with...spiritual and moral character."[1552] The venerable lineage of visual poetry, while not strictly separable from the "magical and mystical impetus to shape texts,"[1553] may be identified with the desire to integrate more fully the *poietic* (generative), aesthetic and symbolic aspects of text and form. Such practices can be traced as far back as the Greek *technopaegina* of the third century BC,[1554] since which time visual poetry has proved an abiding concern, practised both globally and transhistorically. Hellenistic calligrams – works constituted of single or multiple graphemes in the form of an object, often an object related to the work on a semantic level – were shaped by the careful arrangement of lines and a prescribed pattern of reading (Figure 80),[1555] a technique adopted by the Romans in their *carmina figurata*. In the Arab world, by contrast, where problematic religious implications of certain types of figuration persist, forms tend to be calligraphically determined, objects emerging from the careful reshaping of letters (Figure 81).[1556]

1960s. Ed. K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996. 367-416. Individual contributions, such as that in the quotation above, will be cited in the form that follows: Higgins, *Symphosymposium*, 398. Collection hereafter *EVC*.

[1551] Berjouhi Bowler, *The word as image* (London: Studio Vista, 1970) 7-8; 119. Notable examples exist in almost all ancient cultures, and such talismans are by no means uncommon in the contemporary world (ibid).

[1552] Ibid. Again, this is a widespread view held by calligraphers from the Far East, to the scribes of medieval Europe.

[1553] Ibid., 9.

[1554] Ibid. See *AVP*, 1.

[1555] Simias of Rhodes, Egg calligram, 3rd century BC, Rhodes (Bowler, *Word*, 57). To be read from the outside towards the centre, this egg-shaped bucolic poem also serves to draw attention to the nature of poetry (ibid., 128). Possibly, like an egg, a poem is contained by its form, but this form itself contains the potential for *poiesis*. Figures 81 to 83 appear in Bowler's excellent anthology as indicated in parenthesis.

[1556] Amuletic tughra, Iran. Date unspecified (ibid., 29). "Tughra writings are the most ingenious use of Arabic script. A sentence from the Koran or a common prayer is written in a way that the composition outlines a [form]" (ibid., 124). In this example, a face is composed of four words – Allah, Mohammed, Ali and Hassan – which mirror each other to make up the left and right halves of the face (ibid.).

Figure 80: Simias of Rhodes, Egg calligram. 3rd century BC, Rhodes.

Figure 81: Amuletic tughra, Iran. Date unspecified.

Figure 82: Hanuman Calligram, Sanskrit, 19th century. Edition of Ramayana.

Figure 83: Massoeretic Text, Hebrew, 14th century. British Museum, London.

Calligrammatic poetry is prevalent both in Urdu and in Sanskrit. Notable amongst the latter for its immense detail, is the figure of Hanuman (Figure 82) which is formed by a narrative which encompasses his entire life, from birth to his death.[1557] Visual poems, mostly of a religious nature, are equally widespread throughout Medieval Europe – from Armenia and Turkey in the south east, to Germany in the north west – and throughout the sub-continent. Of the finest religious calligrams are Hebrew massoeretic texts: "the massorah, which is the critical emendation found on certain pages...[u]nexpectedly, in some manuscripts...is shaped into patterns"[1558] (Figure 83).[1559]

It was only at the start of the seventeenth century – the dawn of the early modern period in western Europe – that the first English calligrams of any poetic significance were produced. As Sloane notes, it was not uncommon for the attitude of seventeenth century poets towards the visual to "swing inconsistently back and forth between what were considered either primarily Aristotelian or primarily Platonic conceptions of knowledge obtained through the senses."[1560] This dialectic is expressed with some force in the manner in which concrete visuality is interrogated in much of their poetry. Whether through particularly evocative diction or physical form, Sloane confirms that "the tendency to visualize ideas reached its zenith in the early years of the seventeenth century."[1561] Thus, the *strong lines* of the metaphysical poets frequently became so strong as to take on physical form. There is indeed a curious, if indirect, commentary on the Platonic doctrine of Forms here. Such poetry draws attention to the symbolic character of writing, affirming the force of representation at the level of both semantics and form – in what the poem means and the physical shape it takes to convey or enhance this meaning. Yet their form merely reflects, rather than predicates, the *logos* of such poems which – particularly in view the predilection of the best of these pattern poems for religious themes – remains in an important sense transcendental. This is reflected in George Herbert's "The Altar" (Figure 84)[1562] and Robert Herrick's "The Cross," which are exemplary of the calligrams of this period. Also significant is the emblem – a

[1557] Hanuman Calligram, Sanskrit, 19th century. Edition of Ramayana (ibid., 22). Hanuman is an Indian deity, one of a mythical ape-like race, the vanaras, and a devotee of Rama in the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*.
[1558] Ibid., 128.
[1559] Massoeretic Text, Hebrew, 14th century. British Museum, London (ibid., 53)
[1560] Mary Cole Sloane, *The Visual in Metaphysical Poetry* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 5). To recall, albeit in very inadequately schematic terms, Plato believes that a faint knowledge of the ideal which precedes sensory experience, while Aristotle believes that knowledge is acquired through sensory experiences.
[1561] Ibid., 24.
[1562] George Herbert, *The Altar*, 1633

visual genre inherited from the Renaissance consisting of a motto, a symbolic illustration, and an epigrammatic exposition of these in formal verse[1563] – which is well-represented by Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (1586) and Francis Quarles' *Emblems* (1635).

Concerning Herbert's poem, one must recall that the altar is a favourite motif of visual poetry,[1564] not only connecting the work to the formal rites of religion, but also connecting *poietic* inspiration to the surrender and sacrifice of the self to the divine.[1565] "The Alter" is a fine example of the visual poem as symbol: its physical form (as altar) reinforces the conceit which gives the poem its momentum – the heart as altar – while its true subject transcends either word or form, since the heart is finally a cipher for the human soul and its relation to God.
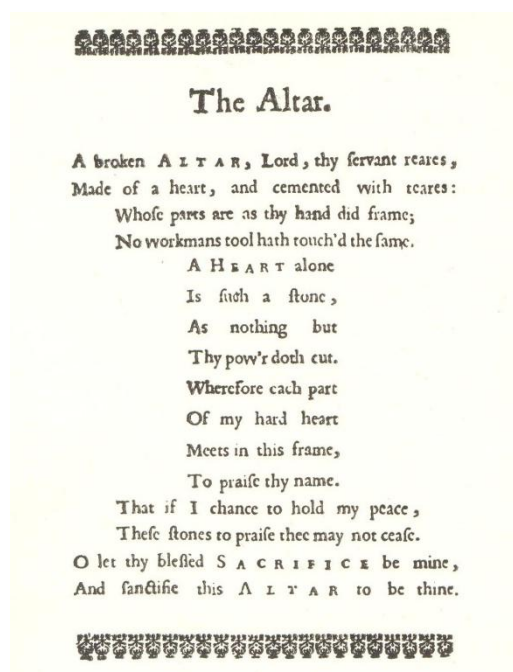
Figure 84: George Herbert, *The Altar*, 1633.

Between the seventeenth century and the present the relation of visual and verbal art has been exposed in numerous and often rather contradictory ways. We might consider the mystical intricacy and virtuosity of William Blake's illuminated poetry in relation to G.E. Lessing's celebrated essay on aesthetics, *Laokoön*.

[1563] These epigrams were often not present in early Renaissance emblems, but became increasingly detailed and meditative in the case of the metaphysical poets (ibid.).

[1564] Bowler, *Word*, 129.

[1565] This impulse might be traced to ancient Dionysian and Orphic cults in Greece which emphasise *enthusiasm*, or, as it meant then, the fusion of the human and the divine (Russell, *History*, 24-7, 30-1).

The point of comparison between painting and poetry has historically rested on a common symbolic or analogical appeal. The Horatian maxim *ut pictura poesis* – as is painting, so is poetry – expands upon its classical radix, and strikingly paraphrases the dominant Baroque and Neo-Classical understanding that what renders the literary and pictorial comparable, is finally symbolic – the shared and somewhat abstract evocation of images to which they both appeal.[1566] "Symbolic or allegorical art," of which calligrammatic poetry is exemplary, "thus seem[s] a natural point of convergence and cooperation between literature and art."[1567] For all its stylistic innovation and visionary appeal, work such as Blake's remains traditional in this respect. The Romantic period witnesses a radical intensification of aesthetic self-consciousness,[1568] particularly in the case of poetry.

The fragment poem and the philosophical fragment reflect simultaneously on their *poietic* genesis and their particular poetic attributes in terms of subject, language and form. We might recognise in this specialisation of medium something of the shift heralded by Lessing, from an historical focus on the likeness to which both painting and poetry appeal, to a focus on the force of relation itself. For two things to be related, they must in an important sense retain their individuality, which is why Lessing "deplore[s] this confusion of genres"[1569] which weakens both painting and poetry. Lessing insists that for the visual arts or literature to thrive, it is necessary to differentiate the dominance of space in the former from the fundamentally temporal concerns of the latter.[1570] On this basis, Lessing's *Laokoön* is taken to justify an increased separation of poetry from painting as the basis for their mutually benefitting one another.[1571] "Lessing's objections to the neoclassical *ut pictura poesis* argument contributed to the general shift in aesthetic thinking that marks the romantic period,"[1572] says Steiner, as art *qua* mimesis gives way to art *qua* expression.[1573]

[1566] Steiner, *Colors*, 6-10.
[1567] Ibid., 9.
[1568] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, 3-4.
[1569] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 126.
[1570] Steiner, *Colors*, xiii.
[1571] Ibid., 12-3.
[1572] Ibid., 14.
[1573] Ibid. Danto points to the limitations of both purely mimetic and antimimetic understandings of art (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 13, 21, 68-9, 76-83).

c) Locating the *atopia* of poetry

"A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance,"[1574] one of the great poems of Stéphane Mallarmé's *oeuvre*, has a strong claim to being an inaugural work of the Modernist avant-garde. It combines typographical experimentation (varying capitalisation, type and size of the lettering) with careful attention to the *Gestalt* of the poem, "a certain distribution of space"[1575] in which words and lines are carefully arranged so that they seem "now to speed along and now again to slow down the motion."[1576] The poem institutes a particularly concrete type of self-reflexivity:[1577] its visual form intensifies its concern with chance as a force of both generation and negation – the poem, subject to aleatory forces, imposes a node of order, "a limit on infinity,"[1578] while retaining its proximity to "the void in which all reality is dissolved."[1579] Mallarmé reminds us that the true significance of *poiesis* lies in its making possible the place of poetry – "Nothing...will have taken place...but the place"[1580] – recognising that the problem of meaning remains undecidable, subject to contingent rules which are not, strictly speaking, *poietic*. "The labor of writing is no longer a transparent ether," Derrida tells us. "It catches our attention and forces us, since we are unable to go beyond it with a simple gesture in the direction of what it 'means,' to stop short in front of it or to work with it."[1581]

To work with the poem means firstly to recognise that its form is, in fact, a type of performance.[1582] Here we are at once reminded of the Kantian position, in which "[f]orm is the unmistakable 'space' of...aesthetics"[1583] insofar as it "denote[s] the difference between determination and the determinable in

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[1574] Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance," trans. Daisy Aldan, *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry*, Volume One: From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude, ed. Jerome Rothenberg & Pierre Joris (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), 53-76. Anthology hereafter *PMV1*.

[1575] Stéphane Mallarmé, Preface, *Throw*, 53.

[1576] Ibid.

[1577] The *Noigrandes* concrete poets regard this as the inaugural work of aesthetic concretism (Haroldo do Campos, *Symphosymposium*, 376; Clüver, *Symphosymposium*, 376-7 and Claus Clüver, "Concrete Poetry: Critical Perspectives from the 90s," *EVC*, 268; Marjorie Perloff, "Concrete Prose in the Nineties: Haroldo de Campos's *Galáxias* and After," *Haroldo de Campos: A Dialogue with the Brazilian Concrete Poet*, ed. K. David Jackson (Oxford: Centre for Brazilian Studies, 2005), 144.

[1578] Mallarmé, "Throw," 69.

[1579] Ibid., 73.

[1580] Ibid. 72-3. Figures 85 and 86 demonstrate the importance of typography and layout in Mallarmé's poem, its use of capitalization, empty space and line break, which, for the sake of fluency, have not been rendered exactly in the present quotations from the poem.

[1581] Jacques Derrida, "Mallarmé," trans. Christine Roulston, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 114.

[1582] See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 108-9.

[1583] Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 10.

general."[1584] In this sense, form constitutes the field of potentiality upon which the fusion of thought, thing, sensible intuition and experience takes place[1585] without which the "formation of a representation of objects"[1586] would be impossible. Form is at once the founding premise and horizon with regard to *poietic* taking-place, in which light we come to understand that poetic form is neither transcendental nor static, and might be comprehended more readily as a process, the "putting-into-form of...formation."[1587] Form, in this sense, is a processual shaping of the generative force of *poiesis* which recalls and reinforces the necessity both of structure and of structuration in any existential situation.

"A Throw of the Dice" exhibits a remarkable grasp of the complexities of form: it is both singular in instantiation and universal in its evocation of *poietic* force.[1588] Badiou offers the following evocative précis of the poem: "[u]pon an anonymous maritime surface, an old Master mockingly shakes his hand, cupped over dice, hesitating before the throw [of the dice] for so long that it seems as if he'll be swallowed up before the gesture will have been decided."[1589] The subject of the poem is chance, the significance of action and inaction in relation to chance,[1590] and the undecidability which inhabits aleatory situations.[1591] Mallarmé leads us to the "impossibility of rational choice – [the impossibility] of the abolition of chance"[1592] – through that most encompassing archetype of ontological flux, the ocean,[1593]

[1584] Ibid., 12.

[1585] Ibid., 8.

[1586] Ibid., 6.

[1587] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State U of New York P, 1988), 105. It is with this phrase that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy attempt to convey the urgency of the critical project which Romanticism regards as inseparable from literature. To pursue *poiesis* requires more than an understanding of form itself or even an analysis of how form itself is formed ("the putting-into-form of form" (ibid., 104)). Finally, we require insight into the process of formation in the full presence of its taking-place – the "putting-into-form of…formation" – which confirms the correlative dynamism between *poiesis* and poetic form.

[1588] Badiou defends the "universality of great poems" on philosophical rather than formal grounds (Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 46), but if we are willing to concede that poetic form and Badiou's topology of the *event* are homological in that they both constitute dynamic foundations (*BE*,175) – of the instantiation of *poiesis* and of the production of novelty respectively – while simultaneously transecting and interrupting the ordinary state of being, the two views are comparable. Badiou offers two remarkable readings of Mallarmé's poem: the first in Mediation Nineteen of *Being and Event* (*BE*, 191-8) examines the poem as analogy to Badiou's model of the event; the second in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Badiou, *Handbook*, 46-56), political in tenor, relates the poem to tension between mastery and non-mastery, choice and non-choice, in contemporary politics.

[1589] Ibid., 46.

[1590] The poem generates the situation "such that to act or not to act, to throw or not to throw the dice, amount to equivalent arrangements" (ibid., 50).

[1591] *BE*, 193-4.

[1592] Ibid., 195.

[1593] Regarding the noise of pure Being, connected analogically to the sea, Michel Serres notes that "[t]he silence of the sea is mere appearance. Background noise may well be the ground of our being" (Serres, *Genesis*, 13).

brought into proximity with the inadequate and human approximation of these inestimable forces, the throw of the dice. This action represents the force of *poiesis*. The wager is the poem itself. The latter emerges from the generative chaos of the aleatory event, attempts to unify in its taking-place the elements of pure Being, and failing to do so, recedes into the recognition that *poiesis* is finally incapable of approximating Being, which is to say, multiplicity itself. "The number...even if it existed...even if it began and even if it ceased...even if it summed up...this would be no worse nor better but as indifferent as chance"[1594]
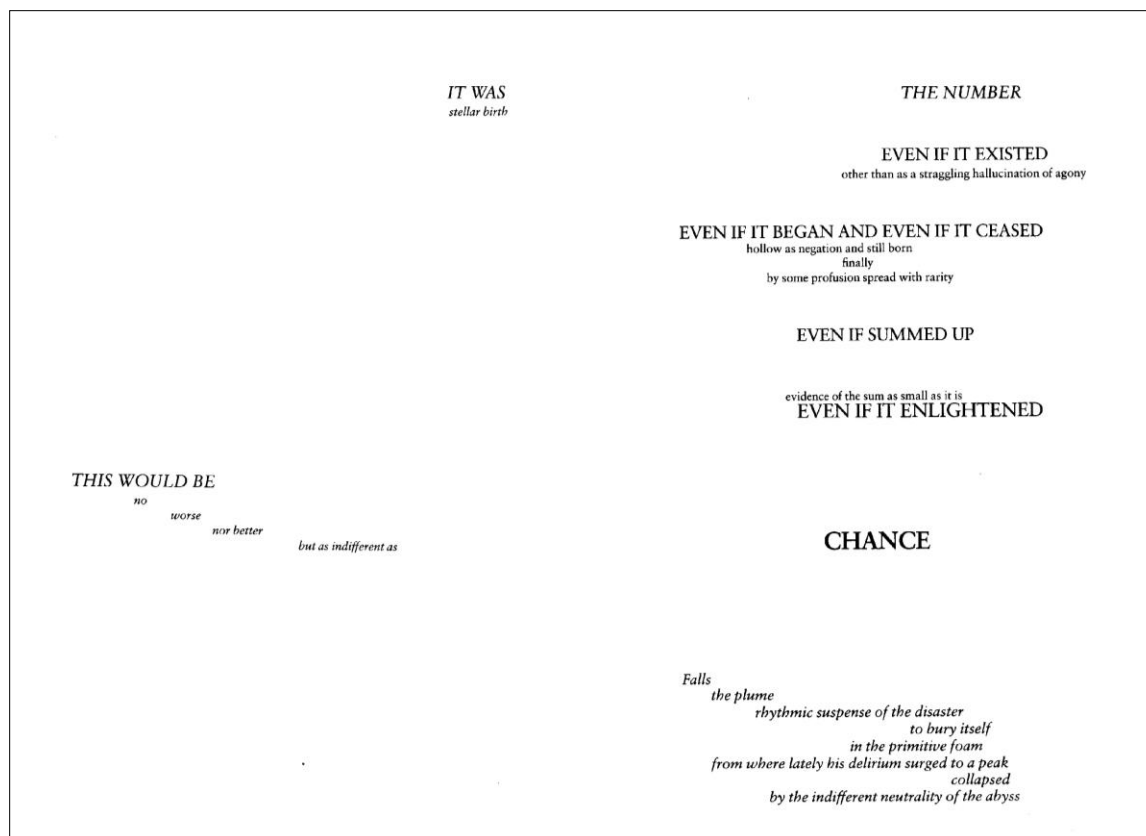
Figure 85: Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*, 70-1.

Returning to the poem, according to Badiou "the metaphor of all evental sites being on the edge of the void is edified on the basis of a deserted horizon and a stormy sea" (*BE*, 192), recalling that Badiou defines the evental site as an abnormal multiple which is presented in a situation, without any of its *elements* being presented in a situation, which therefore is "*on the edge of the void*, or *foundational*" (ibid., 175). It the ontological condition, as grasped in set theory, of an empty ground upon which an event takes place − an event which conditions but does not itself actually participate in a situation (hence that the elements of the site can remain unpresented).

[1594] Mallarmé, "Throw," 70-1 (Figure 85).

In Badiou's estimation, the poem "joins the emblem of chance to that of necessity, the erratic multiple of the event to the legible retroaction of the count. The event in question...is therefore that of the production of an absolute symbol of the event. The stakes...are those of making an event out of the thought of the event."[1595] Important here is the recognition that *poiesis* does not produce the event, but produces the trace of an event. Mallarmé's poem, in this view, points towards the eventality of the event, "the 'pure event'"[1596] which attempts to grasp that which "lies beyond what is, what purely happens."[1597]

It is significant that Badiou should deploy the "emblem" – the principal genre of seventeenth century visual poetry – and "symbol" – those things which "embody their meanings and explain their mode of embodiment,"[1598] in Danto's terms. The concrete and conceptual are conjoined – continuous and complementary – as the scattering of words across the page, anticipates the surrender to chance, the throw of the dice; the typographical experimentation (italics, upper-case letters, and words of different sizes) generates fragmentary narratives, short sequences in which the poet attempts to impose order upon the disorder which finally overwhelms the work.

Mallarmé heralds many of the significant aesthetic concerns of Modernist and Postmodernist art. In search of a poetry "freed from any scribal apparatus,"[1599] as Rancière suggests, the poem exhibits a tangible anxiety regarding the difficulties of autonomy, a question brought into focus through the poet's thematic and formal concern with aleatory operations, which were to influence numerous future paths of aesthetic thought. The possibility of univocal interpretation, perhaps of meaning itself, is revealed as a radical uncertainty – a sentiment echoed, often amplified, in the work which follows. This vision cannot be separated from a radical reconsideration of poetic form, lineation and diction. It is not, I believe, too much of a stretch to suggest that "A Throw of the Dice" is the first aesthetically significant concrete poem, far exceeding the representational logic of the calligram in its integration of its visual and conceptual elements, so that these simultaneously reflect on themselves, and reflect on one other. As a concrete exemplar of chance, the poem is caught in the productive paradox of being at once *autopoietic* and "indifferent" to its productive capacities. This is one of the central issues which concrete poetry

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[1595] *BE*, 193. Norris relates Badiou's analysis of the poem as "a subtle registration of the way that various imagined events impact upon the very process of thought – *not* ...the state of consciousness – that it seemingly described, represents or narrates" (Norris, *Badiou*, 123).
[1596] *LW*, 516.
[1597] Ibid.
[1598] Danto, "Art World Revisited," 41.
[1599] Rancière, *Future*, 95.

confronts, since "[i]n the last analysis the poems are their own justification. The fact that they exist is enough."[1600]

There is much to recommend the poem as a prototypical form of minimalism. The economy of Mallarmé's style veers towards austerity. Its experimentation with lineation and visual arrangement is at times fragmentary – a fragmentariness which augments its subject, chance, and which is also characteristic of those works which are generated by aleatory operations.[1601] At other moments it exposes the material and processual aspects of textuality itself at their most fundamental. We might only think as far as the carefully constructed diagonal of the "LET IT BE" sequence[1602] arranged across two facing pages, which begins slowly from the top left, drawing attention to the topographical isolation of the "Abyss" and the nullity it threatens, which accelerates rapidly in self-conscious, diminutive lines towards the centre of the textual surface, gathering there, coming to a near halt, before tapering more slowly, ponderous and hesitant, towards the bottom right (Figure 86). These words, as carefully arranged as they are chosen, draw attention to negative space – the blank, empty space of the page, a "visual silence, which creates a privileged space for the text and its individual images."[1603] The work in its most severe concrete elements recalls the minimalist concern with *containment*. That this containment fails – that chance, which itself marks a sort of minimalism of intervention on the part of the artist, is finally *atopian* – compels us to recognize and retrace the same transformative logic which is in the present work defined in terms of *transumption*. A minimal intervention transforms the fundamental material of the poem in order to generate the poem as such. This seems to endorse of "A Throw of the Dice" as an early instantiation of aesthetic concretism, and while it would be absurd to conclude that Mallarmé was a committed minimalist, it would be even stranger to ignore the fact that several of the work's most notable characteristics – concerns regarding medium, style and *poiesis* itself in their most radical forms – are intrinsic to any minimalist enterprise. In this sense, we come to recognize aspects of minimalism as transhistorical phenomena insofar as minimalism concerns radices intrinsic to art itself, rather than any act of artistic or critical will.

[1600] *AVP*, 2.

[1601] In this respect, one might consider "Language Event One" – the Surrealist symcomposition in which each poet writes two unrelated clauses which are then combined at random (Louis Aragon, George Sadoul, Benjamin Péret, Suzanne Muzard, Yves Tanguy, André Breton, Elsie Péret and Pierre Unik, "Language Event One," *PMV1*, 472-3), or the fragmentary works produced by the more thorough aleatory techniques of Jackson Mac Low and John Cage.

[1602] Mallarmé, "Throw," 58-9.

[1603] Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 4.

LET IT BE

    that the

           Abyss

     whitened
        slack
          raging
            under an incline
              desperately soars
                by its own

                   wing   beforehand relapsed from wrongly steering the flight
                                      and repressing the outbursts
                                          cleaving the bounds at the root

                                deep inside weighs

                  the shadow hidden in the depth by this alternate sail

                              to adjust
                                  to the spread

                         its yawning depth as great as the hull

                            of a ship

                        careening from side to side

Figure 86: Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*, 58-9.

That the ontological precision[1604] of "A Throw of the Dice" should be matched by its innovative formal presentation explains its perceptible influence in much of the poetry which follows it. The poem's fragments, hesitations, empty spaces and typographical variation bring an unprecedented depth of reflexivity between the conceptual and the concrete in the understanding of visual poetry, Mallarmé, whether despised or emulated, was unquestionably a significant influence on visual poetry as well as on the refinement of a broadly minimalist aesthetic which would come to prominence in the twentieth century.

"Refined, redesigned, and redefined, visual poetry has been the object of countless schools and movements,"[1605]stresses Bohn. In the early twentieth-century, these visual poets pursued two principal routes. The first path, upon which we encounter the Imagists, Ultraists and Surrealists, emphasises the

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[1604] Norris, *Badiou*, 121.
[1605] *AVP*, 1.

iconic aspects of the visual poem – its capacity to offer an intensified view of its objects.[1606] By contrast, Futurism, Dada and Vorticism express an *iconoclastic* disruption, a constitutive displacement which deposes the conventional hierarchy between word and visual design.[1607]

In terms of the intensified iconic value of poetry, the example of the Imagists is instructive, and also of some relevance to a firmer grasp of the minimalist aesthetic. Like many other movements in twentieth century literature, Imagism self-consciously defines its own parameters in a number of manifestos, anthologies and historical reflections produced between 1914 and 1917. According to Hughes, the Imagists are influenced to a significant degree by the progressive French poetry of the symbolists and cubists,[1608] and draw a "common stimulus"[1609] from the aesthetics of T. E. Hulme, "who quite reasonably may be called the 'father of imagism.'"[1610] Indeed, Kermode claims that "[t]he principles of the Imagist manifesto...are all Hulmian."[1611] Hulme's aesthetic theory[1612] is based on a view of nature in terms of an essential discontinuity between the vital and the mechanical, the intuitive and the scientific.[1613] We are left with a problematic relativism when these are collapsed into one another – the Romanticism which Hulme asserts mistakes humanist values for absolute value;[1614] a deluded search for infinity.[1615] In setting the scene for the emergence of Imagism, and in opposition to Romanticism, Hulme champions what he asserts is a neo-classical aesthetic – a poetic "holding back, a reservation"[1616]which marks the poet's awareness of his or her finitude. "In the classical attitude you never seem to swing right along to the infinite nothing," he tells us. "You are always faithful to the conception of a limit."[1617]

[1606] These objects might belong as easily to a realist as to a surrealist frame of reference. Its iconic quality rests on the transparency of its representation, rather than the nature of that which is represented.

[1607] Cubism presents a difficult case, since it claims that its iconic insight is entirely continuous with its iconoclastic aspects.

[1608] Glenn Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960), 4-9. See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Fontana, 1961), 134-5; 144-5.

[1609] Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists*, 22.

[1610] Ibid., 9.

[1611] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 149-150.

[1612] To illustrate this theory, Hulme famously composes five short, austere, but remarkably evocative poems.

[1613] Kermode, ibid., 136. Hulme derives much of his philosophical justification from Bergson. This connection is discussed principally in two essays by Hulme: T. E. Hulme, "Bergson's Theory of Art," *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1936), 143-169; and T. E. Hulme, "Intensive Manifolds," *Speculations*, 173-214.

[1614] Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists*, 14.

[1615] T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," *Speculations*, 116, 119 (111-40); Kermode, *Romantic Image,* 139-141.

[1616] Hulme, *Speculations*, 120.

[1617] Ibid.

Yet it is on an understanding of the image that his entire metaphysics rests. "Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language"[1618] which conveys reality. Poetry, in its turn, carries the responsibility of communicating images in concrete terms, not through "discursive meaning [...],"[1619] but through an immediacy made possible by the well-constructed poem. In contrast to prose, which reduces concrete reality to a syntax of abstract signs or markers, poetry embodies a concrete language of images which "always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing."[1620] The poetry this attitude engenders is thoroughly classical, in Hulme's terms, possessing a "dry hardness"[1621] which focuses on "accurate description,"[1622] "confined to the earthly and the definite...[revealed in] the light of the ordinary day, never the light that never was on land or sea."[1623] Convinced of the "inadequacy of language,"[1624] that "[p]lain speech is essentially inaccurate,"[1625] the poet must invent new metaphors by maintaining a close connection to concrete, finite things.[1626] Kermode summarises the situation well in noting that, for Hulme, "[p]oetry, by virtue of the image, *is*; prose merely describes. One is end, the other means. What poetry seems to be *about* is therefore irrelevant to its value."[1627]

Here we might recall Levinas' formulation of the *image* precisely as art's means of maintaining communicativity outside of any particular message. Operating within a field of resemblance, the image constitutes an existential residue of the passage between Being and existence, and consequently abstracts our ordinary relation to material objects as well as concepts. Despite considerable divergences, it is notable that the philosophical understanding of the *image* clarifies the view of the Real adopted by both thinkers. For Levinas, the *image* allows art to enter into relation with its own facticity. By Hulme's account, the *image* allows poetry to penetrate to the heart of the Real in a manner not dissimilar to the claim I make for minimalism in the present work. What separates Imagism from minimalism, despite this and numerous other stylistic similarities, is its reliance on a form of mediation – analogy – which does not fully come to terms with its medium. The poetic medium remains opaque, even as poetry reaches for a

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[1618] Ibid., 135.
[1619] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 142.
[1620] Hulme, *Speculations*, 134.
[1621] Ibid., 126.
[1622] Ibid., 127.
[1623] Ibid.
[1624] Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists*, 17.
[1625] Hulme, *Speculations*, 137.
[1626] To the romantic *imagination*, subsumed by emotion which distorts the actual plenitude of our response to the world, Hulme opposes *fancy* – the modern poet's response linked to concrete, finite things (ibid., 137-8).
[1627] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 142.

clearer relation to real things.[1628] To recall, minimalism exemplifies the facticity of the Real, and a reliance on the essentially metaphysical idea of the Image cannot easily be reconciled with such facticity. As Kermode argues, Hulme never truly escapes a mystical elevation of the Image which emerges from the romanticism he derides:[1629] the "twin concepts of the isolated artist and the supernatural Image to which he gains access"[1630] remain present in his thought, and, indeed, in Imagism in general.

As a literary movement, Imagism owes its genesis to the friendship which grew from a rather heated disagreement in 1909 between Hulme and F. S. Flint following a critical review of the former's work by the latter.[1631] They soon found themselves in general agreement on the importance of accurate poetic presentation stripped of excess verbal complexity, establishing their own group for discussion. In April of the same year they were joined by a young Ezra Pound, who had arrived independently at a strikingly similar aesthetic position, and who, in 1912, coined the term *Imagiste* to describe their work and, particularly, the poetry of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Richard Aldington. 1913 saw the publication of two Imagist manifestos – one by Flint, the other by Pound – and in 1914, Pound edited the first anthology of Imagist work, *Des Imagistes*.[1632] Amy Lowell joined and rapidly came to dominate the group, advocating a looser definition of Imagism which conflicted strongly with Pound's rigorous poetic discipline. Pound left the group for the more radical Vorticists, and Lowell published the remaining Imagist anthologies under the title *Some Imagists Poets* in 1915, 1916 and 1917.[1633] By this point the momentum of the movement was all but spent, although its proclivity for concreteness, objectivity, directness and self-sufficiency would remain influential, and is almost certainly felt in some of the poetry we may legitimately categorise as minimalist.

[1628] Recalling Danto's insight that mimetic theories of art seek to render their media transparent, while theories which claim that art produces reality itself, maintain the opacity of their constituent media (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 159), it is somewhat paradoxical that Hulme should insist that poetry is capable of both simultaneously: it must relate to the external world, making the Real more perceptible, while reaching for this perceptibility through the indirect means of analogy. The negative observation, that plain speaking is unclear, does not justify the claim that metaphor (since it is apparently in opposition to plain speaking) is capable of clarifying the Real in the manner suggested by Hulme.

[1629] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 133-5; 139-140.

[1630] Ibid., 178.

[1631] Peter Jones, "Introduction," *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 15-6 (13-43). The review spoke in derogatory terms of the Poet's Club of which Hulme was a member.

[1632] The principal poets of Imagism are H.D., Richard Aldington, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, and the numerous other poets associated with the movement, some more legitimately than others, include T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Skipwirth Cannell, Allen Upward, John Cournos, Marianne Moore, John Gould Fletcher, and D. H. Lawrence.

[1633] See Jones, *Introduction*, 15-6.

Its manifestos lay out clear objectives for poetry: "[d]irect treatment of the 'thing'...absolutely no word that d[oes] not contribute...[and], regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome."[1634] Held together by a doctrine of the image – which is conceived by Hulme as an intuition of the Real, and by Pound's as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"[1635] – these principles are made manifest in a poetry which, in Hughes' paraphrase, is marked by "[h]ardness of outline, clarity of image, brevity, suggestiveness, freedom from metrical laws."[1636] Consider Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," by some way the poet's most austere Imagist poem, an evocative miniature which illustrates these attributes with subtle force:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.[1637]

Here is presented a singular instant – one differentiated from a generic multitude; a clarification and intensification of the ordinary; a poetic subtraction which repeats and amplifies Pound's claim regarding the image. In these lines we may trace those microscopic poetic points upon which the haziness of the reader's imagination tips into the crystalline hardness of the image. At this point the represented image is indeed an "apparition," something which leaves the realm of the undifferentiated and enters a space of intense presence, mediating in this *poietic* intuition a deep experience of its concreteness. This is also the point at which the indiscernible part of identity shifts into the specificity of "these faces." Imagist poetry provides clarity – it recognises *those* faces as *these* faces – but not by rendering the strange familiar, or by forcing anonymity into the form of a homonym. The point at which the image seems most intimate, is also the one where the hardness of the poem is reaffirmed: the "petals" are most significant when their ephemeral singularity is rendered almost transparent, stuck against the "bough," a symbol of both stability and a certain inflexibility. The hardness of the poem reaffirms that the world does not give itself over to simple domestication; the image reveals an aspect of the world which is strictly impenetrable[1638] and, in this sense, alterity is affirmed as that which guards the Real against the reduction of concrete *poiesis* to prosaic equivalence, to recall Hulme.

[1634] F.S. Flint, "Imagisme," *Imagist Poetry*, 129 (129-130).
[1635] Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts By An Imagist," *Imagist Poetry*, 130 (130-4).
[1636] Hughes, *Imagist and the Imagists*, 4.
[1637] Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro," *Imagist Poetry*, 95.
[1638] From the Imagist perspective, this part is what is approximated by the image which, in turn, is intuited by poetry.

That that poem manipulates the pace of our perception[1639] is confirmed by examining its tempo and rhythms. Like all Imagism it abandons regular metre, but this is not to say it is arrhythmic. The first line divides into three accelerating figures – "the apparition," "of these faces," and "in the crowd" – followed by a significant retardation in the second line. The figures of the first line consist respectively of five, four and three syllables. The initial figure begins with an isolated unstressed syllable ("The") followed by the rapid-fire tetrasyllabic "apparition." It continues with a second tetrasyllabic foot ("of these faces"), the assymetrical "of these" followed by a stressed then an unstressed syllable ("faces"). The final unstressed syllable carries its momentum into the anapaest which closes the line ("in the crowd"). The *caesura* here resides in the verbal arrangement of the poem on one level – the colon which punctuates the line-break is strengthened by the slow transition between the heavy, voiced plosive ("d") at the end of the first line, and unvoiced plosive ("p") which begins the second.[1640] It is also a *poietic* caesura inasmuch as the strength of the *image* is conveyed by the metaphor formalised in the second part of the poem. Somewhat hesitantly, the second line opens with the syncopated iamb, "Petals," then briefly accelerates in the central anapaestic foot ("on a wet"), ending with a progressive ritardando in the two final stressed syllables ("black bough").[1641]

This brief account of some of the poem's technicalities is not offered anecdotally, but in support of Kermode's observation that, for Hulme, "the meaning [of the poem] is the same thing as its form, and the artist is absolved from participation with the discursive powers of the intellect."[1642] I believe this may be generalized to the best Imagism. Whether it is the image which determines the technicalities of poetic language, or vice versa, is less significant than the recognition that the two are inextricable in the poem. In this particular sense, the Imagist poem perpetuates the self-reflexive strain established by the Jena romantics.

[1639] This recalls Šklovskij's understanding that "the poetic image…aims to destroy the tendency towards habituation and serves to lengthen and intensify the process of perception" (D. W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century: Structuralism, Marxism, Aesthetics of Reception, Semiotics* (London: C. Hurst, 1978), 15-6), as well as Luhmann's claim that art is effective through a "*retarding* [of] perception" (Luhmann, *Art as Social System*, 14). It should be noted that, *contra* Hulme and several of the Imagists, the formalists express no interest in the metaphysical elevation of the image.

[1640] The change here in the point of articulation – from the back, dorsal, "d" to the front, bilabial "p" – necessitates a physical adjustment whenever the poem is sounded, regardless, I believe, of whether this is done aloud or mentally. It is intensely difficult to imagine these sounds following each other significantly more quickly than they can be articulated out loud. Quite simply, this adjustment takes time. The same sort of phenomenon may be noted in the final three words of the poem – "wet," "black," and "bough" – between the alveolar "t" and the velar which end "wet" and "black," and the bilabial "b" which begins "black" and "bough."

[1641] It might be argued that the line ends with a spondee, but to my mind, given that the poem's tempo is decreasing, it makes more sense to see these syllables as separate.

[1642] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 143. Once again, this point bears a striking resemblance to the critical pronouncements of several minimalists.

Despite this desire for unity between form and content, and despite its being a thoroughly visual poetry –
Hulme emphasizes the visual and physical nature of the Image – the Imagists experiment very little with
concrete form. Notable exceptions are the patterned lines of Marianne Moore's wonderfully titled "You
Are Like the Realistic Product of an Idealistic Search for Gold at the Foot of the Rainbow," and the
minimal, clipped couplets of much of William Carlos Williams' work,[1643] which draw significant
attention to the physical spaces between words, lines and stanzas. We nonetheless encounter intensely
visual examples of a different order in this poetry. One might only think of the remarkable second stanza
of H.D.'s "Evening:"

The cornel-buds are still white,
but the shadows dart
from the cornel-roots –
black creeps from root to root,
each, leaf
cuts another leaf on the grass,
shadow seeks shadow,
then both leaf
and leaf-shadow are lost.[1644]

Other poets render the image knowable through plain lines – austere, hard, and descriptive. The opening
of Aldington's "Pickett" is exemplary in this respect:

Dusk and deep silence…

Three soldiers huddle on a bench
Over a red-hot brazier,
And a fourth who stands apart
Watching the cold rainy dawn.[1645]

These lines are interesting for the minimalist sensibility they demonstrate – this could be a passage of
Hemingway's, Robbe-Grillet's or Carver's prose, merely shaped into verse – but more especially for the
manner in which the image is rendered static through description, while the passage of time between two
instants ("dusk" and "dawn") is given a dynamism through its absence: time is accelerated by a

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[1643] William Carlos Williams writes his best Imagist poetry after the demise of the movement, and many argue that
this work already demonstrates considerable affinity with objectivism (Jones, *Introduction*, 36-7).
[1644] H.D., "Evening," *Imagist Poetry*, 63.
[1645] Richard Aldington, "Pickett," *Imagist Poetry,* 57. Similar, although not as bare or focused as Aldington's poem,
is Lowell's "Spring Day" (the poem is arguably more Impressionistic than it is Imagistic).

symmetrical lack of presentation of actual and textual silence, reinforced by ellipsis and the physical space between stanzas. At other times, the clarity of the image is sought through an evocative synaesthesia, as exemplified in the wonderful penultimate line of Amy Lowell's "In a Garden" – "And the scent of lilacs was heavy with stillness."[1646]

d) Futurism and the poignancy of direction

The Imagist concern lies with presenting the Real, minimally mediated by a poetic language focused on accurate description, simple lines, divested of the need for exegesis and any lyrical excess. In this sense, it is formally minimalist.[1647] Yet this is seldom the case in practice, on top of which the retrospective idealism of the Imagists seems able to attend to the unyielding acceleration of the early twentieth century only obliquely. Concurrently, other projects expressed a far greater urgency and militant orientation towards the future, grounding themselves in a dynamic revolutionary affirmation that aesthetic novelty and the demolition of exhausted values[1648] would constantly replenish one another in an exhilarating and infinite affirmation of existence: "once again we hurl defiance to the stars,"[1649] in the celebrated terms of Marinetti. Marjorie Perloff (in a phrase she adopts from Renato Poggioli[1650]) identifies this as the *futurist moment* – a moment of extreme dissatisfaction with the *status quo*, generic to any revolutionary avant-garde; a moment which tips into a militant utopianism and pledge of fidelity towards futurity itself; a moment at which artists are convinced that something entirely new is imminent.

The start of the twentieth century saw groups of young artists – deeply dissatisfied with the stagnation and complacency of the establishment in its various social, political and cultural guises[1651] – take on coherent programmes, defining a number of concurrent movements. The principal among these are Cubism, Italian Futurism, Russian Futurism and Vorticism.[1652] To comprehend both the importance and difficulties of the *futurist moment* as it manifests in these movements, it is necessary to juxtapose Perloff's observation, that

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[1646] Amy Lowell, "In a Garden," *Imagist Poetry,* 87.

[1647] By these criteria, Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* is certainly a minimalist poem.

[1648] Zbigniew Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place in the Development of Modern Poetry: A Comparative Study and Anthology* (Ottowa: U of Ottawa P, 1980) 3-4; Jane Rye, *Futurism* (London: E. P. Dutton, 1973), 11.

[1649] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," *Manifesto*, 189 (185-189).

[1650] Perloff adopts this phrase, and its relatively broad application, from work of Renato Poggioli (Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1986), xvii.

[1651] Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place*, 5.

[1652] There were significant futurist experiments in other parts of Europe, and as far afield as Brazil, which are bracketed for the sake of brevity.

in these is "produced a short-lived but remarkable rapprochement between avant-garde aesthetic, radical politics, and popular culture,"[1653] with Agamben's cautionary remark, that "where there is movement there is always a caesura that cuts through and divides the people...identifying an enemy."[1654] It is not surprising that an aggressive utopianism should flirt with proto-fascist rhetoric. Still, the extent of the horror which Marinetti's exalted prophesy – that war is the "world's only hygiene"[1655] – provokes in hindsight, could not realistically have been predicted in 1909. As Sellin notes, the glorification of war and violence was common to the major poets of Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism and appears in numerous works of Apollinaire, Marinetti, Tzara, Mayakovsky and Breton.[1656] A sense of crisis dominated the existential mood, and those who appealed to this *futurist moment* were convinced that an aggressive aesthetic stance could project itself beyond catastrophe. Indeed Futurism only "makes a degree of sense as a willed aesthetic attitude,"[1657] when it expresses a *will to art*.[1658]

In its various expressions, this *futurist moment* is marked by a shared assertion of *simultaneism* as the nucleus of modernist aesthetics. Art attempts to capture the dynamic situation in which sensory information, and the forms and media which convey this information, can be presented concurrently – whether by a synaesthesia, a logic of formal interpenetration, the innovative aesthetics of performance, or collage. Thus, for simultaneists the "juxtaposition, within the same construct, whether visual or verbal [or, indeed, musical], of different time frames"[1659] is concurrent with an "interpenetrative spatial disruption [which] is supposed to represent the affective character of the spectator's perceptual experience."[1660] Speed and noise, youth and vigour, excitement and innovation, technological acceleration and urban growth seem to propel existence itself forward.[1661] At times simultaneism even promises a sort of utopian politics, an aesthetically generated collective consciousness.[1662] Given the stakes, it is not surprising that

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[1653] Perloff, *Moment,* xvii.

[1654] Agamben, "Movement."

[1655] Marinetti, "Manifesto," 187. This coordinates closely his view of the aesthetic as a site of "struggle" (ibid., 187) upon which poetry is a "violent attack on unknown forces" (ibid., 187) and "art...can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice" (ibid., 189).

[1656] Eric Sellin, *Reflections on the Aesthetics of Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism: A Prosody Beyond Words* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 23.

[1657] Ibid.

[1658] Ibid., 19. Sellin takes this term from Andras Hamori, who understands it as that which marks aesthetic from merely decorative objects, but it generates an obvious comparison to Nietzsche's *Will to Power* (See Rye, *Futurism*, 11).

[1659] Perloff, *Moment*, 174.

[1660] Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 147.

[1661] Ibid., 139. Marinetti, "Manifesto," 186-9; Rye, *Futurism*, 11, 121.

[1662] Butler, *Early Modernism,* 158-9.

there exists some disagreement as to the origin of the term,[1663] its conceptual debts,[1664] and over its applicability or inapplicability to various artists and movements.[1665]

According to Butler, where Cubism "value[s] formalism for its own sake...[the Italian] Futurists...demanded involvement and commitment."[1666] In formal terms, Cubism – along with Constructivism and De Stijl – are certainly the forebears of an abstract expressionism which establishes the nonreferential conditions in which minimalism's radically reductive aesthetic could come to prominence.[1667] Are the excesses of Futurism antithetical to this conceptual course? May we suppose that the Futurist proposition that "EVERYTHING OF VALUE IS THEATRICAL,"[1668] together with its proclivity for "improvisation, [and] lightning-like intuition,"[1669] are opposed to formalism, and hence also to minimalism, which is regularly conceived of as formalism's extreme pole? Futurism emphasizes a shift from a distanced, passive, respectful obedience in relation to the work, to one of unbroken closeness and continuous participation,[1670] once again affirming its overtly political dimension. In Butler's judgement, "the spectator is involved in the struggle, because [the work's] depiction turns upon a rhythmic interdependence between subject, object, and environment."[1671] Yet this theatricality does not bar it from minimalism.

Indeed, Hal Foster, reminds us that "minimalism breaks with late modernism through a partial reprise of the historical avant-garde,"[1672] and although we overstate the case by conflating the two, we might also recall that in his 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," Fried views minimalism as an anti-art precisely on account of its theatricality.[1673] For Fried, "the literalist [minimalist] espousal of objecthood amounts to

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[1663] Ibid., 158.

[1664] Marinetti denies the influence of Mallarmé on his typographical experiments (Perloff, *Moment*, 175; Rye, *Futurism*, 115) much as Apollinaire fails to acknowledge Marinetti as a model for his calligrams (Butler, *Early Modernism*, 152-3; 157).

[1665] Robert Delaunay, "Simultaneism in Contemporary Modern Art, Painting, Poetry," *Manifesto*, 160-3.

[1666] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 152.

[1667] In relation to the Constructivist tradition, Foster suggests that minimalism is "one site of a general return of this avant-garde – a return that, with the force of the repressed, opened up the disciplinary order of late modernism" (Foster, *Return*, 56).

[1668] Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra, "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre," *Manifesto*, 193.

[1669] Ibid., 194.

[1670] This is the sixth conclusion of the Futurists programme to revivify theatre (ibid., 196).

[1671] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 147.

[1672] Foster, *Return*, 54.

[1673] Admittedly, Fried's view regarding the confluence of theatricality and aesthetic absorption is rendered a great deal clearer when understood in terms of his situation within an historical counterpoint between the autonomous presentness of high modernism and the rather more exhibitionary notion of presence which marks much of the art which subsequently would be called postmodernist.

nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art."[1674] Whatever art might be, it must be harboured in the epiphanic potential of the work itself, which minimalism, by this account, hands over too completely to the beholder, and hence to a sort of theatre.[1675] If his characterization is legitimate, minimalism certainly shares its theatricality with Futurism. Not insignificantly, the Futurists themselves envision their synthetic theatre as a type of minimalism in which performances would be "very brief," aiming "[t]o compress into a few minutes, into a few words and gestures, innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts, and symbols."[1676] This resembles the attitude often espoused by critics of minimalist literature, that their objects are the containers of compressed meaning in which "everything said must contain all that has not been said."[1677] "*It's stupid to write one hundred pages where one would do*,"[1678] in the words of Marinetti.

The Futurist partiality towards "ABSOLUTE DYNAMISM"[1679] sets it against the traditional business of form – ensuring stability and predictability, differentiating and mediating the chaotic stuff of what is unformed. Returning to the three existential logics of *transumption* introduced earlier, might we say that a formalist aesthetic *contains* the object, while Futurism – which extends our conception of artwork from within the heterogeneous, interpenetrative nexus of elements from which it is constituted – operates by a logic of *distension*? This is by no means an unreasonable suggestion. Yet, as minimalism shows with particular clarity, that a work appeals primarily to one logic does not prohibit its secondary involvement with another logic (or other logics). For instance, while formalism is a model of order for the serial, wall-mounted boxes of Judd's *oeuvre* (Figure 87),[1680] or for the rigorously prescribed, mathematically coded movement of Beckett's "Quad I" (Figure 88), this is not the case for the sublime, interpenetrative atmospheres generated by Dan Flavin's celebrated installation of variously coloured lights on the spiral walkway of the Guggenheim Museum, (Figure 89),[1681] or of Philip Glass's *Strung Out* (Figure 90),[1682] which recalls Futurist and Dada performance through the manner in which the music is arranged across

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[1674] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 125.
[1675] Ibid.
[1676] Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra, "Synthetic Theatre," 191.
[1677] Hallett, *Minimalism*, 7.
[1678] Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra, "Synthetic Theatre," 193.
[1679] Ibid., 194.
[1680] Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1966. Collection unspecified.
The work comprises four cubic units of stainless steel with amber Plexiglass sides.
[1681] Dan Flavin, *Untitled (to Ward Jackson, and old friend and colleague who, when, during Fall, 1957, I finally returned to New York from Washington, and joined him to work together in this museum, kindly communicated)*, 1971. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
[1682] Philip Glass, *Strung Out*, 1967.

the stage, requiring the performer to engage in a type of slow, ritualistic dance, as he or she moves from beginning to end.

Figure 87: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, **1966.**

Figure 88: Samuel Beckett, *Quad* **(still from colour version), 1981.**

Figure 89: Dan Flavin, *Untitled (to Ward Jackson, an old friend and colleague who, when, during Fall, 1957, I finally returned to New York from Washington, and joined him to work together in this museum, kindly communicated)***, 1971.**

Figure 90: Premiere performance by Dorothy Pixley-Rothschild of Philip Glass' *Strung Out***, November 1968, New York.**

We might extract two mildly comforting aesthetic maxims from this situation: mistrust any activity which overhastily gives names to artistic movements; and have faith in the universalizing potential of *poietic* logic (in relation to the artwork). Regarding the first, in naming their activities, artists and critics habitually claim to do things which, in fact, they do not or cannot accomplish. The second, fortunately, shows that this does not matter very much, because any artwork might manifest according to apparently disparate *poietic* logics – logics which are themselves devoid of determinate content, but which deepen our awareness of the relation of an artwork to *poiesis*, and of *poiesis* to the Real. In this light, simultaneism names a *poietic* logic[1683] which permeates aesthetic works in appealing to a futurist moment, even though these moments may be quite different.[1684]

There can be little doubt that Cubism, which was an accepted term by early 1912,[1685] owes the simultaneist thrust of its aesthetic to Italian Futurism. *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France*,[1686] the collaborative masterpiece of poet Blaise Cendrars and his wife, painter Sonia Delaunay,[1687] is a pioneering work of simultaneism not, according to Butler, on the basis of the "associative juxtaposition within the verbal text," but "upon its interaction with the painting...which accompanies it."[1688] In this, it recalls the symbiosis of William Blake's poetry and illustration, and anticipates the work of Max Ernst, such as *The Hundred Headless Woman*.[1689] However its semantic concerns are also plainly Futurist: its subject is a journey of initiation of the sixteen-year-old poet, filled with a confused superabundance of violent, erotic, irrational and revolutionary energy. Establishing that the simultaneist effect of Cendrar's poem owes more to the manner in which the visual and verbal elements extend one another – rather than to the internal, self-referential arrangement of its verbal elements, points from a logic of containment to one of distension – recognizing a dynamic *poietic* field which is atopian insofar as it escapes any simple location.

[1683] To recall, the present work regards simultaneism, or simultaneity, as one of the characteristic situations of the logic of distension.

[1684] Might minimalism not present a futurist moment of sorts in the way it present a radical view of the minimal distinction of art from mere thing, and the transfiguration of the latter to the former, in the terms of Danto (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 99).

[1685] Scobie, *Earthquakes*, 47.

[1686] Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delauney, "The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France," *PMV1*, 161-172.

[1687] They were strongly associated with Cubists. Robert Delaunay, Sonia's brother, was the leading Orphist.

[1688] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 161-2.

[1689] Max Ernst, *The Hundred Headless Woman* (New York, George Braziller, 1981).

Apollinaire – the self-appointed spokesman of the Cubists[1690] – identifies four principal routes of Cubist expression: scientific cubism, which expresses internalised geometric principles; physical cubism, which coordinates its elements through visual perception; instinctive cubism, which is informed by intuition; and orphic cubism, which is "the art of painting new structures out of elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself, and been endowed by him with fullness of reality."[1691] In Apollinaire's view, simultaneism takes on its full force in light of the aesthetic objectives of Orphism. "[W]orks...must simultaneously give a pure aesthetic pleasure, a structure which is self-evident, and a sublime meaning."[1692] Here is an anticipation of the aesthetic extreme that will manifest in terms of minimalism as soon as the unmediated presence, self-reflexive transparency and sublime effect for which Apollinaire campaigns, are pressed towards a greater level of abstraction and an austere approach to aesthetic medium.

In practice, despite that fact that he "deplored the Futurists,"[1693]Apollinaire's visual poetry reveals their significant influence.[1694] If many of these poems appeal to a traditional calligrammatic logic[1695] – words formed into a single icon or sign, their "textual values...read against the visual imprint of a shape whose referential frame inflects the entire text"[1696] – others attempt to generate a syntax of signs.[1697]The force at the heart of the visual poem is increasingly located within the concrete visual and structural relation of the words themselves, rather than in the iconic relation of word to image. Drawing on the technique of collage – which moves beyond the early Cubist analytical delineation of space in relation to objects, to a "synthesis or building up of separate objects on the picture plane"[1698] – Apollinaire claimed to offer a "new representation of the universe, [t]he most poetic and the most modern."[1699] Indeed, what sets Apollinaire apart from his predecessors, and provides impetus to the subsequent visual poetry of high Modernism, is his sensitivity to the capacity of his medium to generate new interartistic *topoi*. The proper medium of "Horse Calligram" (Figure 91) is neither visual nor verbal; nor is it a simple composite of the

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[1690] Scobie, *Earthquakes*, 46.

[1691] Guillaume Apollinaire, "Cubism Differs," *Manifesto*, 124.

[1692] Ibid. See Scobie, *Earthquakes*, 128-9.

[1693] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 152.

[1694] Ibid., 155, 157; Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place*, 5; Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 14-5. This is particularly true of Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, published in 1918, the year after his death.

[1695] Apollinaire claimed that to compare his calligrams to the figurative poetry of the Renaissance was like comparing a racing car to a wind-up toy (Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 14-6).

[1696] Drucker, "Visual Performance," 134.

[1697] Scobie, *Earthquakes*, *73*-4; Johanna Drucker, "Experimental, Visual, and Concrete Poetry: A Note on Historical Context and Basic Concepts," *EVC*, 39-40.

[1698] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 167. "[T]he Cubist painter...decomposed an object into its parts, seen from different angles, and regrouped them in two-dimensional patterns" (Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 17).

[1699] Guillaume Apollinaire, "Horse Calligram," *PMV1*, 119.

two. Its concern lies with the production of something entirely new, which Apollinaire believed would be discovered through the simultaneism exposed by collage. This is certainly an exaggerated claim. It is true that such works as "Horse Calligram" present skilful examples of an "'autoillustration,' which makes words take on the visual form of an object,"[1700] and that these works involve an accelerated notation and reading in which "connections made by movements of the eye are supposed to inspire an innovatory type of inference."[1701] However, as Bann notes, that "lines of text are ingeniously manipulated in order to imitate natural appearances,"[1702] should not persuade us of the *concreteness* of such works in the strong sense of the "parallel development of structure and content,"[1703] of sense, concept, medium and meaning. Nor were these concerns unique to Apollinaire: historical precedents abound, most notably in the case of the Arabic *tughra*, while Apollinaire's contemporaries, Cendrars, Marinetti and Cangiullo, express similar interests.[1704]
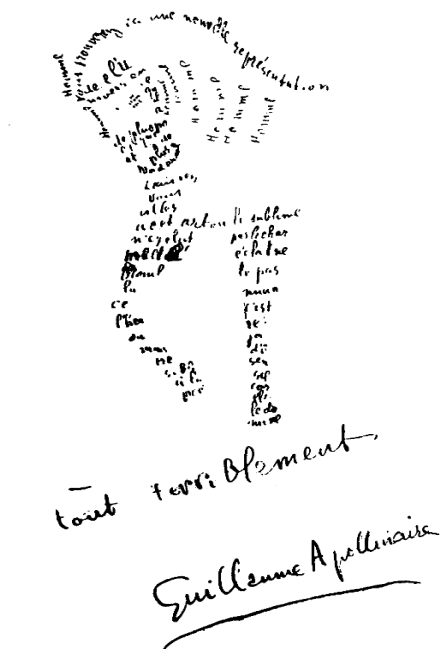
Figure 91: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Horse Calligram*, 1918.

[1700] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 170.
[1701] Ibid.
[1702] Stephen Bann, "Introduction," *CPIA*, 11 (7-27).
[1703] Ibid., 16.
[1704] Ibid., 166; Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 16-7.

Aesthetically more significant is "Lettre-Océan" (Figure 92),[1705] a "psychovisual collage"[1706] which reveals Apollinaire's work at its perceptually most dynamic and its conceptually most profound. The poem takes its title from postal terminology, a letter sent across the ocean, between Apollinaire in bourgeois Paris, and his brother, Albert, in a politically unstable Mexico City.[1707] Three principal visual figures emerge in the poem. The first is the postcard, marked by the stamp and wave-like postmarks, which is a partial reconstruction of narrative fragments exchanged between the brothers.[1708] The second, the larger of the circular figures, on the right side of the poem, is a representation of the Eiffel Tower from above, marked by the verbal transcription of the tower's height: "*Haught de 300 metres*" ("Height of 300 metres").[1709] From this point the sounds of the city fan outward in expanding concentric circles, from the sound of factory sirens ("hou"), to that of an autobus ("rro, o o to ro ro ro"); the sound of a gramophone (its "zzz" and fragmentary catches of melody) and the creak of the poet's new shoes ("cre"), presumably as he walks through the city.[1710] Combining the visual and auditory perception with the poet's thought,[1711] the poem, embodied by the tower, "radiates lines of words"[1712] which on one level represent the transmission of radio waves or telegraphic messages[1713] but, on another, establish the poem, as a "symbolic axis mundi:"[1714] "[w]ith the location of the poem at its centre, the action radiates outward...to encompass the *arrondissiment*, the city, the nation, the continent, and the whole world."[1715] The third figure, the smaller of the two circular shapes to the bottom left, represents "a bunch of keys on a ring."[1716] At its centre is the topographical marker, "*Sur la rive gauche devant le pont d'Iéna*" ("on the Left Bank opposite the Jena Bridge"). Bohn stresses that since this is the actual location of the Eiffel Tower, critics habitually misinterpret this as a second representation of the tower.[1717] According to Bohn, that these are keys is "strengthened by the shape of several of the verses and by the line "*Des clefs j'en ai vu mille et*

[1705] Guillaume Apollinaire, "Lettre-Océan," *Alcools et Calligrammes* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1991), 220-1. This was in fact Apollinaire's first visual poem, and probably also his best.

[1706] Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 17.

[1707] This was the time of the Mexican Revolution. This letter is made of several fragments which include a postcard, but also a telegram, indicated by the letters "*TSF (télégraphie sans fil*, 'wireless telegraphy')" (ibid., 15).

[1708] Ibid., 19-21.

[1709] Perloff, *Moment*, 196.

[1710] Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 18.

[1711] Ibid., 22.

[1712] Perloff, *Moment*, 196.

[1713] Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 20.

[1714] Ibid., 23.

[1715] Ibid.

[1716] Ibid. 20.

[1717] Ibid. 21. See Perloff, for example (Perloff, *Moment*, 196). Also, Bohn points out that the centre originally read "*la foule*" ("the crowd") (Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 21).

mille" ("I have seen thousands and thousands of keys")", and, allegorically, by the fact that several of these *keys* are political slogans "each of which claims to be the 'key' to an ideal society"[1718]

LETTRE-OCÉAN

J'étais au bord du Rhin quand tu partis pour le Mexique
Ta voix me parvient malgré l'énorme distance
Gens de mauvaise mine sur le quai à la Vera Cruz

Les voyageurs de *l'Espagne* devant faire
le voyage de Coatzacoalcos pour s'embarquer
je t'envoie cette carte aujourd'hui au lieu

REPUBLICA MEXICANA
TARJETA POSTAL

de profiter du courrier de Vera Cruz qui n'est pas sûr
Tout est calme ici et nous sommes dans l'attente
des évènements.

Des clefs j'en ai vu mille et mille

BONJOUR TU NE CONNAITRAS JAMAIS BIEN LES

Mayas

T S F

Te souviens-tu du tremblement de terre entre 1885 et 1890
on coucha plus d'un mois sous la tente

BONJOUR **MON FRÈRE ALBERT** à Mexico

Jeunes filles à Chapultepec

Figure 92: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Lettres-Océan* (1918)

 "The poem does not simply imitate an object," notes Butler. "It can lead one to ask how the spatial arrangement of a series of messages might affect their meaning."[1719] This resonates with Johanna Drucker's description of concrete poetry in terms of the "work [which] has a distinct shape on the page and loses a part of its meaning if it is rearranged or printed without attention to the typeface and form which were part of the poet's original work."[1720] "Lettre-Océan" is thus amongst the founding gestures of modern concretism. It also speaks of something purely *poietic*. The topography of Paris is

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[1718] Ibid.
[1719] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 171.
[1720] Drucker, "Experimental," 40.

schematized,[1721] displaced into words and visual design, manifesting a *poietic* atopia – a non-space which is spatialized by its *poietic* taking-place, and which becomes concrete in this process of *transumption*.[1722] To clarify, our suggestion is not that Apollinaire's calligrammatic poetry is minimalist, when clearly it acts as the container of a great deal of complexity, but that it exemplifies through its simultaneist, concrete mould an early modernist vision of the aesthetic transumption which is radicalized and intensified by minimalists.

Led by Marinetti, the Italian Futurists amplify the simultaneist aesthetic in their work by vigorous generic innovation.[1723] Marinetti recognized and lauded the manner in which contemporary advertising and journalism were restoring dynamism to stagnant aesthetic formulae.[1724] Embracing several of these techniques, the Futurists were also astute to the importance of public spectacle, staged impressive spectacular performances, and quickly elevated the manifesto to the foremost avant-garde genre of the day through their tireless dissemination of aesthetico-political propaganda.[1725] The innovations they brought to sound and visual poetry were considerable. Having abandoned "traditional syntax, metre and punctuation,"[1726] the Futurists were free to experiment with layout and typography. Marinetti's "After the Battle of the Marne" (Figure 93) [1727] exemplifies this concern in terms of the use of different types and sizes of lettering – recalling Mallarmé, it is true – and experiments with the collagic overlaying of texts. This spirit extends to Marinetti's unorthodox use of colour, the incorporation of mathematical and numerical symbols,[1728] and its incorporation of sonic elements, whether onomatopoeic – the repeated "ta" in "After the Battle"[1729] – or orthographic – adding or subtracting from the number of vowels and consonants in words.[1730]

[1721] Bohn, *Visual Poetry*, 16.

[1722] This apparent paradox – that the poem becomes concrete by a process of abstraction – parallels Agamben's model of the example which is "excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 22).

[1723] Perloff, *Moment*, xviii. Drucker draws attention to the notable influence on Italian Futurism of the aesthetics of Symbolism and Cubism (Drucker, *Visual Performance*, 133).

[1724] Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 49.

[1725] Rye, *Futurism*, 17. As Butler notes, what the Futurists were doing was not entirely new; but it was made to seem so by being accompanied by an aggressively dismissive view of all past solutions" (Butler, *Early Modernism*, 139).

[1726] Ibid., 111.

[1727] Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, "After the Battle of the Marne, Joffre toured the front by car," *PMV1*, 199. Its formal and technical experimentation aside, the poem also reflects the frequent use of militaristic subject-matter by the Futurists.

[1728] "After the Battle" contains a numerical list in its left-hand corner, and incorporates the mathematical symbols +, –, = and × (ibid.).

[1729] Ibid.

[1730] "Mon amiiiii," for example (ibid.) See Rye, *Futurism*, 111; Morley, *Writing*, 48-9.
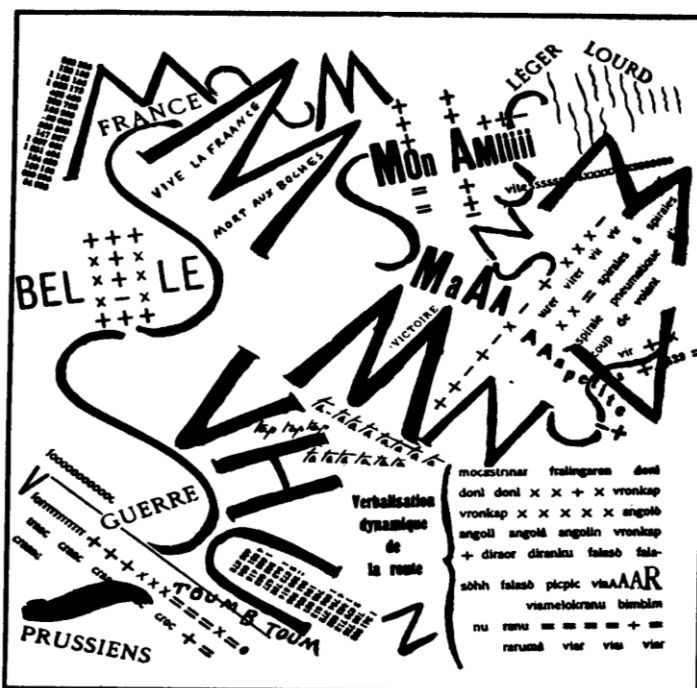
Figure 93: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *After the Battle of the Marne, Joffre toured the front by car*, **1914.**

These experiments were captured in the phrase *parole-in-liberta* – words-in-freedom – through which Marinetti sought a positive poetic response to the technological acceleration of modernity in which he placed such great faith.[1731] Free verse, Marinetti concluded, is not as free as it supposes.[1732] Finally, it reinforces the general imposition of limits upon the senses, affirming that the "structure of language mirror[s] the oppressively hierarchical nature of society."[1733] Words-in-freedom, with all the formal, linguistic, sonic and visual innovation they brought, were supposed to liberate the senses and emotions on the one hand, and words themselves, on the other. "Words, which...had been held in the service of communicating information, were to be re-imagined as material things in themselves...Rather than serving as referents, they were now deemed self-illustrative, identified with their own aural and visual properties."[1734]

This experimental attitude, with its increased focus on the concreteness of the sign, spread rapidly across Europe. It discovered significant resonances in the advanced intermedia experimentation of Russian

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[1731] Ibid., 48.

[1732] Perloff, *Moment* , 174.

[1733] Morely, *Writing*, 47.

[1734] Ibid., 48.

poets,[1735] and England, too, manifests a futurist moment in the work of the Vorticists.[1736] That Anglo-American critics have regularly mistaken the rhetorical animosity of the Vorticists towards Italian Futurism for a reliable indicator of the former's autonomy from the latter, [1737] should not distract us from the simple fact, as Perloff sees it, that "Vorticism would not have come into being without the Futurist model."[1738]Marinetti's aesthetic had a considerable impact on Pound,[1739] who, to recall, had left the Imagists for the Vorticists, and who considered "energy, force, dynamism...[and] simultaneity"[1740] – distinctly Marinettian terms – central to his poetic vision.

"Its typographical and synthetic innovations were nevertheless startling," [1741] suggests Perloff. In *BLAST*, the publication through which the Vorticists disseminated their ideas and work, we encounter "a visual format that recalls the advertising poster or billboard rather than the page to be consecutively read from top to bottom and from left to right."[1742] Advertising, to be effective, must intensify and exploit the economic dimension of the sign. By exploring this logic, the Vorticists progress towards a poetic distinction of the minimal, nuclear element of this commercial semiotics. Despite its stylistic incongruity with the exploits of *BLAST*, a similar concern is reflected in journalistic terms by the "emergence of a more taut and bare prose style in the newspapers of the day…[which] reflected the sense of increased velocity in daily life"[1743] which is exemplified in the non-fictional writing of proto-minimalist Ernest Hemingway.

The Vorticists integrate poetry, manifesto, experimental layout and illustration in an attempt to "give one a sudden feeling of vertigo, of plunging into an abyss of space,"[1744] "an acceleration into depth"[1745] in which the hope is to encounter "a radiant node or cluster."[1746] Led by Wyndham Lewis, they express an often brutal and dystopian vision of the self-executing collapse of the modern world, triggered and accelerated by the proliferation of technology, the diminution of the notion of value in a dehumanised

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[1735] The contribution of the Russian Futurists is discussed briefly in the examination of sound poetry below.
[1736] As with the Imagists (*Imagistes*), it was Pound who named the Vorticists.
[1737] Perloff, *Moment*, 171.
[1738] Ibid.
[1739] Ibid., 175, 179, 184.
[1740] Ibid., 174.
[1741] Ibid., 163-4.
[1742] Ibid., 181.
[1743] Roston, *Modernist Patterns*, 128.
[1744] Paul Overy, "Vorticism," *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981) 108.
[1745] Ibid. 107.
[1746] Ezra Pound qtd. in Overy, ibid.

world.[1747] In this respect, Vorticism represents a cynical appropriation of the futurist moment: a curious prospective retrospection in the sense that it seeks to stabilize a future catastrophe through a luminous point in the *poiesis* of the present – a cautionary threnody of sorts.

e) An event between art and non-art

The First World War and its terrifying technologies of death sparked radical doubt in even the most ardently utopian Futurist technophile. Within the choking dystopianism of collapsing empires and the failing politics of a hollow humanism, Dada was born – choking on, then spitting out the art of the past, and nourishing itself in the fervent belief that it was "*essentially* different."[1748] Dada resists positive definition as thoroughly as it does negative definition: it can be clarified by no attribute or set of attributes, nor by the fact that it lacks these. "The *work* of Dada," suggests Welchman, "behave[s] more like a variable than a constant."[1749] Deprived of a stable set of objects, we come closer to our object only obliquely, by tracing the signifying force of Dada *qua* force, which, in Sanouillet's estimation, amounts to installing the name, Dada, as *logos*.[1750] "Dada was a word, a brand new, meaningless and magic word,"[1751] a *prime word*, in the terms of Marcel Duchamp, "which can be divided only by itself and by unity."[1752]

Dada intoxicates, not merely to confuse, but so that we can again experience, in the intense clarity of critical sobriety, the problematic nature of "the accepted...referential function of sign systems."[1753] As Caws claims, Dada's "drunkenness...can deliver us from what Tristan Tzara – the figure most intimately connected to the movement through its entire course – calls the 'lazy habit' of living."[1754] Negation is merely the necessary prelude to sublation and the revolutionary manifestation of *poietic* novelty: "'[w]hat we wanted was to make a clean sweep of existing values, but also, in fact, to replace them with the

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[1747] Overy, "Vorticism," 109.

[1748] Michel Sanouillet, "Dada: A Definition," *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectic of Revolt*, ed. Stephen C. Foster and Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Madison: Coda, 1979), 21.

[1749] John. C. Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse: Critical Theory and the Dada and Surrealist Word-Image," *The Dada and Surrealist Word-Image*, ed.Judi Freeman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1989) 60.

[1750] Sanouillet, "Dada," 21-2

[1751] Ibid., 21.

[1752] Ibid; Marc Dachy, *Dada: The Revolt of Art*, trans. Liz Ash (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 91-3.

[1753] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 142.

[1754] Mary Ann Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Eluard and Desnos* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970), 111.

highest human values.'"[1755] Dada attempts to discover by anarchic means the radical point at which an elemental or primal aesthetic[1756] and a fundamental politics[1757] can coincide. "[U]nder...[its] emblematic, ironic and rather baffling name,[1758] there came together an international constellation of artists, groups, periodicals, books and works, radically affirming the freedom of man and the irrepressible claims of the life impulse in all its manifestations."[1759] No-one, least of all its practitioners, was entirely sure where the perimeters of their project lay, yet they were uniformly convinced "it was through art that Dada...[would make] good its insurrection."[1760]

Exposed by this conviction are two parallel fields of tension: the first between art and non-art, the second between generation and destruction. Here art addresses not only its own existential conditions (in the first case), but those of being in general (in the second). The stakes are high, and, unsurprisingly, the spectrum of strong critical judgements ranges from the condemnation of Dada as an irretrievably nihilistic enterprise,[1761] to those dedicated to its heroic elevation.[1762] Most convincing, however, are the accounts which recognise in Dada a dialectic desire, an attempt to engender through its diverse expressions both aesthetic and social revolution.

Dada's negotiation of the distinction of art from non-art, and relatedly, of the relationship between *poiesis* and destruction, rests on the self-understanding that its primary task is to expose the very manner in which the Real is shaped by a dialectic movement.[1763] To recall, it is on the back of the dialectic that the modern, progressivist vision of history comes up against the moment of dialectic self-consciousness at which

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[1755] Tristan Tzara, qtd. in Dachy, *Dada*, 34.

[1756] Ibid., 12; Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 12, 19. Hereafter *DS*.

[1757] Dada opposed most political structures, and particularly forms of nationalism and authoritarianism (*DS*, 22-6, 28; Dawn Ades, "Dada and Surrealism," *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 120-1). Hereafter *DSCMA*. There is disagreement amongst critics as to the micro-politics of Dada. According to Ades, the geographical and stylistic diversity of the artists suggests "no real unity" (ibid., 113), whereas Sanouillet is adamant that Dada was "a *group* of people...[which] banded together their talents and energies to wage an excruciating war against society as a whole" (Sanouillet, "Dada," 23), resisting "the delusions of politics and returning to bourgeois narrow-mindedness" (Dachy, *Dada*, 33). Dada's political mobility is further imputed in the polemical use of the manifesto which "counter[s] any purely aesthetic interpretation of their work[...]" (Marc Dachy, *The Dada Movement: 1915-1923,* trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 8).

[1758] For which dozens of competing explanations and histories have been offered, which, although interesting, are excluded from the present discussion.

[1759] Ibid., 7.

[1760] Ibid.

[1761] *DS*, 4.

[1762] "Voicing its negation of the systems and forms of power opposed to life, Dada in the space of a few years displayed a wild and creative energy, fundamentally positive in its thrust, and asserted the absolute supremacy of art and life as experienced by free men" (Dachy, *Dada Movement*, 9).

[1763] It was argued earlier that the dialectic view presents only a limited vision of the genuine forces which underpin reality and are expressible in terms of ontology.

history apparently comes to an end by grasping its own contingency. Dada aggressively rejects history and the structures through which it is communicated, but it seems unable to move beyond historicity – the force by which an entity emerges in the present with an awareness of its own contemporaneity, and so exists in an implicit relation to the past it ostensibly negates, launching itself thus into the imminent potentiality of the future. Inasmuch as it exemplifies the resilience of historicity, Dada also presents the minimal condition for the type of closure which defines an historical situation as such. Sanouillet intuits precisely this point when he writes that "with Dada, we live inside a closed world…The critic or the historian can only write or talk about *Dadaism* and the *Dadaists*, not about Dada and the Dadas."[1764] "Dadaism created while Dada was destroying."[1765] This is only an "apparent paradox,"[1766] however, since the *poietic* force – that force which the dialectic itself promises to harness – becomes visible only through the maximal tension produced by a minimal contact, between the generic taking-place of the work – Dadaism – and the anarchic singularity of the work itself – Dada.

Dada exemplifies a radical modernist aesthetic[1767] in the very moment that it expresses its hostility to modernism as a whole.[1768] Yet, as Lyotard insists in his examination of Duchamp, "[i]nconsistency is not insignificance."[1769] Indeed, Dada's deliberate inconsistency is what marks it in relation to an *event* in Badiou's sense of this term: an aleatory, trans-ontological rift; a subtraction from the existential state – a negation which also posits something absolutely new. We might say that Dada's inconsistency acts as a cipher to its eventality. It intuits this event through its irrational yet productive suspicion of any physical or formal laws pertaining to aesthetics. These Dada judges as "arbitrary, random, 'precise but inexact' (as Duchamp says to Steefel), without any assignable reference. A self-referring law, a contract with oneself...From the fact that the law is itself not legitimate...comes the result that you have no guarantee of conforming to it."[1770] Dada is exceptional in the sense exposed by Agamben – it creates "a zone in which application [of the law] is suspended, but the law…as such, remains in force."[1771] Here is a "moment of vigorous conflict in the zoning of [aesthetic] practices."[1772]

[1764] Sanouillet, "Dada," 25.
[1765] Ibid., 20.
[1766] Ibid.
[1767] Welchman takes note of the "critique and suspicion of several of the central items on the modernist agenda: abstraction, autonomy, and utopian order" (Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse," 58).
[1768] Ibid., 58-61; Dachy, *Dada Movement*, 8.
[1769] Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, trans. Ian McLeod (Venice, CA: Lapis, 1990), 12-3.
[1770] Ibid., 22, 24.
[1771] *SE*, 31.
[1772] Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse," 60.

Dada eludes and subverts discipline and genre,[1773] and occasionally generates something entirely new. From the manner of its emergence, which emphasizes simultaneously the eschewal of external causal relation and mimetic reference, Dada reveals that its abiding concern is finally one of self-containment. Its most intense *poietic* moment is also its most intimate, yet it plays by nobody's rules, least of all its own.[1774] Here are objects in search of a theory. However, since it is anarchic in relation to any aesthetic norms, any such theory must extend from the innermost potentiality of the object itself. It is thus that Dada "transforms art [itself], reinventing every discipline from within."[1775] Moving within the existential ambit of the minimalist logic of *transumption*, and particularly its *distensive* and *distributive* modalities, and claiming to be free from history, cause and *telos*, Dada represents itself as the decisive moment within which objects are allowed to be just objects.[1776] This is evident from Tzara's famous (if basic) recipe for chance poetry – strips of text are cut from a source, placed in and then picked from a bag, and then notated[1777] – which dislocates *poietic* force from its original source, allowing it simply to take-place. Equally we might look to the visual poetry of Raoul Hausmann (Figure 94),[1778] or the "schematic mecanomorph works,"[1779] or machine portraits, of Francis Picabia (Figure 95)[1780] to witness the germination of a proto-minimalist expression of *transumption* unconstrained by tradition.

[1773] In addition to its "radical interdiscursivity...in which the historically codified regimes of art practice" (ibid., 61) – particularly genre and discipline – are significantly undermined, Welchman relates that Dada "militated against the divisionism of nineteenth century practices: divisions of labor, divisions of academic and other disciplines, down to the divisions between the arts and the dividing of art from non-art" (ibid.).

[1774] "One might say the best criterion of a Dada piece is that it escapes definition" (Sanouillet, "Dada," 26).

[1775] Dachy, *Dada*, 14.

[1776] This recalls the point raised above in relation to Sontag and Agamben.

[1777] Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Towards the End of the Line: Dada and Experimental Poetry Today," *Dada Spectrum*, 227.

[1778] Raoul Hausmann, "Material for Painting, Sculpture, Architecture 1918," 1918. Hausmann's "Material" is an exemplary concrete poem (Dachy, *Dada*, 36-8) which presents the conceptual interaction of language, form and geometric shape in an attempt to come to terms with that which constitutes aesthetic material. It reflects upon the pull between positive space (the blue geometrical shapes and the black outlines of the typographically experimental lettering) and negative space (the white spaces between shapes, and those rhythmic gaps between letters). Together, these reflect the dynamism of constructed shapes, but also the manner in which syntax is propelled forward. In this sense, Hausmann's actual subject is *poiesis* as it manifests in intermediary expression.

[1779] Drucker, "Visual Performance," 144.

[1780] *Poéme banal* (Francis Picabia, *Poéme banal* (1918)), for instance, is "composed of text – a title, label, and addendum – and *diagram*" (Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse," 92). According to Welchman, these diagrams attempt to "represent[…] a kind of ultimate realism," acting both as a theoretical blueprint and model of practice, which "comes into being as the will-to-use, but…only exists to be modified, to be altered, or enacted, or scratched" (ibid.). In concert with Attridge's argument that singularity is not of necessity inimitable or opposed to its reproduction as such (Attridge, *Singularity*, 63-4), the machine diagram as conceived by Picabia is remarkable for "the permission it grants to reproduce and to duplicate" (Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse," 92), while acting as "a model for the highest order of denotative (one-to-one) exchange between word and image in systems of representation." (ibid.). The poem appeals to a logic of self-referential *transumption* precisely to the extent that the potential for replication and execution which inhere in its design at once contain and distribute its *poietic* heart.

Figure 94: Raoul Hausmann, *Material for Painting, Sculpture, Architecture 1918*, **1918.**
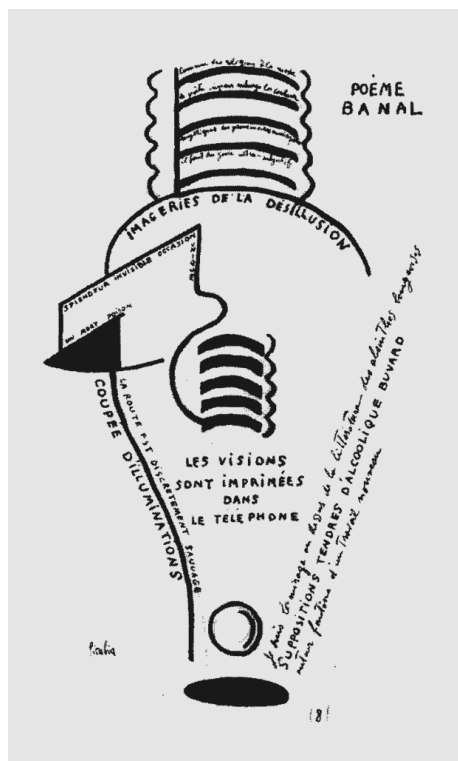
Figure 95: Francis Picabia, *Poéme banal*, **1918.**

The manner of Dada's *transumption* is intensified as its concerns become increasingly abstract. There persists in such cases the apparent paradox that the increased abstraction – indeed, minimization – of the referential content of the work, is accompanied by its concrete physical, manifestation as an actual object. Duchamp's ready-mades are exemplary in this respect. These are everyday objects, identified and selected, divested of any particular significance, and then reinvested with aesthetic importance. Following Danto, these are mere things transfigured into artworks,[1781] and have a different ontological status from their prototypes.[1782] Although qualitatively indistinguishable, the artwork is quantitatively more intense, more knowable in terms of the taking-place of the Real. A prototypically minimalist gesture, the readymade augments that element of Dada which Tzara characterizes in terms of an *art more art*.[1783] The readymade reaches towards an *art more Real*. Dada re-exposes a fundamental shift in the modern conception of realism, from a faithful reflection of the natural world to the location of an essential *poietic* element which is coincidental with the Real.[1784] The Surrealists[1785] – many of whom initially considered

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[1781] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 149.

[1782] Ibid., 99.

[1783] Dachy, *Dada Movement*, 8.

[1784] For leading Dadaist, Hugo Ball, this entails an investment in an aesthetic anti-naturalism in order to expose something almost super-natural at the heart of art (*DS*, 19).

themselves Dadaists – were convinced that they had discovered and could bring to light the very force of *poiesis* which the Dadaists had intuited only negatively.[1786] This *poietic* force is reflected in the term *surreal* itself, which "has two meanings: more-real, and more-than real."[1787] The Surrealist project revives a waning Platonism, particularly in the case of Magritte, for whom "thought is…a universal, originary process, the raw material of all expression and activity, conditioning language and image alike."[1788] It is on this quasi-transcendental basis that Surrealism claims to subsume within a sphere of poetic unity[1789] "the clash of signification at the interface of different codes,"[1790] *containing* under the sign of poetry[1791] any number of disciplines, media and genres.

Although the rhetoric of Dada rejects the sort of unifying gesture of thought which the Surrealists embrace, there can be little doubt that they are similarly comprised of heterogeneous elements, and that this heterogeneity is finally regarded as the substance of reality, rendering what is *real* in a significant sense indistinguishable from what is *more-real*. Consider Duchamp's most celebrated readymade, *Fountain* (Figure 96).[1792] This work sets in motion a startling dynamic, problematizing the distinction of art from non-art, and, in so doing, invigorating the relation of the readymade to the Real. To test the aesthetic resolve of a supposedly open forum for contemporary art in New York,[1793] Duchamp submitted this work under the pseudonym Richard Mutt – a urinal, roughly signed on one side, which in any situation is a symbol of a deeply awkward conjunction of the private and the public.[1794] When the urinal becomes art, and when the gallery becomes a public toilet, we might legitimately suggest that a certain

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[1785] Surrealism – which is antithetical to minimalism inasmuch as it seeks to demonstrate that the essence of art resides in elements of *meaning* not transparent to consciousness, and which must be uncovered through the various techniques of automatism (*DSCMA*, 124-5) – is for the most part bracketed in the present study.

[1786] Ades' account is typical of this pole of thinking: "Surrealism was born out of a desire for positive action, to start to build again from the ruins of Dada" (ibid., 121).

[1787] Daniel Albright, *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2004), 319.

[1788] Welchman, "After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse," 83.

[1789] Ibid., 84.

[1790] Ibid., 82.

[1791] Ibid., 84.

[1792] Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. There is some dispute as to whether Dada should be dated from the first readymades produced by Duchamp in 1913 and the subsequent association in New York of Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray, or to the establishment of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich (and the association of Tzara, Ball, Arp, Huelsenbeck, Richter, Hennings and Janco). Ades and Caws endorse the former (*DSCMA*, 111; *DS*, 10-1; Mary Ann Caws, "Dada's Temper: Our Text," *Dada Spectrum*, 219-225), while Dachy clearly prefers the Zurich Dadaists as founders of the movement (Dachy, *Dada Movement* 8-9; Dachy, *Dada*, 28).

[1793] *DS*, 11.

[1794] The traditionally private act of urination takes place in a public space – separated from ordinary space, it is true, but where people nonetheless go to do that which is private *together*. The individual urinal – as opposed to the trough-like ones which one might still encounter in more *rustic* public toilets – restores a symbolic, though not actual, element of privacy to the act.

revolution of a concept has taken place. For the present, the question of particular significance, however, is whether or not the Real resides with greater intensity in the real thing (the urinal) or in the readymade (the urinal *as* artwork). Inasmuch as the Real is actually indifferent to the mode of its presentation, the question is meaningless; but insofar as we are dealing with existential intensities – which is the actual quantitative wager on the term *more-real* – we are obliged to note that the artwork is in an important sense more-real than the simple urinal.
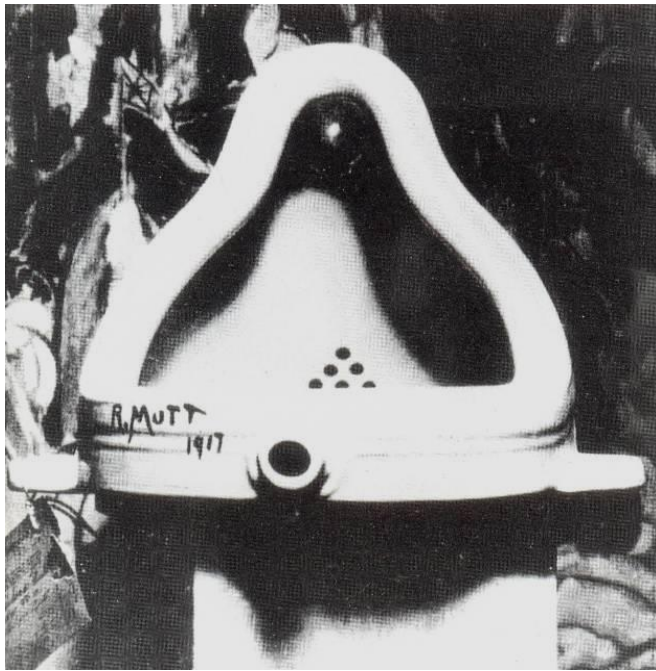
Figure 96: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Regarding the transfiguration of non-art to art, Duchamp explains that the artistic status of the readymade rests on a generative dynamic governed by choice. From this choice, a new concept, context and name for the work are able to establish themselves. "[The artist] CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object."[1795] The resonances with Danto's argument regarding the transfiguration of mere things to art are striking. Although Danto's primary examples are taken from Pop and minimalism, it is arguably the Dada readymade which presents modernism's most intense moment, an event in relation to which such transfiguration itself becomes commonplace. Danto recognizes that since it is possible that an artwork be

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[1795] Marcel Duchamp qtd. Dachy, *Dada*, 71. Richard Wollheim offers an interesting discussion of the manner in which this emphasis on decision redefines the concept of the artwork (Wollheim, "Minimal Art," 396).

entirely perceptually indiscernible from an everyday object,[1796] the distinction of art from non-art must be sought elsewhere than in the qualities of the entity in question.[1797] Without denying the significance of context,[1798] or of the formal sanction provided by the institutions of the artworld,[1799] art presses beyond both the aesthetic question of representation and the contextual question of historical emergence. There is, for Danto, an ontological distinction to be made between art and non-art.[1800]

The present claim is that the ontological differentiation of art from non-art owes to the fact that the former is quantitatively *more-real* than the latter – at very least insofar as it exemplifies the rules it prescribes for itself. "[E]ach example," Danto suggests, "constitutes a sort of ontological argument in favour of its own designation."[1801] Furthermore, as Danto notes, when "'real' is used in contrast with representation...[s]omething is 'real' when it satisfies a representation of itself."[1802] It is the capacity of art to abstract itself from within the undifferentiated profusion of reality which marks it as *Real*. As we have seen, the Real – defined by the fact that some quantity irreversibly *takes-place* – conditions the possibility of reality. Paradoxically, reality's primary reference is not the Real in this sense, but to the relations which exist between entities through which their qualities become visible. An art of the Real – exemplified by the readymade, and more clearly even by minimalism – abstracts itself from such relation through an act of self-aggregation: it limits the significance of its own qualities and content, and stresses as its defining moment the raw facticity of its taking-place *as art*. What follows such an object in terms of meaning and significance, although easily mistaken as essential, is in fact coincidental to that which renders the object Real.

In relation to the Real, *Fountain* confronts us with a radical type of aesthetic abstraction. It is not concerned with the deconstitution or distillation of form, structure, content or medium.[1803] Here abstraction is inseparable from the force of manifestation itself. It continues the work of *poietic* concretism begun by Mallarmé – confirming a certain symmetry between the event by which *poiesis* becomes concrete and eventality itself. Where Duchamp differs in this respect, is that the readymade

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[1796] Danto, *Transfiguration*, 6, 43, 143.
[1797] Ibid., 28.
[1798] Ibid., 39, 47.
[1799] Ibid., 5, 91-5.
[1800] Ibid., 99.
[1801] Ibid., 190.
[1802] Ibid., 81.
[1803] These, in various combinations, are the preoccupations of Cubists, Constructivists, Suprematists, De Stijl (Plasticism), and Abstract Expressionists, spanning the full range of their expressions, from floating colour planes of the early Piet Mondrian, to the colour fields of Barnett Newman, dramatically transected by vertical zips.

reveals that the more concretely *poiesis* is rendered, the more devoid of content it becomes. This is why, in the case of *Fountain*, the transformation of the ordinary thing to art can be accomplished by neither any formal nor by any conceptual property as such. As Duchamp intuits, the selection, reception and exposition of the readymade rest upon an axiom: either this is an artwork or it is not. Yet, when art is at its best, this difference is *infra-thin*, a term which Duchamp employs to describe the minimal gap between a thing and its self-identity.[1804] In deciding this question, "aesthetic judgment is an infra-thin passage and an indifferent difference, something that does not have a name, and even less a concept,"[1805] suggests Thierry de Duve. The minimal distinction which admits *Fountain* to the realm of art compels us to strip to their barest our aesthetic norms, and the categories by which we understand these.

The readymade declines to be named in any simple relation to medium or genre.[1806] Although its primary objective is to provoke aesthetic decision, it is no surprise that the implications of such a decision should transform how we interpret the value of the art-object, and that its use value gives way to aesthetic value.[1807] The readymade "articulate[s] the tense relation between art and commodity,"[1808] and resists being merely a "displaced commodity."[1809] If ultimately it is treated as a new genre, the readymade warrants this treatment not by drawing out comparisons to the standards of sculpture or urinals, but by its very refusal of association. Rejecting relation, *Fountain* sets its own boundaries, affirming the logic of *containment* at its centre. The transfiguration of the object to art presents an internal expansion of the terms which it contains – a *distension* in other words.[1810] At the same time, the readymade presents the *poietic* manifestation of a new medium, and so appeals equally to a *transumptive* logic. "[F]or Duchamp, the art work…is neither purely verbal nor purely visual (or musical), nor is it an intermedia composition," Perloff maintains. Rather, the transumptive logic emerges in what Duchamp regards in the terms of the

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[1804] Marjorie Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 116; also ibid., 109-10.

[1805] Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan with the author (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 160.

[1806] "The readymade…renders the act of naming…undecidable" (de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 159). Joselit recognizes this same nominal deficiency in terms of an "alienation between words and objects [which] occurs in virtually all of Duchamp's readymades" (David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1998), 87).

[1807] Foster, *Return*, 109-10. Foster is more committed than most critics to analysing the manner in which value of any kind retains an intrinsic economic logic.

[1808] Foster, *Return*, 108.

[1809]Joselit, *Infinite Regress*, 72.

[1810] Duchamp himself named this slight *distension* of reality as that which interested him in the pataphysics of Alfred Jarry, and which inspired the *delay* which marks the relation of the readymade to the Real (Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism*, 87).

infra-thin as a type of nominalism which makes art Real[1811] – a minimization of relation and distinction which "distinguishes the same from the same;"[1812] the minutest possible *delay*[1813] between taking-place as an event and taking-place as an instant.[1814]

In this light, *Fountain* suggests the potential universality of the minimalist aesthetic, while also demonstrating that it is perfectly conceivable for a single object to manifest concurrently more than one of the three logics of minimalist *transumption* – containment, distension and distribution – identified in the present work. Yet, despite its smooth, monochromatic, symmetrical appearance, and although it is formed by the processes and materials conventionally reserved for industrial manufacture,[1815] it would be incorrect to label *Fountain* a minimalist sculpture.[1816] Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine that the radical position adopted by the minimalists could have taken hold were it not for Dada's proto-minimalist proclivities. Critics of minimalism uphold this claim. Strickland discerns Duchamp's influence on Rauschenberg's *combines* and Morris' *Column*;[1817] and despite the latter having produced the iconic grey polyhedrons which bring together the monochromatic and geometric traditions of abstract sculpture, Maurice Berger quite rightly argues that the diversity of Morris' work points beyond minimalism to a neo-Dadaist sensibility.[1818]

Wollheim, in the essay "Minimal Art," argues that the stylistic austerity of Reinhardt's monochromatic canvases – "only minimally ahead of the *tabula rasa* [they] supersede[…]"[1819] – and the readymades of Duchamp – works of which there are "preexistent facsimiles or highly undifferentiated objects"[1820] – are associated by their displacement of the evidence of physical work[1821] to the realm of concept.[1822] As we have seen, in Greenberg's terms, minimalism belongs to the Dadaist anti-art tradition, but, devoid of the *presence* to which it aspires, is incapable even of generating much interest in this respect.[1823] Yet, as Hal Foster suggests, "if the first great misreading is that minimalism is reductive, the second is that it is

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[1811] Ibid., 116-7.

[1812] de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 160.

[1813] Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism*, 87-8.

[1814] The instant represents the smallest possible existent temporal entity.

[1815] Danto – in what, I believe, is an exaggerated claim – sees this as the defining feature of minimalist sculpture (Danto, *Transfiguration*, 25, 44, 57).

[1816] Strickland emphasizes this point in similar terms (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 21).

[1817] Ibid., 20-1, 24.

[1818] Berger, *Labyrinths*, 6, 22, 34.

[1819] Wollheim, "Minimal Art," 397.

[1820] Ibid., 394.

[1821] Ibid., 395-6.

[1822] Ibid., 399.

[1823] Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," 183-5.

idealist."[1824] Above I contend that the opposition in minimalism between concept and object is one which is forced by rhetoric rather than anything intrinsic. If we are to understand either Dada or minimalism as expressing a type of conceptualism, it must be on condition that this is the concept at its most material – that which clarifies the Real, which renders the Real *more-real*.

Kenneth Baker reiterates the Dadaist legacy in minimalism in terms of questions of the object, reality, and presence, and, contra Greenberg, he suggests that it is the material presence (above any concept) sought by the minimalists which not only distinguishes them from Dadaists, but also renders their work genuinely novel.[1825] Turning minimalism subtly towards its dialectic and mediatory dimension, Barbara Rose's "A B C Art" interprets this art as incorporating elements of Dada and Constructivism.[1826] This view is echoed by Foster,[1827] by Meyer[1828] – especially in discussing Flavin and Andre[1829] – and Perloff who, explaining theatricality in minimalism, juxtaposes Fried's essentially anti-Dadaist stance to the Constructivist position in which the work "exist[s] only in relation to the environment and the viewer, that they were affected by conditions external to their own materiality."[1830]

We become increasingly aware that Dada operates as a kind of aesthetic stem-cell. It reflects, reflects upon, or influences a range of aesthetic movements. As we have seen, surrealism develops from the Dadaist aesthetic, and on the level of form, Dada consolidates the most revolutionary aspects of cubism and futurism. In many of its best works – particularly its typographical experiments and phonetic poetry – it addresses aesthetic concerns strikingly similar to those reflected in Constructivism and De Stijl.[1831] At its most abstract, its desire for directness reflects the spirit of abstract expressionism and minimalism, as we have already witnessed.

These aside, Dada influences or generates the prototype for many of the most radical experiments of the neo avant-garde artists of the 1950s and 1960s.[1832] Shattuck argues that Dada's asystematicity and

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[1824] Foster, *Return*, 40.
[1825] Baker, *Minimalism*, 20, 24.
[1826] Rose, "ABC," 278.
[1827] Foster, *Return*, 4.
[1828] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 145.
[1829] Ibid., 106, 111-2, 190.
[1830] Perloff, *Moment*, 110.
[1831] Dachy, *Dada Movement*, 9. Gregory Battcock, a leading of anthologist of minimalist and conceptual art, devotes a full study to the close relationship between minimal art and constructivism (Gregory Battcock, *Constructivism and Minimal Art: Some Critical, Theoretical and Aesthetic Correlations*. Diss. New York University, 1979).
[1832] Foster, *Return*, 1.

heterogeneity epitomize a mode of radical romanticism,[1833] and it is not surprising in this light, that of its most pervasive concerns – aleatory operations – should take hold so fervently in the neo-romanticism of postmodern culture.[1834] Chance, to which the Dadaists regularly appeal, becomes a central concern in all expressive media. The Surrealists make a loose but significant appeal to chance as an engine of *poiesis*, and more rigorous aleatory operations are evident in the work of the Black Mountain and Fluxus groups – most iconically in the multifaceted *oeuvre* of John Cage[1835] – as well as in many of the most significant new media, digital and hypertext experiments, those of Alison Knowles and Stuart Moulthrop amongst them. Perloff, meanwhile, suggests that the poetry of leading contemporary avant-gardists – amongst other she names Bök, Goldsmith, McCaffery and Drucker – would be inconceivable without the revolutionary attitude heralded by Dada.[1836] Through the challenge to the distinction of art from life which the readymade issues, and by extending the logic of collage to three dimensions, Dada anticipates the "vernacular realism"[1837] of an art of *assemblage* – "a means of creating works of art almost entirely from pre-existent elements."[1838] Assemblage itself develops in several directions: Robert Rauschenberg's *combines* integrate painterly technique with "blunt undisguised things;"[1839] Alan Kaprow creates entire environments or *installations*, often redefined, by the involvement they call for from the viewer, as *happenings*;[1840] and the wholesale revision of the environment instigated by such daring experiments as Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast[1841]* – a 2.4 kilometre stretch of Little Bay, Sidney, which was wrapped in a giant 92 900m of fabric, held in place for four weeks by rope.[1842]

Like its forebears, the neo-Dadaists Fluxus group[1843] was as heterogeneous as it was active. Anarchic, occasionally nihilistic, but tirelessly experimental, Fluxus embraces numerous genres and disciplines in

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[1833] Roger Shattuck, "The Mode of Juxtaposition," *About French Poetry from Dada to 'Tel Quel': Text and Theory*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1974), 20.

[1834] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, 3; Niall Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), ix, 65, 73.

[1835] The work of numerous other leading avant-gardists of the time involved various aleatory techniques, including Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Pierre Boulez, Jackson Mac Low, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and the minimalists Terry Riley and La Monte Young.

[1836] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 87.

[1837] Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 19

[1838] Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 119.

[1839] Haskel, *Blam!*, 17.

[1840] The most significant artists of this period to stage happenings include Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Red Grooms and Jim Dine.

[1841] Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Wrapped Coast*, 1969.

[1842] Michael Lailach, *Land Art* (Bonn: Taschen, 2007), 32.

[1843] Fluxus included such eminent experimentalists as Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono, George Brecht, Emmett Williams, Nam Jun Paik, as well as the minimalists La Monte Young, Terry Riley and Robert Morris, several of whom were students of John Cage.

the same moment as it transgresses these. It figures its aesthetic dynamic in terms of *events* rather than happenings, opposing its anarchically determined, but carefully prescribed, "unitary gesture[s]"[1844] to more "improvisatory permissiveness of most [h]appenings."[1845] The group stretches what might be legitimately understood in terms of conceptual and performance art, video and sonic art, and the experimental extremes of visual and sound poetry. Of its most significant practitioners are also amongst the best minimalists, including the composers Terry Riley and La Monte Young, visual artist Robert Morris and interart poet, Emmett Williams. Indeed, the concrete poetry of the latter instantiates amongst the most rigorous types of minimalism imaginable.

13. SONIC OBJECTS AS MINIMALIST POETRY

a) Solid sounds

The term *object poem*[1846] is offered by critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the poetic logic adopted by artworks which are constituted by the selection and arrangement of particular prefabricated objects. These works – which aim "to pin down a state of being in the concreteness of things"[1847] – intuit that the concrete exemplification of the futurist moment in works such as Duchamp's readymades and neo-Dadaist assemblages is not only material, but belongs equally to concept and language. Exhibiting a disjunctive parataxis, the *object poem* demands a "new type of reading,"[1848] one which reaches beyond any particular medium, or combination of media, towards the force of *poietic* coherence itself through which the material object – whether its matter is plastic, sonic, conceptual or kinetic – is *transumed* or transfigured to an art object.

That the concrete substance of the object proves, in this light, to be as contingent as that which defines the poem itself again prompts us to move from the visual sphere to that of language and sound in order fully

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[1844] Haskell, *Blam!*, 49.
[1845] Ibid.
[1846] To the object poem we might compare Andre Breton's *Poem-Object* (Andre Breton, "Object-Poem," trans. Michael Benedikt, *PMV1*, 477) which attempts to contain the poem within a unified object. Similar experiments were undertaken by several concrete poets in later years.
[1847] Harold Rosenberg, "Object Poems," *Artworks and Packages* (New York: Dell, 1969), 78-9.
[1848] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 170.

to comprehend the logic of transumption. *Sonic objecthood* is of particular interest in this regard, precisely for the manner in which it manifests with such material force extraneously to many of the habitual markers of materiality. In this light, Perloff is quite correct in claiming that "the sound of poetry [is] – in all senses of the word – significant."[1849] Its consonances and dissonances, its rhythms and repetitions, its tones and intonations, and its rhymes and resonances have always been integral to the poetic enterprise itself. The historical imbrication of poetry, sound and music is as venerable as it is complicated. It is closely tied to the means of its transmission, regarding which it is useful to keep in mind Cole's observation that "[i]n all cultures of which we have knowledge...word literacy has preceded music literacy." Since "there is no parallel with the slow evolution of word writing,"[1850] a significant rift exists between modern musical notation – organized around the specification of exact pitch, duration and metre,[1851] and which has remained largely unchanged since late Medieval times – and the communication of musical information paratextually, through the supplementary graphemes[1852] which link sound and poem.[1853] In this sense, there is a tradition of notating sound poetry which stretches back almost two and a half millennia, and which, we can reasonably assume, reciprocally informs and is informed by a vernacular oral tradition of performance.

Within the western tradition, classical sources provide many useful descriptions of the manner in which poetry has always been tied to performance.[1854] For confirmation, we need look no further than Plato's address to Ion – "you rhapsodes and actors, you and the poets whose work you sing"[1855] – or Aristotle's description of how "rhythm, melody, and verse…[are sometimes] all used together, and in others introduced separately one after another."[1856] The most fundamental aspects of poetry emerge through the union of our intrinsic mimetic capacity, which "delight[s] in works of imitation"[1857] and a musical "sense of harmony and rhythm natural to us."[1858] Many of poetry's most conspicuous elements are the sonic devices through which it mimes the natural world. Against nature, poetry measures itself, determining the proportions of its rhythmic structures; from nature it derives onomatopoeia; and upon nature it superimposes patterns of its own invention – principally metre, rhyme and other sonic consonances.

[1849] Perloff and Dworkin, *Introduction,* 11.
[1850] Hugo Cole, *Sounds and Signs: Aspects of Musical Notation* (London: Oxford UP, 1974), 6.
[1851] Cole refers to this as a "time-pitch" (ibid., 8).
[1852] We might include amongst these various shapes, diacritical marks, neumes and supplementary alphabets, all of which are added to existing literary texts.
[1853] Nancy Perloff, "Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: A Musicologist's Perspective," *SP/PS*, 98.
[1854] M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 4-6. Hereafter *AGM*.
[1855] Plato, "Ion," trans. Paul Woodruff, *Plato Complete Works*, 532d/ 940.
[1856] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. John Warrington (London: J. M. Dent, 1963), 4.
[1857] Ibid., 8.
[1858] Ibid.

Poetry, for the Ancient Greeks, is as much an art of recitation and musical performance as it is a rhythmic construction within language. The early cultic hymns of public ritual[1859] were adapted to every social situation, from political contestations to the drink-fuelled debates of symposia[1860] – elaborated in the parody of iambic verse which gives rise to comedy, and the heroic narrative of epic poetry which sparks the genesis of tragedy, with which it shares a thematic gravity.[1861] Central to the structural integrity of tragedy is the chorus, the group of singers which offer both exposition of, and commentary on, dramatic action.[1862] The chorus recalls the "ritual poetic forms"[1863] of tragedy's theurgical roots, singing or chanting in various metres, completing or complementing the dialogue between characters. The interventions of the chorus exemplify the manner in which Ancient Greek music – "the art of the Muses"[1864] – emphasizes the "unity of poetry, melody, and gesture in archaic and classical culture."[1865] "Besides singing," West identifies the prevalence of "a technique of reciting verse with instrumental accompaniment"[1866] akin to chanting. A distinctly minimalist aesthetic adheres to the performance of this poetry: "clarity and purity of tone, resonance, and coincidence with the accompaniment were the virtues commended."[1867] In this art, simplicity and linearity are valued not as an end in themselves, but because they clarify the work, allowing poetry, music and performance to reflect and intensify one another, "characterizing the text in relation to its poetic genre."[1868]

It is fortunate that although only a few fragments of notated music survive from classical antiquity,[1869] the means of their accurate deciphering is contained in the numerous theoretical treatises produced by the Greeks and Romans in their attempts to work out the systematic elements of the acoustic universe.[1870]

[1859] Giovanni Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*, trans. Rosaria V. Munson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), 16; *AGM*, 14-5; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4. The most significant of these hymns are the *paean* and *dithyramb* – the former dedicated to Apollo, the latter to Dionysus – the same opposition from which arises the "Dionysian madness...from which both the tragic and comic arts emerged" and along which Nietzsche traces his discussion in the *Birth of Tragedy* (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Spears (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 7).

[1860] Comotti, *Music*, 6; *AGM*, 24-6.

[1861] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 9-11; 42-5.

[1862] *AGM*, 40-1. Claude Calame, "The Tragic Choral Group: Dramatic Roles and Social Function," trans. Dan Edelstein. *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 216.

[1863] Ibid., 217-8.

[1864] Comotti, *Music*, 3.

[1865] Ibid.

[1866] *AGM*, 40.

[1867] Ibid., 45. Comotti makes a similar point (Comotti, *Music*, 12).

[1868] Ibid.

[1869] Ibid., 2-3; *AGM*, 7.

[1870] Ibid., 4-6; Cole, *Sounds and Signs*, 7-8; Comotti, *Music*, 2-3, 99.

These fragments – mostly didactic excerpts or choral prompts[1871] – were notated using letters adapted from the alphabet and inscribed above the poetic text.[1872] Rhythm, metre, duration and tempo were relative to the syllabic stresses of the poem.[1873] As music was largely transmitted by repetition and memorization,[1874] and because an improvisatory spirit permeated almost every genre of Greek poetry, "words, rhythm, and music...were each time adjusted to the requirements of the moment."[1875] Two Delphic hymns to Apollo (Track 26)[1876] – the first composed anonymously in 138 B.C., the second by Limenios in 128 B.C. – remain the most complete records of Greek music, exemplifying well the manner in which instrumental accompaniment amplifies the clarity of the chanting chorus, and the alternation between recitation and melody. From Imperial Rome, only a single haunting fragment survives – "four mutilated measures,"[1877] by the celebrated Roman poet, Terence (Track 27).[1878]

The comparative study of chant – across various religious traditions, cultures and historical periods – reveals four essential categories of incantation: recitative chant, in which a single reciting tone is used for an entire text with occasional variations at the ends of phrases; syllabic chant, in which each syllable is assigned a single tone, which tones are then sequenced to constitute a melody; neumatic chant, in which short embellishments of a few notes often occur on single syllables; and melismatic chant, in which numerous tones can be assigned to individual syllables, and thus exhibit complex types of ornamentation. Neumatic and melismatic cantation, generally melodically intricate, are more closely associated with our understanding of music than of poetry. For this reason it is necessary to leave aside the more ornate traditions of Gregorian and Byzantine chant, noting rapidly that it is no exaggeration to claim that Greek poetic recitation presents the single most universal influence on western literature and music, and the many subsequent attempts to coordinate *poiesis* and sound at their most fundamental levels. There is almost certainly some continuity between the chant forms of the medieval church, east and west, and the music of Imperial Rome.[1879] Before the Carolingian imposition of the Gregorian liturgy and its chant across Europe in the thirteenth century, a variety of regional forms thrived, many of which clearly

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[1871] Ibid., 12; *AGM*, 7; Cole, *Sounds and Signs*, 7.

[1872] Comotti, *Music*, 99-100.

[1873] Ibid., 102-3.

[1874] Cole, *Sounds and Signs*, 8.

[1875] Ibid., 7.

[1876] Anonymous, "First Delphic Hymn to Apollo," *Musique de la Grèce Antique*. Harmonia Mundi, 1979.

[1877] Gregorio Paniagua, liner notes, *Musique de la Grèce Antique*, Harmonia Mundi, 1979, 8.

[1878] Terence, "Hecyra," *Musique de la Grèce Antique*.

[1879] Imperial Rome absorbed many of the artistic norms of the Greeks, and although early Christians were resistant to Roman cultural ideals, the Jewish liturgical tradition and the classical influence soon came together, as evidenced in the treatise of the fifth century musical theorist, Boethius (Albert Seay, *Music in the Medieval World* (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1975), 16-17, 19.

manifest their ancient ancestry. The Old Roman chant of the pontifical liturgy of seventh century Rome presents a "meeting point between the music of Greco-Latin antiquity and the Middle Ages"[1880] (Track 28).[1881] Older still is the Mozarabic chant of Latin Hispania (Track 29),[1882] consolidated in the fifth century by the Visigoths,[1883] the Benevantan and Milanese chant of Lombard south Italy, which is "pure, archaic, and elaborate...full of formulaic repetitions,"[1884] and the Gallican chant which is now entirely extinct.

By contrast, much syllabic and recitative chant expresses a palpably poetic sensibility. To the first Delphic hymn we might fruitfully compare Muhammad Hassan's masterful recitation of *Surat Al-Fatihah*, the first part of the *Qur'an* (Track 30)[1885] and Tibetan Buddhist chant from the Thami monastery (Track 31).[1886] In the case of the former, the means are minimal, yet the effect is as considerable as it is poetic. The melody alternates between two principal reciting tones with occasional and subtle micro-tonal embellishments which elicit the remarkable syncopation innate to the language, and generate the slight imbalance which renders the stable tone and rhyme at the end of each phrase so effective. In the latter, the rapid, even-paced reciting-tone of the mantra – over which the more expressively inflected tone of a lead-chanter drifts, and which is intensified at various points by the startling unison of the trisyllabic phrase *om ma hum*[1887] – demonstrates well the potential proximity of speech, chant and verse.

Two of the most perceptive thinkers on the relation of sound and poetry – Jacques Roubaud (a founder of *Oulipo*) and Dick Higgins (a pioneer and tireless, if controversial, advocate of intermedia concretism) – agree that sonic poetry is necessarily separate from music and song. According to Higgins, "[o]ne thing that sound poetry is not is music,"[1888] while Roubauld is unambiguous in asserting that "[a] song is not a poem and a poem is not a song."[1889] Both affirm the normative potential of genre, or the purpose of

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[1880] Marcel Pérès, liner notes, trans. James O. Wootton, *Saint Marcel Mass, Old Roman Chant*, Harmonia Mundi, 1992, 9.

[1881] Ensemble Organum, "Domine quinque taelta," *Saint Marcel Mass, Old Roman Chant*. Harmonia Mundi, 1992.

[1882] Ensemble Organum, "Qui venit ad me non esuriet," *Mozarabic Chant, Cathedral of Toledo*. Harmonia Mundi, 1995.

[1883] Ismael Fernandez de la Cuesta, liner notes, *Mozarabic Chant, Cathedral of Toledo*, Harmonia Mundi, 1995, 9, 12.

[1884] Thomas Forrest Kelly, liner notes, *Chant of the Cathedral of Benevento: Holy Week and Easter*, Harmonia Mundi, 1993, 8.

[1885] Muhammad Hassan, "Surat Al-Fatihah," *Holy Qur'an* .

[1886] Monks of Thami Monastery, "Phyag'chal-ba," *Tibet: Musiques Sacrées*, Ocora, 1987.

[1887] Georges Luneau, liner notes, trans. J. Bennett, *Tibet: Musiques Sacrées*, 8.

[1888] Dick Higgins, "Points Towards a Taxonomy of Sound Poetry," *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of Intermedia* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), 51.

[1889] Jacques Roubaud, "Prelude: Poetry and Orality," trans. Jean-Jacques Poucel, *SP/PS*, 18.

establishing the conditions upon which their respective taxonomies are maximally coherent.[1890] In a significant sense, they are, of course, correct: sound poetry is not music, just as a shrub is not a tree. Yet, we must also consider that sound poetry makes little sense *qua poetry* if we fail to hear the resonance of the aesthetic which Hellenic culture recognized in terms of *music* – the integration of poetry, song and gesture. This *musical* aesthetic of ancient drama informs not only the liturgical interplay of medieval chant[1891] and mystery and morality plays,[1892] but also influences the trobar – the art of the troubadours (and later, the trouveres): those travelling musician-poets whose song, centred on pastoral motifs and romantic love, "indissolubly interlaces a particular language to its music"[1893] (Track 32).[1894]

From the innovations of the troubadours, poetry consolidates its most stable melodic property. "Rhyme as we know it came to the fore...by means of the troubadour verse and the evolution of an emphasis on sound."[1895] Yet, just as song and poetry seem most intimate, they part company: poetry asserts its autonomy from music, and "in relation to other types of language arts."[1896] Although historians of poetry seldom make the observation, this rift most likely has less to do with any generic innovation, and more to do with the rapid rise of polyphony – the increasingly complex interaction of melodies becomes an end in itself and, for the most part, does not deal sympathetically with the semantic or formal properties of the verse. For poetry, the result is the development of lyrical forms such as the sonnet independently of the direct influence of music. Certainly, verse is still set to music – we need only think of the remarkable corpus of John Dowland in this regard – but even in such cases, lyrical poetry retains an independence it did not previously possess. In this light it is perhaps not surprising that between the fourteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century the relation between poetry and sound is governed by the lyrical genres. In fact, poetry becomes virtually synonymous with lyricism, even though, as we have seen, there is considerably greater sonic interest in the history of poetry than the history of the lyric is able to express.[1897]

[1890] Higgins proposes eight classes of sound poetry: " folk varieties,...onomatopoeic or mimetic pieces,...nonsense poetries which trope their own languages" (Higgins, *Points*, 50) and the more contemporary expressions of "works in an invented language,...near-nonsense works,...phatic poems [in which semantic meanings of sonic units are defamiliarized by various techniques of statement (ibid., 45-6)],...unwritten-out poems,...notated ones" (ibid., 50).

[1891] This dramatic element emerges in the responsorial performance of many chants as well as dramatic forms such as the Passion. Some critics, incorrectly I believe, downplay the dramatic element of liturgy. See, for example, Deirdre O'Grady, *The Last Troubadours: Poetic drama in Italian opera 1597-1887* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

[1892] Robert Donington, *The Rise of Opera* (London and Boston: Faber, 1981) 19.

[1893] Ibid.

[1894] Taimbault de Vaqueiras, "Kalenda Maya," *The Dante Troubadours*. Nimbus, 1997.

[1895] Susan Stewart, "Rhyme and Freedom," *SP/PS*, 36.

[1896] Roubaud, *Prelude*, 19.

[1897] Perloff and Dworkin, *Introduction*, 2-7.

b) Intermediation as generic expression

Intermediation, understood as "a conceptual fusion of scenario, visuality...audio elements"[1898] and language,[1899] has, in Higgins' estimation, "always been a possibility since the most ancient times."[1900] In this light, we should not overlook the particularly remarkable revival of the ideals of Greek tragedy in sixteenth century Florence. Two aristocratic groups – the predominantly intellectual *Camerata dei Bardi,* and the performers of the *Accademia degli Alterati*[1901] – debated the classical notion of music, concluding, despite their differences, that only in returning to ancient models could a new mode of expression be found in which "music shares integrally with the words in unfolding the drama"[1902] to be portrayed. Opera – as this radical, transgeneric, intermedia project came to be known[1903] – aimed at nothing less than the resurrection and contemporary perfection of the aesthetic philosophy they believed the Greeks had practised, but which had been lost to the West. Despite its occasional stylistic flourishes, the aesthetic ambition of early opera is essentially minimalist in much the same sense as its Greek precursor: both strive for rhythmic clarity, formal transparency, and an immediacy in the relation between poetic text and its sonic properties. "Without neglecting to be song, music must contrive to be declamation...known in general as the reciting style...expressing as faithfully and as vividly as possible a more or less dramatic verbal style."[1904] A mature example of this style can be heard in the opening recitative of Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in which the rhythms of speech are clearly discernible in the narrative declamation of the shepherds (Track 33).[1905] Although opera rapidly becomes extremely elaborate, abandoning the classical model, it retains a certain concern with aesthetic unity and immediacy, as is clearly evidenced in the Wagnerian use of *Sprechgesang*[1906] and the search for a *Gesamtkunswerk*, "uniting every branch of art," recognizing that "[t]he endeavour of Art is therefore all-embracing."[1907]

[1898] Higgins, *Points*, 27.

[1899] Ibid., 24-5.

[1900] Ibid., 25.

[1901] The genesis of opera is often erroneously credited to the Camerata alone (which was hosted by Giovanni Bardi, and included the theoretician Vincenzo Gallilei, the father of Gallileo and the composer Giulio Caccini). In fact there existed a productive rivalry of sorts between this group and the Accademia degli Alterati, sponsored by Jacopo Corsi, and which included the most significant early librettists, Allesandro and Ottavio Rinuccini and the composer Jacopo Peri (O'Grady, *Last of the Troubadours*, 4-5).

[1902] Donington, *Rise of Opera*, 19.

[1903] See Higgins, *Points*, 25.

[1904] Donington, *Rise of Opera*, 68.

[1905] Claudio Monteverdi, "In question lieto," *Orfeo*. Erato, 1986.

[1906] *Sprechgesang* (and the later *Sprechstimme*) is a style between speech and song, similar to the recitative of earlier opera, although stylistically more punctuated in narrative than the verse of early opera and classical tragedy.

[1907] Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, trans. William Ashton Ellis. http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagartfut.htm. 20 November 2011.

It is at first surprising that the minimalists should discover in opera arguably their most successful vehicle. Yet, recalling its austere Greek origins, the late Renaissance emphasis on directness of expression, and the Wagnerian revival of the notion of absolute art in the *Gesamtkunswerk*, we encounter a genre which, for all its opulence, is predominantly concerned with generating a forceful access to the Real. This capacity is revealed in Philip Glass' first operatic trilogy, all three works of which extensively explore the reflexive relationship between music and language. The examination offered by Glass and his librettists is particularly interesting, as throughout the cycle they employ languages not in common usage: *Einstein on the Beach* incorporates the abstract language of mathematics, closely reflected in the additive and subtractive processes of the compositional process, with the non-linear poetry of Christopher Knowles, whose "neurological impairment and a strikingly unusual way of viewing his own world"[1908] helped him to write texts of "startling originality;"[1909] *Satyagraha*, a political work based on Mahatma Ghandi's early political life and his philosophy of passive resistance, is written in Sanskrit;[1910] and *Akhnaten*, a potent exploration of the parallel logic of religion and politics in the foundational gesture of monotheism,[1911] is largely compiled from various fragments in the language of ancient Egypt.[1912] On the other hand, Alice Goodman's libretto for John Adams' first opera, *Nixon in China* – which deals with the historic 1972 meeting between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong – is written entirely in rhyming couplets.[1913] Consider the following chorus close to the opera's opening (Track 34):[1914]

> The people are the heroes now
> Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow
> When we look up, the fields are white
> With harvest in the morning light
> And mountain ranges one by one
> Rise red beneath the harvest moon.[1915]

Not only does the verse follow a traditional lyrical mould, but, as in the classical tradition, speech is imitated closely in the refrain – "The people are the heroes now/ Behemoth pulls the peasant plough" – in terms of both the limited melodic range and the rhythmic material used by Adams. The heroic pastoral

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[1908] Philip Glass, *Opera on the Beach: Philip Glass on his New World of Music Theatre* (London and Boston: Faber, 1988) 28.
[1909] Ibid.
[1910] Schwartz *Minimalists*, 142.
[1911] Ibid., 147.
[1912] Ibid., 148.
[1913] Alice Goodman, "Towards *Nixon in China,*" booklet. *Nixon in China*, Nonesuch, 1988, 11 (11-3).
[1914] John Adams, "The people are the heroes now," *Nixon in China*, Nonesuch, 1988.
[1915] Alice Goodman, "The people are the heroes now," libretto, *Nixon in China,* music by John Adams, Orch. St. Lukes, cond. Edo de Waart, Nonesuch, 1988, 30.

imagery which begins "When we look up" is conveyed by distended rhythmic figures, of triplets against the quadruple metre, maintained in the steady flow of eighth notes passed between woodwind, brass synthesizer (harpsichord) and in the pizzicato quarter notes in the lower strings. The white "morning light," in which the harvest – a powerful symbol of the prosperity of the people –is revealed, passes without interruption into the rising harvest moon, its red light reflected in the "mountain ranges" it progressively renders visible. The image here is one of the rise of communism in China. Labour, like the rhythmic accompaniment of the orchestra, is ceaseless and unlimited by the time of day. If the harvest begins at daybreak, it continues into moonlit night. We are enjoined to juxtapose the rapid flow of chronological time – the working-day – with the cyclical temporality of day and night, lunar cycles, and the seasons. We might understand the tension between temporal passage and cyclical repetition – and between the speech-like declamation of the opening two lines and the heroic lyricism of those which follow – in terms of a continuum of revolutionary time. This is of particular significance in light of the Maoist emphasis on the necessity of an "ongoing, permanent revolution,"[1916] and its transposition from urban to rural societies, from factory to field. As is an habitual consequence of syncopation, the subtle displacement of the word "plow" at various points, strengthens moments of regularity and cadential arrival. Rhyme, for its part, reinforces the sense of consonance and containment which complements the immediacy so central to minimalism. Similar observations might be noted of the interaction of verse and music, word and voice, in the varied and sophisticated song-writing of Nico Muhly, the most interesting composer to adapt the sonic vocabulary of musical minimalism in recent years, and of the remarkable minimalism of Louis Andriessen, in which the object is made virtually tangible by musical means. In this respect, the opening of the four-part musical theatre work, *De Materie*, is exemplary: the orchestra literally hammers out in sound the bruteness of matter, one hundred and forty four "instrumental fortissimo crashes (toccata!)"[1917] which introduce the theory of the visionary Dutch philosopher, Gorlaeus (1591-1612), arguably the world's first atomic physicist who reinvigorates the classical atomism of ancient Greece[1918] (Track 35).[1919]

At its best, minimalist opera – incorporating under the banner of *music* any art which intensifies the force with which it communicates, while retaining a radical, immediate and essentially materialist understanding of each of these – explores the objectal logic we might identify in terms of a sonic object poem. It presents a strong case for the survival into contemporary aesthetics of the ancient notion of

[1916] Hallward, *Badiou*, 226.
[1917] Elmer Schönberger, liner notes, *De Materie*, Nonesuch, 1996, 8.
[1918] Ibid., 9.
[1919] Louis Andriessen, "Part I," *De Materie*. Nonesuch, 1996.

music in which poetry and sound are inextricable. On this basis, sound poetry is more than "poetry in which the sound is the focus,"[1920]in Higgins' terms. It includes, in McCaffery's estimation, "the many instances of chant structures and incantation, of nonsense syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions still alive among North American, African, Asian and Oceanic peoples...[the] ludic strata...in the nonsense syllabery of nursery rhymes, mnemonic counting aids, whisper games and skipping chants, mouth music and folk-song refrain."[1921]

c) Homonymy, homophony and solidity

McCaffery isolates three phases in the development of sound poetry. The earliest is identified in terms of the "vast, intractable area of archaic and primitive poetries,"[1922] which, I believe, discovers its most significant instantiation in the classical model and its various elaborations. More recent are the avant-gardist efforts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the "several diverse and revolutionary investigations into language's non-semantic, acoustic properties"[1923] which include the Futurists, Dadaists and a few scattered experimentalists – Christian Morgenstern, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear amongst them.[1924] Most recently, in the 1950s and beyond, sound becomes a central pursuit in the search for a concrete poetic aesthetic. This poetry extends beyond the limitations of the score, word or phoneme, beyond the body and the voice, to an understanding of the sonic poetic object as the pure force of mediation itself. This is intimately bound to development of sound recording technologies which express the "possibility of 'overtaking' speech by the machine."[1925]

It is the second of these phases which is approximated by the *futurist moment* – that point of revolutionary utopianism identified earlier. Striking works of experimental sound poetry are produced by both the Russian and Italian Futurists, and key Dadaists from the Zurich and Berlin avant-garde scenes. Attempting to press to a linguistic point of origin for the rich rhymes, rhythms, alliterative and onomatopoeic potential of the Russian language, poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexey Kruchenykh, Ilia Zdanevich (Iliazd) and Vladimir Majakovskij are instrumental in uncovering a poetry which is

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[1920] Higgins, *Taxonomy*.
[1921] Steve McCaffery, *Sound Poetry – A Survey*, http://www.ubu.com/papers/mccaffery.html. 20 November 2011.
[1922] Ibid.
[1923] Ibid.
[1924] Ibid.; Higgins, *Taxonomy*.
[1925] McCaffery, *Sound Poetry*.

"spontaneous [and] instantaneous."[1926] Sound, in their estimation, is the element most capable of achieving the sense of simultaneism and movement common to every brand of futurism.[1927] In poems such as "Ballad of the Dancer" (Track 36),[1928] Kruchenykh presses the rhythmic onomatopoeic element of poetic language in novel directions, beyond the mimicry of concrete sounds, towards something wholly more abstract. Here the accents and stresses of dance are clearly audible: it opens with a vigorously accented alternation of rapid, multi-syllabic upbeats and regular, heavy downbeats (0"-10"), which proceeds through growingly even syllables and a subtle ritardando (0"-15") through a bridge (16"-33") with its several dramatic *fermata* or pauses and melodically perceptible imperfect cadence,[1929] and into a second motif which begins irregularly, but culminates in a waltz or minuet, with its characteristic staccato third beat which leads into an accented first beat (42"–52"), concluding with an onomatopoeic *click of the heel* to end the dance and poem.

More notable in relation to minimalism, is Kruchenykh's phonemic work – brief, repetitive and entirely onomatopoeic[1930] – in which "poetry must revert to a more primitive, more libidinal, outburst of organic orality."[1931] Consider "zok zok zok" (Track 37),[1932] which explores a range of phonemes, points of articulation, patterns, permutations and reversals. If it is clear that this exposition of the fundamental units from which language is constituted is a distinctly minimalist activity, it is also the case that Kruchenykh's belief that his poetry was generating an alogical, transrational *explodity*[1933]of significance might be viewed as easily as the foundational gesture of an aesthetic maximalism. To the contemporary ear, the rhetorical theatricality of Kruchenykh's recitation is more outlandish than it is interesting. Yet, we cannot fail to discern in its feverish urgency, an intense commitment to futurity, one which is intensified in the eclectic and conceptual approach to poetic sound adopted by his poetic colleague, Khlebnikov.

The radical understanding of *poiesis* which Khlebnikov endorses rests on the symbolic union of number and etymology. A mathematician by training, the poet became increasingly concerned with discovering and figuring, a numerical basis, for reality.[1934] The implausibility of Khlebnikov's mathematical efforts

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[1926] Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism*, 131.
[1927] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 146.
[1928] Alexey Kruchenykh, *Ballad of the Dancer*, 1951.
[1929] This imperfect cadence presents an F# major chord – the sub-dominant chord in C# major – into the dominant chord, G# major (it could also be written as C#: IV-V).
[1930] Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism*, 124-5.
[1931] Christian Bök, "When Cyborgs Versify," *SP/P S*, 130 (129-41).
[1932] Alexey Kruchenykh, *zok zok zok*. Sound source undated.
[1933] Nancy Perloff, *Sound Poetry*, 101-2, 104-5.
[1934] Perloff, *21ˢᵗ Century Modernism*, 143-4.

are less significant than their affirmation of a super-sensible radix at the heart of language and poetry. Poetic language is henceforth a *zaum* language, captured in "phonemic and morphemic play...beyond (*za*) mind or reason (*um*). *Zaum* is most persuasively translated by the neologism *beyonsense*. Indeed, neologism is at the heart of this vision of *poiesis*, once again charging a poetic language exhausted by familiarity and which ignores is own strangeness."[1935] The task of the poet is to uncover the etymological radices of words from within the complex lattice of phonic similarities, and to generate a genuinely novel poetic vocabulary, extracted from either history or utility,[1936] to constitute a translogical poetics.[1937] Sound is of particular importance to Khlebnikov, and in a striking anticipation of the concrete and minimalist problematization of external reference, "the material form of the signifier is thus [regarded as] its meaning,"[1938] so confirming a distinctive vision of sonic objecthood.

The most celebrated product of Khlebnikov's "elaborate etymology"[1939] is the sound-poem "Incantation by Laughter" (Track 38),[1940] which builds an elaborate set of permutations from the root, *sme*, of the word *laugh*, or *smekh*. Gary Kern provides the following translation:

> O laugh it out, you laughsters!
> O laugh it up, you laughters!
> So they laugh with laughsters, so they laugherize delaughly.
> O laugh it up belaughably!
> O the laughingstock of the laughed upon – the laugh of the Belaughed laughsters!
> O laugh it out roundlaughingly, the laugh of laughed-at Laughians!
> Laugherino, laugherino,
> Laughify, laughifcate, laugholets, laugholets,
> Laughikins, laughkins.
> O laugh it out, you laughsters!
> O laugh it out, you laughsters![1941]

The poem, Perloff explains, "uses suffixes, for example, to turn the stem into plural nouns…verbs…or adjectives and adverbs. And stems are often joined to suffixes that don't go with them."[1942] In other words, having grasped the fundamental lexemes, graphemes and phonemes of poetic language, it becomes possible to assert the universal poetic applicability of any number of etymologically derived and

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[1935] Ibid., 126.
[1936] Ibid., 124.
[1937] Ibid., 132.
[1938] Ibid., 134.
[1939] Ibid., 125.
[1940] Velimir Khlebnikov, *Incantation by Laughter*, 1908-9.
[1941] Velimir Khlebnikov, "Incantation by Laughter," trans. Gary Kern in Nancy Perloff, *Sound Poetry*, 101.
[1942] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 141.

phonically coded neologisms. In these, "every letter is letter perfect"[1943] precisely because such poetry enables us to move from the *letter as such* to the self-sufficiency of the *word as such*[1944] – to a patterning of reality which begins with the *distension* of the smallest poetic particles, the minimal difference between the sounding of these particles and their identity,[1945] and in expanding, empties the referential reserve of the sign so that we are left with a sonic object without content; the uncanny echo of a hollow laughter.

For Khlebnikov, poetic sound constitutes a metaphysical field in which phoneme and *poiesis* come together in an extension of any ordinary reference or historical account. In this respect, he resembles the theorists of classical Greece who pursued a transcendental principle through which sound, matter and mind were potentially woven together. Arguably, the principal elements of sonic poetry are as intrinsic to existence as they are to music or poetry: *duration* is fundamental to every sonic object, encompassing its beginning and ending, and constituting the necessary condition for rhythm and metre to take place; *frequency* determines the very material composition of objects, which, in sonic objects, includes pitch, intonation and rhyme. That the sonic instantiation of *poiesis* is of considerable ontological significance is affirmed by both Attridge and Stewart. In particular, it is rhythm which instantiates duration as a "real-time event,"[1946] providing poetry with its momentum.[1947] In Attridge's estimation, "[r]hythm is one of the most familiar experiences of our daily lives. We are all constantly making and encountering rhythms."[1948] Similarly, in her defence of the centrality of poetic rhythm and rhyme, Stewart remarks that "our speech rhythms are only a small instance of rhythm as a force in nature, indeed a force in the cosmos."[1949] She proceeds with a radical claim – that "[r]hythm indeed may be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of human life, for the embryonic heart begins to beat at eighteen to twenty-one days after conception; at that point there is no blood to pump, no function for the heart to serve, but if the beat stops, the embryo dies."[1950]

In the sense that rhythm is both observable in the material world, and an intimate part of *poietic* generation, it is simultaneously natural and super-natural. The latter is the case if, as does Aristotle, we

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[1943] Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexey Kruchenykh, "The Letter as Such," *Manifesto*, 237.

[1944] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 127.

[1945] Perloff takes specific note of the similarities between Duchamp's infrathin and Khlebnikov's understanding of sound which points to the "self-identity and hence *difference* of each individual phoneme."(ibid., 126.).

[1946] Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 2.

[1947] Ibid., 1.

[1948] Ibid., 3-4.

[1949] Stewart, "Rhyme and Freedom," 31.

[1950] Ibid., 31-2.

believe that certain art is capable of perfecting form[1951] by penetrating to the heart of the principles of nature, not merely reproducing them. Above I suggest that it is possible to analyze Kruchenykh's "Ballad" by discerning a pulse and contingent points of metrical stability, much as one would for a musical composition. Carper and Attridge identify within the basic components of musical metrics – the alternation of beat and off-beat – the key to understanding poetic rhythm.[1952] In "zok zok zok," although the basic material is phonemic, the momentum of the poetic medium emerges as a result of repetition and variation, which, as Attridge argues, are fundamentally rhythmical: "rhythm is what makes a physical medium…seem to move with deliberateness though *time*, recalling what has happened (by repetition) and projecting itself into the future (by setting up expectations), rather than just letting time pass it by."[1953] If, for Khlebnikov, *poiesis* is located primarily in the singular sonic structure of the phoneme, the "possibilities of chant and charm, *zaum* and word-magic"[1954] rest on a morphology which is intrinsically rhythmic – it requires the repetition and relation of certain elements.

The *knowability* of these qualities of poetic sound is supported by their potential quantification – their being rendered regular by metric divisions and patterns of rhyme. Metre asserts a principle of definite quantification within a poetic situation which is rhythmic: it includes discrete elements taking-place in a temporal relation to one another, even when these elements exhibit little or no awareness of their own quantitative dimension. Metric "units are countable, and the number is significant," notes Attridge, "[transforming] the general tendency toward regularity in rhythm into a strictly-patterned regularity that can be counted and named."[1955] Rhyme, for its part, presents the minimal condition of poetic consonance. Such consonance is potentially both quantitative and qualitative, and transects equally the fields of sound, vision, shape and concept. Even as it affirms the taking-place of a poetic entity, it also allows us, perhaps *asks* us, to anticipate the future shape of the poem or aesthetic work.[1956] In this sense, rhyme and metre confirm that differentiation and organization are intimately connected to the guarantee of futurity in the *poietic* imagination.

Stewart emphasizes with admirable clarity the comparability of rhyme and metre, and the manner in which they supervene upon rhythm:

[1951] Stewart, "Rhyme and Freedom," 40-1.
[1952] Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge, *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), xi. These authors emphasize this rhythmic pattern specifically in relation to poetry in English.
[1953] Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm,* 4.
[1954] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 153.
[1955] Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, 7.
[1956] Ibid., 4; Stewart, "Rhyme and Freedom," 43.

> Rhyme offers a particular kind of pattern, one that is only partly determinative. Unlike rhythm, which may exist as pure haptic or tactile feeling, rhyme comes with acoustical, if not always semantic, content; and unlike meter, which remains ideal, rhyme is always realized or manifested. There is a certain balance between the will and contingency which is effected in rhyming.[1957]

This captures very precisely the spirit of the best sound poetry. Rhyme is no longer solely a question of homophony, but is also a measure of *existential consonance*. These are high stakes indeed, and lie close to those which Giorgio Agamben exposes, in his analysis of Aristotle, in terms of the tension between object, idea[1958] and concept. He suggests that objects are *synonymous* in relation to the concept through which their identity is amplified, which grants them "the same name and the same definition."[1959] "These same phenomena, however, that relate to each other as synonyms become homonyms if considered with respect to the idea."[1960] Homonyms have "the same names but different definitions."[1961]

To clarify Agamben's manner of distinguishing concept from idea it is necessary to recognize that here he follows Aristotle's commentary, in Book Alpha of his *Metaphysics*, on the Platonic association of idea (Form) and number.[1962] Phrased reductively, a concept supports the existential definition of phenomenon in its relation to other phenomena, while an idea refers to the ontological essence of the phenomenon.[1963] The name is invented to approximate the idea – to testify to the potentiality of an immanent transcendence/transcendental immanence, for what else would be the case were the name and idea to coincide? – while the concept allows specific properties to be defined or elaborated in relation to an entity. In trying to grasp the relation between idea, concept and object, a referential impasse emerges: "an insufficient conception of self-reference blocks us from grasping the crux of the problem."[1964]The idea, to which we must apparently ascribe the ground for consistency itself, is knowable only self-reflexively, and so is tied to the object on the basis of assertion alone. Meanwhile, the concept, which supposedly coordinates the properties of the object, has no absolute basis, so that "if we try to grasp a concept as

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[1957] Ibid., 41.

[1958] In relation to Plato, Agamben and his translators prefer *idea* to *Form*.

[1959] *CC*, 75.

[1960] Ibid.

[1961] Ibid. See Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 147.

[1962] To summarize the argument: universal law is derived from the belief that Forms can be explained by number – the participation or non-participation in the One, to recall Plato's *Parmenides* – and, because number is finally material, can thus equally apply to sensible as well as to abstract entities (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 24).

[1963] *CC*, 75.

[1964] Ibid., 73.

such, it is fatally transformed into an object, and the price we pay is no longer being able to distinguish it from the conceived thing."[1965]

We are compelled once again to consider the connection between being and belonging which constitutes a central concern of identity. An *idea* expresses the set or class to which an object belongs, but cannot itself situate the object within this set – the object always expresses itself with respect to an idea. A *concept*, on the other hand, encompasses the properties and relations by which an object expresses itself in terms of identity, proper to a particular set or class. Yet, the concept is incapable of including itself within this dynamic situation without being collapsed into it. This singular property of the concept – singular in the strict sense that it is "presented but not represented"[1966] – Badiou identifies in terms of its being the founding element of a set, which means it cannot be included in the very situation it prescribes and to which it most properly belongs. These "non-predicative expressions"[1967] present a site of struggle between the phenomenal being of an object and its "being-in-language"[1968] – its possession of a name; the manner in which, through a simultaneously self-reflexive and significatory force, the name becomes appended to an object.

The question I wish to pose in this regard follows: what might transpire if we transpose Agamben's claim that the homonym advances a field of coherence between distinctly defined entities, to the realm of aesthetic perception; might it be plausible to suggest that the homophone prompts a recognition of existential consonance between entities similar to that which is claimed for the homonym? As is often the case, the precision of Agamben's ontological thought rests on the degree to which, at singular existential points, *seeming* and *Being* are indiscernible.[1969] By extension, might it be possible tentatively to propose that, under the peculiar poetic condition here broadly termed *concrete*, the *homophone* suggests the manner in which *sonic seeming* effects *sonic Being* – the manner in which the force by which two or more sounds that resemble one another is sufficient to render their relation to one another of equal existential solidity to the sounds themselves. In this light, the challenge which the homonym and homophone – the bases of rhyme – present to thought is one of recognizing the *consonance* between the forces of self-reflexive identification and signification, and the force of generation or *poiesis*. Discovering such consonance – the coincidence of seeming and Being – would bring together the transcendental and

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[1965] Ibid., 73-4.
[1966] *BE*, 99.
[1967] *CC*, 73. Bertrand Russell coins this term to describe the foundational elements of a set.
[1968] Ibid.
[1969] Agamben, *Signature*, 23, 32.

immanent, and it is perhaps this exceptional sort of sonic objecthood towards which Khlebnikov reaches in trying to discover the radix of sound at the heart of a word's sense.

This example is followed by the Italian futurists,[1970] of whom Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh are frankly dismissive: "[t]he Italians caught a whiff of these Russian ideas and began to copy from us like schoolboys, making imitation art."[1971] It is certain, however, that Marinetti must be credited with the first sustained poetic engagement with technology. Central to the narrative of "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," is the quasi-mythological unification of human and machine: racing into the future, Marinetti rolls his car into a muddy ditch, and from this symbolic sacrifice, the heroic couple are ritualistically reborn from the "good factory muck – plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot."[1972] The sonic aspects of Marinetti's poetry principally concern this elevation of technology, as is clearly manifested in the easily recognizable onomatopoeia of "Aprés La Marne." Here is "phonic poetry, whose onomatopoeia gives voice not to the ecstatic impulses of an organic anatomy but to the electric impulses of an operant machine."[1973]

Equally interesting, although aside from the question of technology, is "A Landscape Heard," which recognizes the poem as a concrete medium for the association of sound and duration – an accumulation of moments which are a materialization of the quantitative logic of being, if not of quantity itself:

> *The whistle of a blackbird, envious of the crackling of a fire, ends by extinguishing the gossip of water.*
> *10 seconds of lapping.*
> *1second of crackling.*
> *8 seconds of lapping.*
> *1 second of crackling.*
> *19 seconds of lapping.*
> *1 second of crackling.*
> *25 seconds of lapping.*
> *1 second of crackling.*
> *35 seconds of lapping.*
> *6 seconds of the whistle of a blackbird.*[1974]

[1970] As noted, the influence of Symbolism and Cubism on the Italian Futurists is significant .

[1971] Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexey Kruchenykh, "The Word as Such," *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2001), 238.

[1972] Marinetti, *Founding and Manifesto*, 186.

[1973] Bok, "When Cyborgs Versify," 131.

[1974] Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, "A Landscape Heard," *PMV1*, 210-1.

The Russian concern with origins is more clearly audible in the work of the Dada poets – notably Hugo Ball, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters – who seek a "pristine Adamic language,"[1975] an *ur*-language capable of capturing the most immediate and powerful sense of linguistic expression. Had they been able to approximate this ideal, the Dada sound poets would almost certainly have produced some of the most significant works of minimalism. In performance, however, austere scores, often little more than a short sequences of phonemes, take on a remarkable intensity. Despite their advocacy of "purely abstract form,"[1976] the search for an *ur*-language is finally a deeply referential activity and one rooted in a rather ill-informed concept of *the primitive*.

The theurgical element of this work recalls the connection of sound poetry to various elements of religious chant – sonically evident in works such as Hausmann's passion incantation "K'Perioum" (Track 39),[1977] and at various points of the large-scale *Ur-Sonate* (Sonata in Primitive Sounds) by Kurt Schwitters. Of more immediate interest than the extreme theatricality of this work – its purposeful exaggerations, the ritualistic mannerism of its intonation, the self-conscious and often virtuosic patterning of its articulation – is its significance in reviving through an overtly *textual* form the transgenericism so successfully exploited by opera. To accomplish this, these poets pursue new ways of notating sound poetry, developing *optophonic* or *vocovisual*[1978] scores designed to create a more immediate and accurate integration of letter, shape and sound[1979] – a unified *poietic* script which works towards a sense of interartistic *presence*. Ordinary musical notation, while very accurate, functions by layering visual information: words are generally written below the melodic syntax of time-pitches, installing a certain discontinuity between musical and verbal information which can only be overcome by careful rehearsal (or genuinely specialist knowledge), and so is neither as immediate, nor as accessible, as one might hope. According to Drucker, "the idea that the poetic page can be constructed along the same lines as a musical score is an idea that has been rediscovered periodically and made use of by poets in various ways."[1980] The modern prototype is offered by the Zaum poet, Iliazd, as well as in the simultaneous poetry of Tzara, Huelsenbeck and Janco in which three texts in different languages are recited concurrently, represented on a single score in which the alternation of space and letter reflects the poets' utterance and silence.[1981] More elaborate is the system developed by Kurt Schwitters, whose abiding concern was with "an ever

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[1975] Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity*, 262; Bök, *Cyborgs*, 131.
[1976] *DSCMA*, 116
[1977] Raoul Hausmann, *K'Perioum*, 1918.
[1978] Rothenberg and Joris, *Introduction*, xvii.
[1979] Dachy, *Dada*, 37-8.
[1980] Drucker, "Visual Performance," 138.
[1981] Ibid.; *DS*, 15; Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Towards the End of the Line: Dada and Experimental Poetry Today," *Dada Spectrum*, 228.

greater integration and equivalence of the various facets of his artistic *oeuvre*."[1982] The *Ursonate* very precisely follows the formal structure of music, most audibly in the recurring theme of the opening rondo, and the da capo section of the third movement, a scherzo and trio (Track 40).[1983] If the "concept of orchestrating verbal language through visual means became a mainstay of experimental poetics in the twentieth century,"[1984] this is nowhere more remarkably exemplified than in John Cage's 1968 anthology *Notations*. In a collection emblematic of early postmodernism at its most utopian, Cage gathers an unparalleled sample of contemporary scores. These range from traditional calligraphic manuscripts and experimental scores which are still recognizably musical, to electronic scores, instructions for performance pieces offered by some of the leading members of Fluxus, and works which clearly situate themselves within the lineage of concretism. Incorporating photography, cartography, geometry and various numerical notations, many of these works implicitly problematize the relationship of three-dimensional space, visuality, language and sound.

d) Losing voice and concrete intensification

By consolidating within a single medium, the visual, sonic, verbal and representational parts of a poetic scheme, the score itself becomes a significant genre of avant-gardist *poietic* pursuit.[1985] John Cage, perhaps the most tireless avant-gardist of all, develops a range of techniques, from the early linear patterns of "Lecture on Nothing,"[1986] which clearly reflect the influence of Schwitters,[1987] to the perceptibly entropic logic of "Empty Words," in which strange verbal attractors and temporary points of linguistic stability increasingly disintegrate to dispersed phonemes, and eventually drifting, chaotic letters (Figure 97). These contrasting styles are mirrored in various of Cage's performances: "Lecture on Nothing" follows the spatially determined pace and pauses of its score, while "Empty Words," drenched

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[1982] Rothenberg and Joris, *Introduction*, xvi.

[1983] Kurt Schwitters, "Scherzo and Trio," *Ursonate*, 1922-32.

[1984] Drucker, *Visual Performance*, 139.

[1985] Arguably, in certain poetic situations, it is the score which alone consolidates the verbal, visual, sonic and conceptual aspects of the poem itself, and which allows for their actual performance. Drucker defines this phenomenon in terms of a visual performativity which "derives from the conviction that there is a form of poetry that inheres in visual means that cannot be reproduced in another visual format without destroying the work or radically altering its signification producing qualities" (Drucker, "Visual Performance," 149).

[1986] John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence: Lectures and writings* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), 109-27.

[1987] Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, Introduction, *PPPPPP: Poems, Performance Pieces, Proses, Plays, Poetics*, by Kurt Schwitters, eds. and trans. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), xvi. According to Rothenberg and Joris, Schwitters' influence is perceptible in other icons of postmodern aesthetics, including Claes Oldenburg, Alan Kaprow (ibid.), Robert Wilson (ibid., xvii), Bryon Gysin, William S. Burroughs (ibid., xix-xx) and Jackson Mac Low (ibid., xxxii).

in the pathos of its growing vacuity, is replete with groans, sobs and hisses – the haunting stutters of words almost conscious of their own disintegration, of phonemes which are no longer able to cohere (Track 41).[1988] There are significant resonances between Cage's task of "making language saying nothing at all"[1989] and Beckett's *syntax of weakness*. Despite notable stylistic differences – style, at least, in the sense imparted by Danto's understanding of "what remains of a representation when we subtract its content"[1990] – both writers pursue inarticulacy as a philosophical accomplishment. For Beckett, this results from a progressive conviction that language is a concrete phenomenon, the marker of an existential persistence. Its failure to fix the externality to which it refers exposes a delicate aperture to the *poietic* force which we wontedly name the imagination. Here the brutality of material finitude – of the body in space – comes up against the infinity of thought.

Beckett tirelessly searches for the medium which might convey this impasse, or narrate this lacuna. The condensed intensities of his early prose and poetry give way to an austere drama of repetitive action and absurd dialogue. Finally, at its most minimal, Beckett's work discovers an intermedium. Textual technologies – writing, typescript and the page – expand by their imbrication with action, movement and performance, and subsequently radio, film and television. Every medium which expresses itself in terms of agency, is symmetrically negated by its intermediary participation, so that these are marked instead by what they fail fully to signify – a growing voicelessness; sometimes mute, but at others the primal sounds of linguistic disintegration. At the heart of the intermedium, therefore, is the recognition of a gap – the void – which no conceptualization or practice of nothingness can dissolve or resolve. In Beckett's *oeuvre* the void is often marked by self-conscious, even exaggerated, rhetorical gaps: verbal and structural ellipses, interruptions and disjunctions; repetitions which both cover and draw attention to narrative disunities and sudden shifts of perspective; physical movements, sometimes rapid and predetermined, at other times painfully tentative and slight, which mark invisible fields of containment and impassable empty spaces. As Abbot adjudges the situation: "[t]o speak of nothing as the place of generation (language, the unconscious) or, conversely, as a purity of emptiness (vacancy without end) is to put something there in the place of nothing and to that degree to anchor it."[1991] This is indeed the case from the perspective of the work as phenomenon, and perhaps what the *poem* – that is, a predicate of *poiesis*, or

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[1988] John Cage, *Empty Words*. Wergo, 1991.

[1989] John Cage, "Empty Words," *Empty Words* (London and Boston: Marion Boyars, 1980), 51.

[1990] Ibid., 197.

[1991] H. Porter Abbot, "Narrative," *Palgrave Advances in Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), 9-10.

a product of production – is able to teach us: "there is no resolving its uncertainties without disengaging from the work itself."[1992]

Here it is necessary to reassert that existence is subtracted from, rather than simply coextensive with Being. This recognition arises from the fundamental axiom of Badiou's ontology – that "the one is not, but any structure, even the axiomatic structure of ontology, establishes that there are uniquely ones and multiples,"[1993]or, in other words, that while being *qua* being is pure multiplicity, from this pure multiplicity are nonetheless subtracted beings. In this light, it might seem counterintuitive to assert that the void, or nothing, is the most proper part of being.[1994] Yet this is the case precisely to the extent that the void is inconsistent; for inconsistent multiplicity is the fundamental ontological atmosphere of all possibility. That which is consistent or presented in existence, is subtracted from, without negating, the inconsistent multiplicity of pure being, so that what is void is distributed between Being and existence – "scattered all over, nowhere and everywhere;"[1995] "the name of unpresentation in presentation."[1996] In this light, "nothing is as much that of structure, thus of consistency, as that of the pure multiple, thus of inconsistency."[1997]

The void names the minimal displacement between Being and existence, "the unperceivable gap…between presentation as structure and presentation as structured-presentation."[1998] In this light, the gaps in Beckett's writing suggest more than omission, expressive incapacity, or even the dialectic opposition of finitude and infinitude. Rather, these conceptual cavities – travelling between idea, word, inscription and sound – attempt to translate into *poietic* terms the manner in which the void is the prerequisite in order that existence be subtracted from pure Being, acting as a "suture to being."[1999] In two of Beckett's radio pieces – "Words and Music"[2000] and "Cascando"[2001] – the poetic intuition of the void discovers a significant, if enigmatic, presentation. Exemplifying an intimate negotiation of language, sound, performance and technology,[2002] we encounter here the exploration of an intermedium, the shifting

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[1992] Ibid., 10.
[1993] Badiou, *BE*, 59.
[1994] Ibid., 56.
[1995] Ibid., 55.
[1996] Ibid.
[1997] Ibid.
[1998] Ibid., 54.
[1999] Ibid., 55.
[2000] Samuel Beckett, "Words and Music: A piece for radio," *CDW*, 285-94.
[2001] Samuel Beckett, "Cascando: A radio piece for music and voice," *CDW*, 295-304.
[2002] It is possible to count Beckett's radio works as sonic objects for the manner in which they test, in theory and practice, the coherence and effectiveness of sound.

boundaries of which subtly instantiate the principles of the sonic object poem. In both works, the association of generation with authorial force, is embodied by two characters who attempt to orchestrate the relationship of word to music.[2003] In "Words and Music," making obvious reference to the relation of the faltering voice to the recognition of finitude compelled by the fading potency of old age, this role is taken by Croak. The action of the play takes shape around Croak's adjudication of the association between words and music – Beckett, with admirable bluntness, names the former Words or Joe, the latter Music or Bob.

Beckett aims "to cast words and music on the same footing."[2004] In this sense he draws on a notion of music which resonates with the classical Greek model, the primary informant of the operatic tradition, despite the fact that, in practice, the literary content of operatic libretti is commonly subordinate to their melodic representation.[2005] As Zilliacus asserts, "Words and Music" is "the closest thing there is in the Beckett canon to opera."[2006] The initial attempts of Words to impress Croak with the meaningful verbal elaboration of the latter's feelings and existential situation, are brought into conflict with Music, which responds to Words programmatically, at first matching then exceeding through its immediacy that which in verbal representation is only approximate. For Ackerley and Gontarski, Croak is a mediator.[2007] However, he is also a poet, whose orchestration of an alternation between words and music is a deliberate experiment in interruption, a gesture of self-limitation, a self-imposed lacuna. At the command of Croak – "Together. [*Pause. Thump.*] Together! [*Pause. Violent thump.*] Together, dogs!"[2008] – Words and Music begin an awkward interplay, "[t]wice culminating in near-operatic sequences."[2009] Finally, we are left with a strong sense of the "shaping power of music in poetic composition,"[2010] and that the lyrical endeavours of Words alone fail to live up to the immediacy of Music. The vision here is not of linguistic impotence, per se, but of a lacuna inhabiting the modern lyrical project which, defeated by its own sophistication, misses its radically productive potential.

[2003] "Croak and Opener are formally in command...[y]et whether they drive or are driven is uncertain" (Katherine Worth, "Words for Music Perhaps," *Samuel Beckett and Music*, ed. Mary Bryden (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 10.

[2004] Clas Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1976), 101.

[2005] Ibid.

[2006] Ibid., 103. This is the case, despite Beckett's apparent animosity to opera early in his career (ibid.).

[2007] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 650.

[2008] Beckett, "Words and Music," 289.

[2009] Worth, "Words," 13

[2010] Ibid.,16.

Initially entitled *Calando*, the musical term for fading away,[2011] Beckett's "Cascando," is a near "mirror image"[2012] of "Words and Music." Opener performs a function structurally identical to that of Croak, coordinating the discontinuous narrative of Voice – whose "[l]ow, panting"[2013] speech, fragmented by ellipses and irregular modular repetition, tries to relate the story of an ill-formed character, Woburn – with the unspecified melodies of Music. Attempting to discover a functional medium for the translation of reality, Opener self-consciously manipulates the aperture of *poietic* activity: "I open and close,"[2014] he tells us. Yet the ideal *poietic* medium proves evasive, since the greatest gap of all is not between the Real and the art which represents it, but in the void which art demands of us – the sheer vacuity of subjective knowledge, and the existential vertigo which accompanies the self-awareness which the artist necessarily courts, all of which are recurrent concerns of Beckett's *oeuvre*. Opener's resignation to self-doubt is exemplary in this respect:

> What do I open?
> They say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head…
> I don't protest any more, I don't say any more,
> There is nothing in my head.
> I don't answer any more.
> I open and close.[2015]

Opener attempts to overcome the increasing dissolution of subjective stability by repeating, with a stubborn futility, his attempts to prescribe the ideal interaction between language and music within which the work might take place. At first presented separately, language and music subsequently sound in unison, but even when he "open[s] both"[2016] the synthesis they find is, at best, uncomfortable[2017] – a forced simultaneism, perhaps.

"Cascando" instantiates several of minimalism's most characteristic aesthetic techniques. Through the significant reduction of sound effects,[2018] it presents an order of sonic containment which demands of language and music a radically reciprocal generativity. Simultaneously, it is possible to recognize, in the

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[2011] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 83.

[2012] Ibid., 84.

[2013] Beckett, *Cascando*, 297.

[2014] Ibid., 300.

[2015] Ibid.

[2016] Ibid., 298.

[2017] Worth describes "the two streams of creativity…[as] separate but collaborative" (Worth, "Words," 17), but even this is an optimistic interpretation of their interaction.

[2018] Stanley Richardson and Jane Alison Hale, "Working Wireless: Beckett's Radio Writing," *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (New York and London: Garland, 1999), 291.

dotted lines through which Beckett represents Music's contribution to "Cascando," the reduction of textual and sonic presentation to a series of repeated blank marks. In the very indiscernibility of the referent of this transcription, it is possible to recognize an implicit transumption – the *poietic* displacement of sound into a minimal script of identical, minimal and essentially contentless marks,[2019] charged, in turn, by the prospective reformulation of these marks in terms of sound. Properly *poietic*, yet in no sense containing the *poietic* substance of the work, the atopianism of such transumption reveals, at the heart of its sonic object, an existential intensity which we might provisionally term *voidal proximity* – a closeness between two or more aesthetic points of contact with the void.[2020]

In this light, there are considerable implications of the ideal state towards which these intermedia experiments of Beckett yearn – the *solid sound*, or the instantiation of pure poetico-musical coincidence and presence. Such solid sound would dispel existential doubt, by locating, by means of such voidal proximity, the void itself, upon which not only *poiesis*, but the very consistency of any situation, is forwarded. This is a fantasy central to the modern conception of the poem, as Badiou notes,[2021] and one which is also distinctly minimalist. For when we recognize the void, we recognize the most minimal condition of any situation. It is towards this same voidal sonic centre that Cage urges *poietic* work when, in "Empty Words," he notes that "a text for a song can be a vocalise: just letters. Can be just syllables, just words; just a string of phrases; sentences. Or combinations of [these]."[2022] Finally, he institutes the "equation between letters and silence"[2023] which is as much visually reflected in the work's score as it is in any of its sonic substance. Jackson Mac Low's scores are no less eclectic. The influence of Cage is often clearly in evidence. At other times, Mac Low's work takes on a distinctly expressionistic character: a concern with the intimacy of vision and sound, with the singularity of handwritten manuscripts for *gathas* – sacred verses intended for recitation in various of the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism – which perhaps translate into contemporary practice not only these forms, but also that which Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh had envisaged when they suggested that "[o]ur handwriting, distinctively altered by our mood, conveys that mood…independently of the words."[2024]

[2019] Worth, "Words," 17.

[2020] By *aesthetic points* I mean the objects or parts of objects proper to any aesthetic code, practice or discipline. Here one of these points is the dotted lines representing music, which is textual-linguistic, while the other is the music in its actual sounding, which is implied in the text, but which must be realized in any complete performance of *Cascando*.

[2021] "[P]oetry propagates the idea of an intuition of the nothing in which being would reside when there is not even the site for such intuition" (Badiou, *BE*, 54).

[2022] Cage, "Empty Words," 11.

[2023] Ibid., 51.

[2024] Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, "The Letter as Such," 236.
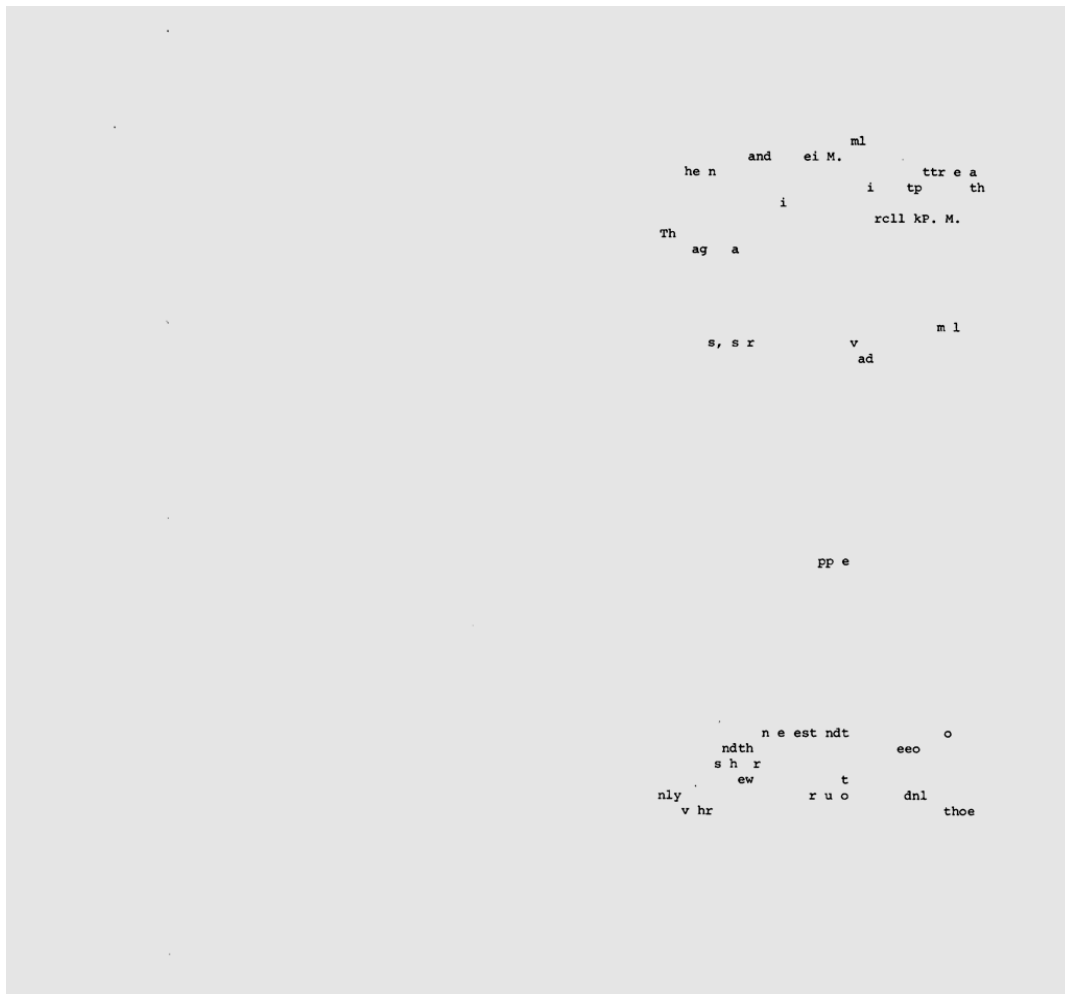
Figure 97: John Cage, *Empty Words*, 1980.

Given that the development of sound poetry is shaped on the one hand by a paradigm established in the music of classical Greece, and on the other by an apparently transhistorical yearning for a primal language, the discovery of a theurgical preponderance in even the contemporary genre. One need only catch a few moments of Ernst Jandl's[2025] "Ode auf N" to recognize the morphological experiments of the futurists, and the ritualistic incantations of the Dadaist are similarly audible in works as diverse as the somewhat contrived, quasi-primitivism of British poet Bob Cobbing, and the juxtaposition of European and South American musical and poetic elements in the work of Brazilian practitioner of "Intersign

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[2025] Of this poet of the Viennese school of concrete poetry Bann remarks that, "[i]n fact Jandl is concerned not simply with sound but with time," (Bann, Introduction, 13) although Bann is careful to highlight both the confluences between concrete and sound poetry, as well as the point at which they depart from one another (ibid.).

poetry,"[2026] Philadelpho Menezes. In Bök's estimation, various contemporary genres of performance poetry – amongst them the ludic improvisations of groups like the Four Horseman, and the "jazzified theatrics that have gone on to characterize 'spokenword' performers…many of whom vocalize 'def rap' from memory at slams"[2027] – derive their momentum from musical metaphor, much as does Schwitters' *Ursonate*.[2028]

e) The technology of solid sounds

To appreciate the contemporary significance of sound poetry – its pivotal role in the development of aesthetic concretism, as well as the radical potential of minimalism it harnesses – we must supplement the traditional conviction that within the voice it is possible to discover something authentic and uncorrupted from our past. Vocality, beyond the most immediate means of bodily performance, must be reconceptualized as a technology – it can be recorded, transmitted, altered and combined without undermining its integrity presenting itself as a flexible means of coming to the heart of *poiesis*. Steven Connor's[2029] conceptual construct, the *vocalic body*, provides a useful means of clarifying the growing technical autonomy of the voice, an autonomy which significantly bolsters its claim to being able to constitute sonic objects:

> Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is…a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice…The leading characteristic of the voice-body is to be a body-in-invention, an impossible, imaginary body in the course of being found and formed…[It is] also the characteristic ways in which the voice seems to precipitate itself as an object, upon which it can then itself give the illusion of acting.[2030]

In Bök's estimation, contemporary technology compounds the situation, central to Connor's argument, in which we are "ever more detached from our voices."[2031] The technologically mediated voice – intensified or duplicated by various technologies of amplification, capture or reproduction – confirms the autonomy of effect exercised by vocalic bodies. Indeed, the majority of recorded music, radio, and film would

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[2026] Philadelpho Menezes, "Intersign Poetry: Visual and Sound Poetics in the Technologizing of Culture," *EVC*, 262.
[2027] Bök, "Cyborgs," 131.
[2028] Ibid., 132.
[2029] Connor provides a useful discussion of implications of the technological mediation of the voice in the work of Samuel Beckett (Connor, *Samuel Beckett*, 127-35).
[2030] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 35-6.
[2031] Bök, "Cyborgs," 129.

sacrifice its potency were it not possible to judge the vocalic body which is instantiated by these technologies as being of equal existential status to the embodied voice. This is not to say that a voice needs to be a recognizably human one, however. Henri Chopin's sound poetry, for example, realizes of its most impactful moments by blending the amplified atmospherics of recording with such unvocalized vocalic bodies as breath – "Espaces et gestes" (Track 42)[2032] is exemplary in this respect.

"Technologies of vocal recording, vocal telephony, and vocal synthesis"[2033] find an increasingly significant place in contemporary sound poetry. We find ourselves in a situation in which the inherited model of anthropocentric recitation, fuelled by its theurgical radix, seems "all but untenable in the face of our technological augmentations, which already threaten to overwhelm the organic coherence of any unified performer."[2034] Our finest contemporary sound poets are those who separate themselves from the stubborn mainstream fetish – "the performative authenticity of a sincere speaker"[2035] – focusing instead on work generated in relation to sound itself.

The virtuosity of Jaap Blonk's "Zamongi Grin" (Track 43),[2036] for example, explores a spectrum of vocal techniques for generating subtle timbrel shifts within the framework of a steady pulse. The remarkable effect of this work derives not from its opposition to the mimetic associations of the voice, as one might expect, but by presenting in a number of rapid shifts precisely how vocality transects the simple anthropocentric compartmentalization historically imposed upon it. Within the framework of a steady pulse – one which strongly recalls the minimalist technique which Reich famously deploys in *Music for 18 Musicians* – Blonk experiments with various vocalic permutations much as one might do in trying to master elementary software for computer-generated music. At times musical references are unmistakeable – rudimentary accented patterns, such as might be practised on a snare-drum, and some combination of pinching the nose, contracting the vocal fold and rhythmically tapping the larynx, reproduces the timbre of a Jew's harp with remarkable accuracy. Other progressions more closely resemble an experiment in phonemic morphology, incorporating sounds which are singularly associable with French, Flemish and Dutch. What is clarified most by Blonk's sound poem, however, is that the sheer immanence of the vocalic body in the best sound poetry relegates its mimetic attachments to a position of secondary

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[2032] Henri Chopin, *Espaces et Gestes*, 1950.

[2033] Ibid.

[2034] Ibid., 130.

[2035] Ibid., 133.

[2036] Jaap Blonk, *Zamongi Grin*, 1998.

significance. Here the voice has independent substance – is a self-sustaining "body-in-invention," to recall Connor, which "seems to precipitate itself as an object."

Insofar as it instantiates the vocalic body as a *poietic* entity which requires no external confirmation for its integrity, or addendum for its justification, this type of sound poem constitutes an important species of concretism. Such concretism, in turn, expresses a significant form of minimalism to the extent that its *autopoietic* status can be regarded as actual, and not merely symbolic. More often than not, however, sound poetry which remains coupled to the voice is drawn back into an interminable hermeneutic interplay, and so quickly is absorbed by the mimetic scale of most criticism – its manner of weighing all art in relation to an anthropomorphic vision of the Real, a paradigm which Badiou identifies as the dominant one in the West, which views the aesthetic in terms of a "subject for enjoyment and the experimentation of the limits of the body."[2037] In this manner, it is all too readily consigned to an exponentially expanding dump of interesting but failed poetic experiments.

Technological attempts to overcome this historical barrier are numerous. Yet, as Bök remarks, despite this remarkable potential, "only a spartan coterie of sound poets have ever committed themselves to the use of such technology."[2038] The investigation of this vastly underexplored *poietic* field remains an urgent task for prospective study. The most obvious and popular set of instruments used at the intersection of sound poetry and technology is the vocoder, a class of instruments which are designed to analyze speech,

deconstitute it into electrical information, and then synthesize it as a vocalic body independent of its source. These are widely used in almost all genres of contemporary music – Fischerspooner's "Emerge" (Track 44)[2039] presents a suitable example of a standard use of the vocoder in popular electronica – and in much progressive sound poetry, Paul Lansky's "Idle Chatter," (Track 45),[2040] for instance.

There exist near limitless processes of synthesizing sonic material, or "transforming sounds by cutting and splicing, retarding, accelerating or reversing,"[2041] using means ranging from the "audio-frequency oscillators, variable speed turntables...[and] generator whines,"[2042] of early electronic experimentation, to the rapidly evolving software currently in use and under development. With the provocative proposition

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[2037] Badiou, "The Subject of Art.".
[2038] Bök, "Cyborgs," 132.
[2039] Fischerspooner, "Emerge," *#1*. Capitol, 2001.
[2040] Paul Lansky, "Idle Chatter," *More Than Idle Chatter*. Bridge, 1994.
[2041] F. C. Judd, *Electronic Music and Musique Concrete* (London: Neville Spearman, 1961),63.
[2042] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 40.

that "[w]e are perhaps the first generation of poets who can reasonably expect in our lifetime to write poems for a machine audience,"[2043] Christian Bök argues that the vanguard of sound poetry manifests in a move away from the ritualistic and verbal, towards a "hitherto undreamt poetics of electronica."[2044] *The Cyborg Opera*, a "linguistic soundscape which responds to the ambient chatter of technology,"[2045] retains the familiar shift in sound poetry from semantic to phonic values, recalling the tradition established by the Russian futurists, but more specifically identifies its models more specifically in Marinetti's work with its celebration of accelerating mechanization,[2046] Chopin,[2047] and the experimental beatboxers, Razael and Dokaka.[2048]

In his discussion of electronica, Simon Emmerson usefully distinguishes between abstract musical substance[2049] – with no point of reference but its own sounds – and mimetic musical substance. Sonic mimesis, in this sense, is either timbrel, in which case it manifests in terms of the "direct imitation of the timbre ('colour') of the natural sound,"[2050] or syntactic, determined by the interrelation of sonic events, in other words.[2051] He notes, moreover, that in practice every musical discourse combines the mimetic and the abstract. This is exploited in productive ways by electronic composers, who have developed technology to capture, generate and fuse different types of sound with relative ease. Consequently, resolving the tension between mimesis and abstraction, or between the primal and the technological, is a less pressing concern for the contemporary sound poet than is moving beyond the traditional understanding that vocality is essential to poetry.

The proliferation of electronic literature, new media interart, and virtual aesthetic communities, presents an important step in this process of *poietic* revolution, the momentum for which derives in no small part from the resources made freely available by organizations such as PennSound,[2052] Ubuweb[2053] and the Electronic Literature Organization.[2054] Intermedia poets – babel, geniwate, Damian Everett and Stuart Moulthrop amongst them – continue to propel their diverse hypermedia experiments forcefully into the

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[2043] Bök, "Cyborgs," 129.
[2044] Ibid., 129.
[2045] Ibid., 129.
[2046] Ibid., 131.
[2047] Ibid., 132, 136.
[2048] Ibid., 135-6.
[2049] Simon Emmerson, "The Relation of Language to Materials," *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, ed. Simon Emmerson (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1986), 19.
[2050] Ibid., 18.
[2051] Ibid.
[2052] *Pennsound*, 20 November 2011 < http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>
[2053] *Ubuweb*, 20 November 2011.< http://ubu.com/>
[2054] *Electronic Literature Organization*, 20 November 2011.< http://www.eliterature.org/>

cultural fray with a subversive, political awareness which parallels if not exceeds such street artists as Banksy and Space Invader. Meanwhile, journals like *poemsthatgo*[2055] – founded and edited by Megan Sapner and Ingrid Ankerson – continue to provide less archival forums for the aesthetic and polemical activities of the hyper-avant-garde. [2056] If, from one perspective, the best sound poetry is deeply minimal – eschewing the ordinary economy of reference and substituting in its place the immediacy of its taking-place as sonic object poem – it nonetheless retains a deep connection to its mimetic radix insofar as its range remains contingent on vocality or to technologies designed to overcome the problem of vocality. It is for this reason that only the most extreme conception of sound poetry, and its most radically minimal instantiations, manifest externally to the voice, or, at least, at the point at which the anthropocentric anchor of the voice begins to dematerialize.[2057] At this point, where the sound object is autonomous, concrete sound poetry begins.

14. CONCRETISM AS AN EXEMPLARY VEHICLE FOR MINIMALISM

a) A concrete continuum

While the venerable lineages of both visual and sonic poetry suggest their transhistorical poetic vocation, it is also true that at certain nodal moments of peak generative intensity,[2058] their capacity for transgressing any particular medium is so concrete and so specific as almost to be singular to a particular work. We might well recognize such works as *concrete theoretical objects*:[2059] aesthetic entities in which the taking-place of *poiesis* is directed in so strong a self-reflexive manner, that ordinary concerns of

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[2055] *Poems That Go*, 20 November 2011.< http://poemsthatgo.com/>
[2056] Archival sites include PennSound, Ubuweb and the Electronic Poetry Centre.
[2057] This is position marked by the technological mediation of the voice, and although it is not limited to any particular historical epoch by necessity, the majority of its objects appear in recent modernity.
[2058] Respectively, Perloff and Watten believe that such moments emerge from the aesthetics of Futurism and Constructivism, whereas philosophers such as Badiou (*event*) and Heidegger (*Ereignis*) conceptualize these in terms of the generic or universal conditions of their emergence.
[2059] Here I bring together two terms significantly, but incompletely, invoked above.

aesthetic production and mimesis are suppressed to the extent that the work appears genuinely self-productive. The manner in which such radically autonomous entities reflexively problematize their own media and constituent material, the present study delineates in terms of aesthetic concretism.

The term *Concrete Art* derives from Theo van Doesburg's 1930 manifesto, which represents a point of confluence between the formalist abstraction of Bauhaus and De Stijl, and the enthusiasm of Futurism and Dadaism. At this juncture, occupied by such artists as Arp, Bill and van Doesburg,[2060] the suggestion arises that the universality of art be sought at the intersection of the conceptual and the concrete – another provocative formulation of the Real.[2061] It is worth emphasizing, with Osborne and Alexander, that two distinct types of abstraction are evident in most aesthetic media. The first involves a reductive extraction of components or essential structures from their imbrication in a complex situation, or the deduction of transcendental principles from the interaction of parts. The second conceives of abstraction as original or fundamental – a situation which precedes, or is entirely indifferent to, any referential, representation or semantic responsibility.[2062]

Concretism opposes the first sense of abstraction entirely, as is evident in Arp's manifesto: "[w]e don't want to copy nature. We don't want to reproduce, we want to produce…Since this art doesn't have the slightest trace of abstraction, we name it: concrete art."[2063] It is opposition to this type of abstraction which also informs Bann's position that abstraction "is in fact almost the antithesis of concrete, [since] the concrete procedure is inductive, while that of the abstract is reductive."[2064] However, considering the second understanding of abstraction as the aesthetic pursuit of an original, non-referential, materialism, we uncover equally plausible claims to the contrary. For Theo van Doesburg such art is concrete precisely to the extent that it is abstract, the former insofar as "[t]he work…must be entirely conceived and formed in the mind before its execution,"[2065] and the latter in that the work must be "entirely constructed from purely plastic elements."[2066] It is to this sense of abstraction the Caws refers in claiming not only that "*concrete* is thus related to abstract art,"[2067] but, further, that "[c]oncretism *abstracts* the object from all attachment to reference, seeing it as obliged only by its own rules."[2068] Thus is it that the ideal concrete

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[2060] See Bann, "Introduction," 8.

[2061] Indeed, in numerous places above such an intersection might legitimately be indentified in terms of the Real.

[2062] See Alexander, *Minimalism*, 182.

[2063] Jean (Hans) Arp, "Concrete Art," *Manifesto*, 524.

[2064] Bann, "Introduction," 25.

[2065] Theo van Doesburg, "Basics of Concrete Painting," *Manifesto*, 520.

[2066] Ibid.

[2067] Mary Ann Caws, "Concretism," *Manifesto*, 518 (518-9).

[2068] Ibid.

work "should have its own form, that it should be somehow original,"[2069] in Higgins' estimation, and to this extent related to a tradition of self-executing high modernism.

In the visual field, concretism anticipates several key minimalist principles, aiming to be "simple and visually controllable…[and] exact…[in an e]ffort for absolute clarity."[2070] Its musical analogue, although to some extent anticipated by the Futurists and Dadaists, is discovered in *Musique Concrète*, principally associated with the work of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry – remarkable collagic works constructed from spliced samples of musical and everyday sound. Equally, Steve Reich's initial decision to label his work *musique répétetive* rather than *minimalism*, sounds a terminological echo of *Musique Concrète*. The early tape works, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* (Track 46),[2071] are not only amongst the truly excellent minimalist process compositions, but might easily be counted particularly fine examples of concrete sound poetry.

Yet, it is in the broad arena of literature that *concretism* discovers its most fertile, and also contested, ground. Considerable disagreement persists regarding the precise extent to which this field might be unified by historical, aesthetic or theoretical considerations. Stephen Bann approaches Concrete poetry as an international, historical *movement*. Bann identifies as its progenitors[2072] the Swiss poet, Eugen Gomringer (Figure 98)[2073] – whose work makes extensive use of repetition and omission to effect a process of forming and shaping at the heart of the poem[2074] – and the Brazilian *Noigrandes* group. The latter's *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* resulted in a particular aesthetic and political cohesion between Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, his brother Augusto de Campos (Figure 99),[2075] Ronaldo Azeredo and Jose Lino Grünewald.[2076] This association centred on their development of a contemporary *ideogrammatic* language[2077] – the *verbivocovisual*, a synaesthetic synergy generated by the "phonemic, ideogrammatic, paragrammatic character of the morphemes and words themselves."[2078] The verbivocovisual expresses itself in terms of a literary *structure-content* – a term deployed to indicate the

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[2069] Higgins, "Symphosymposium," 411.
[2070] Caws, "Concretism," 518.
[2071] Steve Reich, "Come Out," *Early Works*. Nonesuch, 1987.
[2072] The *Noigrandes* poets began writing concrete poetry in 1952, and Gomringer in 1953 (Bann, "Introduction," 7). See ibid., 14.
[2073] Eugen Gomringer, "wind," *CPIA*, 37.
[2074] Ibid., 8-9.
[2075] Augusto de Campos, "terremoto," *ACP*, 49.
[2076] Ibid., 14-5.
[2077] Ibid., 15-6
[2078] Perloff, "Concrete Prose," 145.

manner in which the structure and content of the poem are at once reflexive and reflective of one another, appealing to the immediacy of non-verbal communication[2079] while pressing beyond any simplistic knot of sensation and medium.[2080]
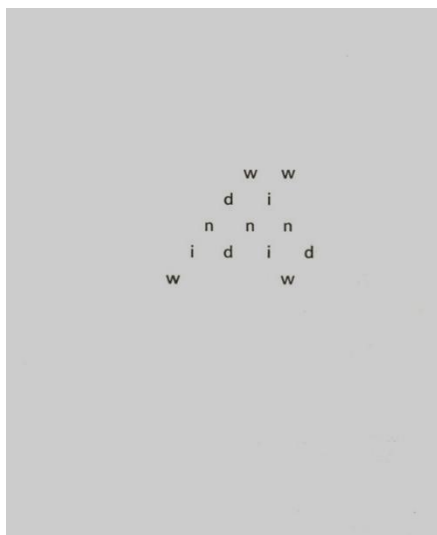
Figure 98: Eugen Gomringer, *wind*, 1954.
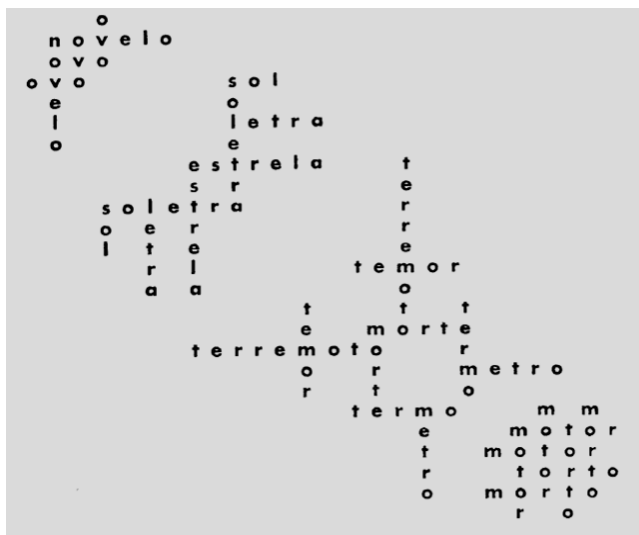
Figure 99: Augusto de Campos, *terremoto*, 1957.
(ovo = egg; novel – bail of thred; novo = new; sol = sun; estrala = star; soletra = (it) spells; so = only; terremoto = earthquake; temor = fear; more = death; metro = metre; thermometro = thermometre.

Towards the end of the 1950s, groups of concrete poets arose in Darmstadt (Claus Bremer and Emmett Williams) and Vienna (Gerhard Rühm and Friedrich Achleitner, who were further affiliated with Ernst Jandl – principally a sound poet), affirming some sort of affiliation, either in terms of their publications or aesthetic positions, with the enterprises of Gomringer or the *Noigrandes* group. Bann identifies a second generation of concrete poets – in Scotland, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan; in England Dom Sylvester Houédard, Josh Furnival and Bann himself; in France, the spatialists,[2081] Ilse and Pierre Garnier; in the United States, Ronald Johnson, Jonathan Williams, Robert Lax and Emmett Williams (who was affiliated with Bremer in Darmstadt).[2082]

[2079] Bann, "Introduction," 15.
[2080] See Perloff, "Concrete Prose," 144-5.
[2081] Spatialism seeks to redefine words in terms of their interaction with space, especially with regard to the definition of concepts of *cosmos* (ibid., 19).
[2082] Ibid., 19-25.

Although Bann recognizes that there exists a "difficulty of assigning a precise limit to the field of Concrete Poetry once the periphery of small groups and well-defined traditions has been left behind,"[2083] this does not dissuade him from offering a typology which is unapologetic in its identification of concretism in terms of a specific movement. Similar claims regarding the inextricability of this poetry from the notion of a movement are forwarded by Augusto de Campos,[2084] Haroldo de Campos,[2085] Claus Clüver[2086] and Harry Polkinhorn[2087] regarding the composition of a distinct movement of Concrete poets. For Bann, such a movement is related to, at times coextensive with, but finally distinct from, sonic and visual poetry. To this view we might contrast that of Dick Higgins, who claims that "Concrete poetry is one of the main forms of visual poetry,"[2088] yet remains curiously hostile to the notion of concretism as the marker of a movement.[2089] Nonetheless Bann and Higgins seem to agree, superficially at least, that at the heart of this poetry is something distinctly literary, although for the former this literariness derives from an interartistic dialectic of sorts, whereas for the latter, it is almost *subtracted* from a rather more vague intermedial *plenum* which stretches across both culture and epoch.

Where Higgins regards *concretism* as a "fiction invented by analogy,"[2090] numerous others are more hospitable to the notion that it constitutes a broad aesthetic modality. Luciano Nanni describes it as "a way of being of the art work…[which] reduce[s] communication…to its physical matter"[2091] in order to revivify the sense in which thought transverses the artwork "in a presemiotic way."[2092] McCaffery similarly considers concretism "a fundamental force"[2093] revealed transgenerically by an "heuristic dynamism," in which, *contra* Higgins, a strong basis for connection is affirmed – one which recalls the claim of the Noigrandes poets that concretism affirms an internal *isomorphism*, structural self-identification, or structure-content.[2094] In this case, the concrete poem is at once "model and precedent,"[2095] as Clüver suggests: paradigmatic – a theoretical object that acts as a cipher for all

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[2083] Ibid., 19.
[2084] Augusto de Campos, "Symphosymposium," 369, 385.
[2085] Haroldo de Campos, "Symphosymposium," 385-6.
[2086] Clüver, "Concrete Poetry," 266-7.
[2087] Polkinhorn, "Symphosymposium," 371-2.
[2088] Higgins, "Symphosymposium," 371.
[2089] Ibid.
[2090] Higgins, "Symphosymposium," 371.
[2091] Nanni, "Symphosymposium," 370.
[2092] Ibid.
[2093] McCaffery, "Symphosymposium," 373.
[2094] Bann, 14-5; Clüver, "Symphosymposium," 386.
[2095] Ibid., 377.

concretism – as well as singular – a theoretical object that declares and reflects only upon itself *qua* poetic entity.[2096] In both cases the work of *concretism* constitutes, as Finlay suggests, a "model of order."[2097]

Concretism, however one understands the term, must certainly involve at least some sort of strong tendency towards convergence. In terms of terminological convergence, we might suggest that although Concrete Art, *Musique Concrete* and Concrete Poetry are historically separate and geographically diverse, they nonetheless share a common aesthetic pursuit in the idea of *concretism*. The second convergence pertains to the intermediary status of the concrete entity itself, which emphasizes at least one of the visual, sonic, verbal or conceptual aspects of the concrete work. Thus, it is no surprise to discover disagreement, almost partisanship, as regards the constitution of the concrete. For Perloff, concretism "is just a synecdoche for the larger category of visual poetry,"[2098] a view endorsed by Caws, who suggests that it "rel[ies] on slippages and ambiguities of language and on the spatial configurations of letters," and Clüver who regards it "a distinct genre of visual poetry."[2099] Pagano, on the other hand, champions a concretism dominated by the sonic fascination with "words, vowels, consonants, [and] the changing play of sounds." Augusto de Campos maintains that concretism is a "radicalization of…the specificity of poetic language itself,"[2100] while Bernstein, in a similar, yet clearly linguistic, register maintains that the "radical materializing dimension [of concretism]…continues unabated in the poetry…often associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E… restor[ing] poetry to itself, to its medium…[while] incorporat[ing] the social and historical registers of words and their combinations."[2101] Others understand the poetics of concretism as conceptually coordinated: according to Castro, concretism is a "poetic conception,"[2102] for Bohn, its "value stems precisely from its conceptual bases," while Vos claims that the concrete poem "intensifies…awareness of the various material and linguistic 'properties' of the verbal sign (visual, aural, tactile, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, kinetic)."[2103]

The present argument holds that the conceptual and quantitative ground for the emergence of a concrete aesthetic are not necessarily in conflict. In this light, the abstraction to which concretism appeals belongs neither entirely to an order of active reduction, nor to one of an essential ground. Instead, might we not characterize the search for pure concretism as one for an exemplary object which is capable of

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[2096] Bann, "Introduction," 16; Caws, "Concretism," 518.
[2097] Finlay, *Model*, 22. See Bann, "Introduction," 9.
[2098] Perloff, "Symphosymposium," 395.
[2099] Clüver, "Concrete Poetr*y*," 278.
[2100] Augusto de Campos, "Symphosymposium," 397.
[2101] Bernstein, "Symphosymposium," 372.
[2102] Melo e Castro, "Symphosymposium," 397.
[2103] Voss, "Symphosymposium," 395-6.

demonstrating, at the heart of its existence, the instant at which concept and matter are indistinguishable? Such would be the wager of a successfully constituted theoretical object, and amongst the many types of theoretical objects, concrete poems offer arguably the most contained, succinct – indeed minimal – field within which theory and praxis are perceptibly continuous. Indeed, Haroldo de Campos suggests that concretism, at least in its geometric phase, "was minimalist poetry *avant la lettre*, even before the term existed."[2104] Polkinhorn recognizes a relationship between the systems of "essentializing order or stabilizing control" exercised by concretism and minimalism, while Clüver twice identifies concretism as the predicate of minimalist endeavour.[2105] Bann, too, observes a number of minimalist concerns in the concrete poem – a concern with increased simplicity and compression;[2106] "repetition to cancel all particular impressions;"[2107] and a self-reflexive containment and preference for closed forms.[2108]

An excellent minimalist concrete poem – and moreover one which exemplifies with some force the manner in which the Noigrandes group's emphasis on the *verbivocovisual* simultaneously involves a strong appeal to the transformatory, conceptual aspect of *poiesis* – is Ronaldo Azeredo's "Velocidade" of 1957 (Figure 100).[2109] The *velocidade* or *velocity* with which the poem is concerned proves at once self-productive and self-reflexive. Visually we deduce acceleration both through the swift descent from top to bottom on the right of the poem, and in the more measured gathering of momentum from top right corner to the bottom left, at which the entirety of its self-prescriptive content – *velocidade* or *speed* – is presented. Conversely, the poem reflects an entropic loss of momentum if we read it upward from the bottom. Transecting the poem is the voiced labiodental fricative *v* – a rapidly vibrating and penetrating sonic ground; a radical sonic quantity, from which is progressively subtracted the concrete sense and substance of this work. From top to bottom, this subtraction from the opening "VVVVVVVVV" marks a progressive acceleration towards the word "VELOCIDADE" which concludes the poem; while sounding the poem from the bottom to the top effect a significant *ritardando*, as the *v* at the left of every line grows in length until the poem is encased by "VVVVVVVVV" – a static existential drone of sorts.

[2104] Haroldo de Campos, "*Symphosymposium*," 386.

[2105] Clüver, "Concrete Poetry," 272, 279.

[2106] Bann, "Introduction," 8.

[2107] Ibid.

[2108] Ibid., 13. While there exist numerous examples of open-form concretism, there are a particularly great number of concrete works dominated by visual and verbal concerns which rely on the Gestalt of the page, in which case they habitually involve a type of deductive minimalism.

[2109] Ronaldo Azeredo, "Velocidade," *ACP*, 12.

Figure 100: Ronaldo Azeredo, *Velocidade*, 1957.

Figure 101:Seiichi Nīkuni, *Ame/Rain*, 1966.

That it is possible to regard the poem as a singular, concrete entity in the very midst of the processes of its synaesthetic taking-place, owes precisely to its self-reflexive conceptual dimension. The symmetry and reversibility of the poem is clarified not only by its physical form, but by the fact that its conceptual material is constitutively open: much as velocity can be steady, positive or negative, which encourages several approaches to the process and temporality at work in the poem, so, too, the conceptual connections between origin, *poiesis*, time, manifestation and change persist dialectically rather than in a settled relationship. As regards minimalism, it is of no small account that this work reflects similar formalist and procedural concerns as the early compositions of Philip Glass, or the serial sculpture of Sol Le Witt. Its aesthetic method combines systematic exposition with incremental repetition – in this case, the increments are symmetrical so that this work is a prime exemplar of the minimalist logic of containment, which is not always the aesthetic position adopted by the work of Glass or Le Witt.

A different, but no less significant, form of minimalist concretism is evident in "Ame/Rain" (Figure 101)[2110] by the Japanese poet Seeichi Nīkuni. Here we encounter a precise example of how a minimal aesthetic gesture potentially effects dramatic *poietic* transformation. The subtle inscription at the bottom centre of the page transforms what would otherwise be a largely undifferentiated and in any case uninteresting, grid of dots into a sheet of falling rain, a powerful demonstration of the capacity of concretism to bind together mimesis and concept through the intermediation of visuality and language.

[2110] Seiichi Nīkuni, "Ame/Rain," *CRAC*, 3.

The abstract becomes eminently concrete very suddenly, through a gesture which endorses the recognition that thought *is* a type of materialism.[2111] Foster notes much the same of minimalism – in particular, of Judd's assertion that the abstract presents, rather than represents, the Real.[2112] The present claim is that concretism and minimalism are confluent not only on the basis of numerous stylistic similarities, but to the extent that both are directed towards the clarification of the Real through a strongly self-reflexive *poietic* programme – one which traverses every possible medium, uniting concept and matter.

Of comparable significance is the work of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, a loosely defined group associated with the eponymous journal edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews between 1978 and 1981. The journal was primarily intended for the dissemination of the theoretical and critical manifestos of various poets all committed, as Ron Silliman notes, to "placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program,"[2113]aiming thus, in Connor's terms "to reaffirm the historical materiality of words in a culture that consistently ignores and effaces this materiality."[2114] "[T]he graphically modified noun *language* was used to name a journal that published *about* language-centred writing…rather than examples *of* it,"[2115] according to Watten. Such autonomy, which is maintained between theory and practice, even amidst a poetry which quite clearly offers itself as a *theoretical practice*, is strongly reminiscent of the critical situation which emerged with regard to the minimalist visual arts. The artifacts of high Minimalism and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry are both accompanied by a mass of theoretical literature: the latter, as Watten reminds us, "stood as a name for a literature that could be represented but only indirectly presented,"[2116] in the sense that "examples of language-centered writing itself were not the primary content of the journal…[and that] articles about language-centered writing were not identical to their referents."[2117]

[2111] See *AF* , 121-2; Badiou, *MP*, 73.

[2112] Foster, *Return*, 127. See ibid., 40, 44, 58, 63; Michaels, *Shape*, 84.

[2113] Ron Silliman, "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), 131.

[2114] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 121.

[2115] Barrett Watten, "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E between Discourse and Text, *Poetics Today* 20.4 (1999), 586.

[2116] Ibid.

[2117] Ibid.

The agenda of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets is relatively unambiguous, as defined in Silliman's epochal essay,[2118] "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World:" exposing the historical nature and structure of referentiality; emphasizing the question of language; recognizing the centrality of language to the ongoing project of class struggle.[2119] For Silliman, it is capitalism which empties language, claiming from the supposedly "*natural laws* …of poetry"[2120] an empty yet effective fetish by which to invent a realism suitable to its ends.[2121] A principal concern of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is therefore the critique of reference[2122] – the relationship between both word and thing, and word and itself – in order to come to terms with the simultaneously political, economic and aesthetic aspects of a meta-linguistic "gestural poetry."[2123] Indeed, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry constitutes a significant field of theoretical objects – the coincidence of theory and praxis[2124] in a concrete yet also meta-discursive writing. It revivifies the Jena romantic project which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy term a transcendental "poetry of poetry."[2125] Indeed, it is not mere coincidence that symcomposition – which aims to "reconfigure[…] the politics of authorship in a form of collective practice"[2126] – is a technique used in both the *Athenaeum* of the Jena school, and *Legend*, composed by leading L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman.

Also of interest is concrete prose, which, despite its impressive range of techniques, has received little critical attention. McHale takes note of numerous important experiments in this regard – in the physical presentation of the book, the colour, texture, size, orientation and binding of leaves; with regard to typography and the significance of space; and conceptually, in the manner of its self-reflexivity and

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[2118] See William Lavender, "Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay,"' *Poetics Today* 17.2 (1996): 188.

[2119] Silliman, "Disappearance," 131.

[2120] Ibid., 122.

[2121] Ibid., 122-5.

[2122] Ibid., 125.

[2123] Ibid., 126.

[2124] Lavender disputes this point (Lavender, "Disappearance," 183-5) and further describes it as a reactionary "way of reading…a certain critical stance…[that] stems directly from the sudden influx to America of continental critical thought" (ibid., 195).

[2125] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 105.

[2126] Watten, "Secret History," 596. With reference to the Jena romantics, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe a "principle of the collective writing of fragments…through what is referred to as 'symphilosophy' or 'sympoetry'…[which aims to] ensure the universality of the vision of the whole…[through a particular] *method*…suitable for access to truth" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 45). Considering the symcomposition of *Legend*, Watten suggests that "individual interests bound up in a group dynamic of radical tendency…may move toward a horizon of either dissolution or redefinition" (Watten, "Secret History," 597). By this argument, moving beyond "the positing subject creates a space of negativity that may be identified as the Utopian space of language...[and] an intersubjective horizon that is the realization of its form of multiauthorship (ibid., 605).

coordination of experience.[2127] Indeed, it is the re-orientation of margins and visual axes, the use of blank space and construction of unusual visual and sonic patterns, which constitute the most significant visual, and by analogy, conceptual hallmarks of such prose.[2128] McHale repeatedly draws attention to Raymond Federman's 1971 experimental novel, *Double or Nothing*, – and secondarily to selected works of such other writers as William Gass, Michel Butor, Christine Brooke-Rose and Steve Katz.[2129] Purposeful experiments in concrete prose can be traced, however, at least to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* – most famously, its black page – which finds a recent equivalent in Dave Eggers' "There Are Some Things He Should Keep to Himself" which consists, in its entirety, of five blank pages.[2130] Noigrandes concretist, Haroldo de Campos, increasingly turns his attention to concrete prose from his *Galáxias* onward,[2131] and Perloff draws attention to the experimental prose of Cage, Retallack, McCaffery and Waldrop as comparable writers, and particularly to the "absurdist cataloguing" of Kenneth Goldsmith's immense *No. 111.2.7.93-10.20.96*,[2132] a groundbreaking, concrete revision of the *poietic* knot within which linguistic belonging is existentially charged.

b) The parameters of concretism

The suggestion regarding concretism is that the concrete entity presents the persistence of a particular existential intensity at which *poietic* material – whether visual, sonic, linguistic or conceptual, separately or together – coheres in a maximally self-referential manner, while presenting a minimal distance between theory and praxis, form and content. Such concrete intensities are not restricted to any historical epoch – at least not by any necessity – as they are determined by aesthetic rather than historical norms. If they manifest with considerable force in the 1950s, it is because at this point the particular intensity of concretism becomes self-conscious. Thus, without dismissing the coherence of the international movement which emerged in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s,[2133] it is no exaggeration to maintain that

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[2127] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 180-90.

[2128] See McHale, 183-4; Perloff, *Concrete Prose*, 141-2; Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity*, 268-9). We might also in passing note the concrete concerns of much of the paracritical work of Ihab Hassan and some of the writers in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

[2129] Pegrum remarks that the techniques employed by some of these writers are fairly close to those of the Dadaists and Futurists (ibid.).

[2130] Dave Eggers, "There Are Some Things He Should Keep to Himself," *How We Are Hungry* (London: Penguin, 2005), 201-5.

[2131] See Perloff, "Concrete Prose," 148-52.

[2132] Kenneth Goldsmith, *No. 111.2.7.93-10.20.96*, 20 November 2011 <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/111/index.html>.

[2133] See Scobie, *Earthquakes*, 145.

a certain concrete logic undergirds the numerous historical explorations of aesthetic intermediation. Furthermore, given the complexities which adhere to any such project of concrete intermediation, it is not surprising that at its most minimal, such concretism is also at its most visible.

The present proposition is not that minimalism and concretism are identical, nor even that they are necessarily complementary. Rather, it holds that at times their conceptual and material passages are parallel – one clarifying the other – and, at others, that their trajectories intersect, effecting a *poietically* productive perturbation and genuine novelty. The concrete emergence of novelty is seldom unrestrained, however. Concretism reflects not only an *aesthetic* self-productivity, but also a *theoretical* self-reflexivity. The concrete object and poem – indeed, the concrete object-poem – constitute meta-theoretical entities, but entities with minimal content that has a maximal effect. In this sense, concretism constitutes an existential orientation rather than a movement, subject to a distributed history, gathering at nodal moments but in essence unrestrained by these. That which is concrete of concretism is not its medium, but the relation which persists between the medium and its message – a relation which is rendered with particular clarity when this message is minimalist or self-reflexive.

c) Synaesthetic concrete patterning

We might call to mind the celebrated position of Marshall McLuhan, who views all media as an "extension of some human faculty – psychic or physical"[2134] and the sense in which the medium *is* the message as emerging from the manner in which it "shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action."[2135] Certainly, this is a deeply concrete vision of intermediation, but it is one which is equally anthropocentric. The quantitative ground for a particular medium is handed over almost entirely to the qualitative distinctions of sensation and physical process. Thus, turning to Bohn's insight, that concrete intermediation "is neither a compromise nor an evasion but a synthesis of principles underlying each medium,"[2136] we come to recognize that at the very moment of affirming that media are extensions of the senses, we are drawn back to the recognition that as such a synthesis, these works are equally drawn from theory and concept.

[2134] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 26.
[2135] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Abacus, 1964), 16.
[2136] Ibid.

In this light, the concrete object is a theoretical object precisely in the sense explored above: a singular intersection of self-reflective theory and practice. With regard to a minimalist concretism, the McLuhanist dogma that *the medium is the message* is nowhere more provocatively interrogated than in the so-called *colour poetry* of Robert Lax. The experimental temper of this work is well-exhibited in the productive tension which emerges from the relation of the various verbal, visual, linguistic and implicitly rhythmic manifestations of its constituent media. We might fruitfully compare the verbal "Red & Blue," which appears in Bann's epochal anthology, to the predominantly visual "Another Red Red Blue Poem." Both present a remarkable series of synthetic permutations which result from the dialectic between the verbal and visual spheres, generating more general questions regarding the relation of concretism and intermediation.

Closely considering Lax's original typescript for "Red & Blue" (Figure 102),[2137] reproduced in miniature below, reveals the manner in which the temporal, rhythmic and intervallic material of this poem sets up a productive counterpoint between its potential visual, conceptual, linguistic and sonic instantiations. Here an oblique approach to quality crosses sheer quantity in a forceful examination of the concrete aesthetic:
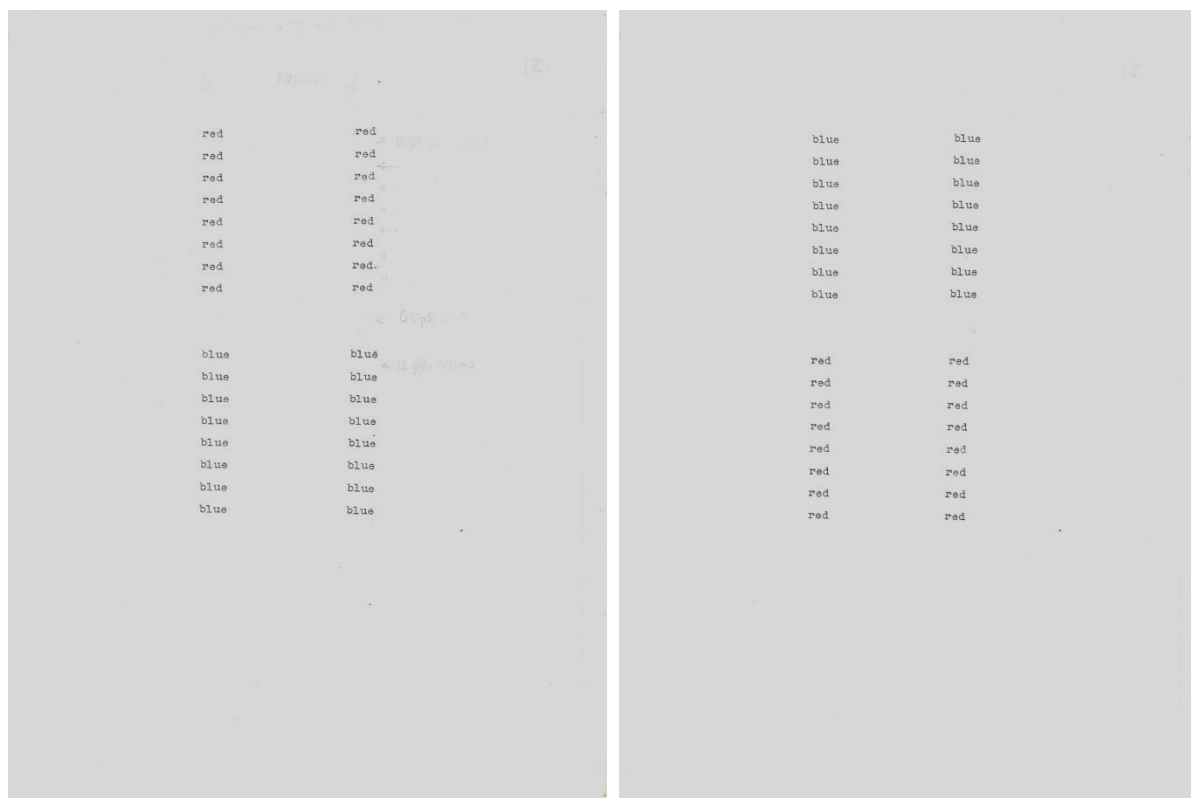
[2137] Robert Lax, *Red & Blue*, 1967. Facsimile of original manuscript.

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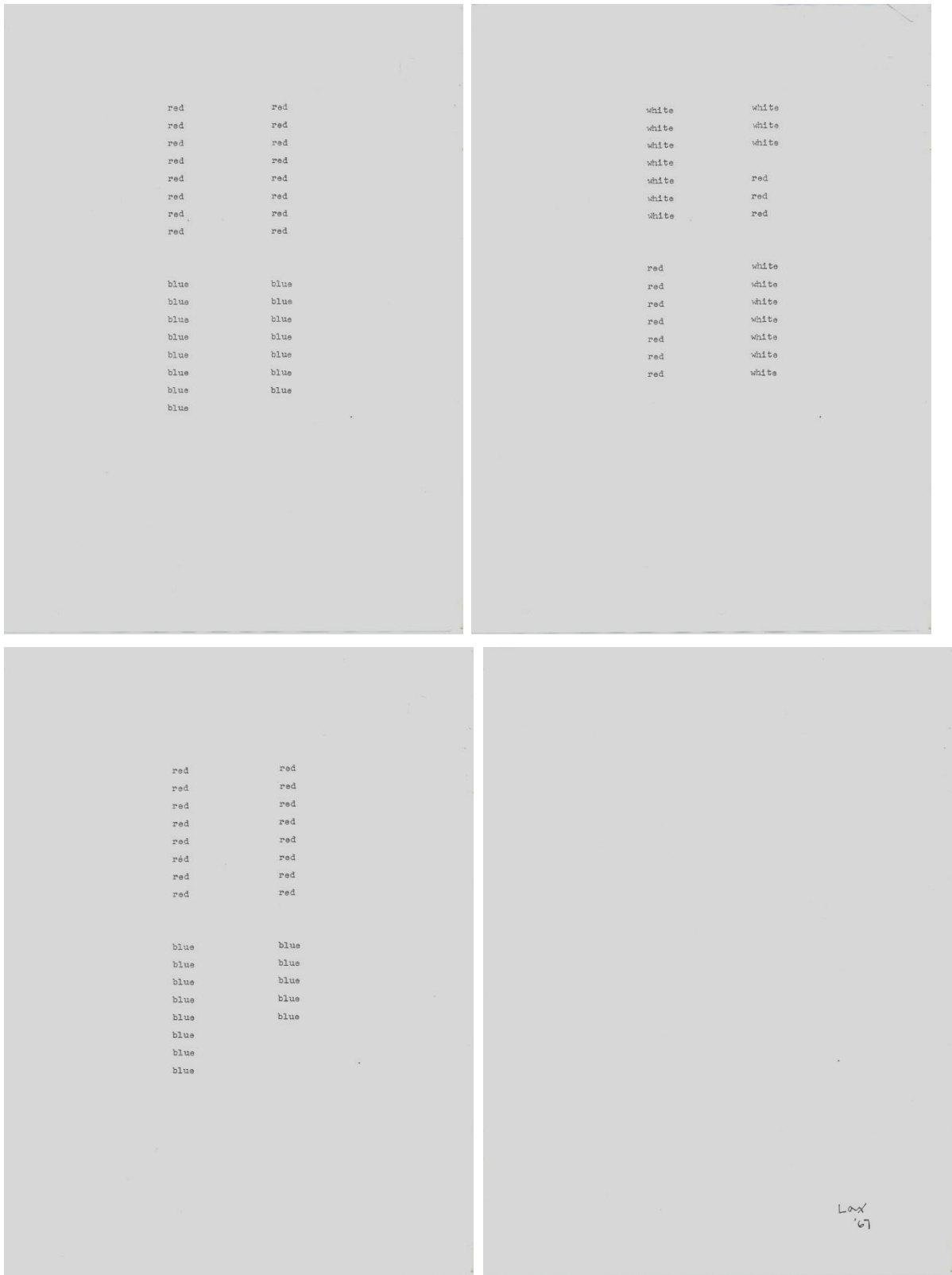
Lax
'67

Figure 102: Robert Lax, *Red & Blue*, 1967.

Only three words are used in this work: red and blue – opposites on the visual spectrum – and white, which marks at once the absence of colour, as well as the potential for its taking-place. These are "arrange[d as] individual syllables in slender columns"[2138] containing eight repetitions each – parallel, vertical bands[2139] which "break[…] up the journey of the reading eye,"[2140] but which constitute a rhythmic regularity of their own, at once visual and sonic insofar as they encourage a certain pace of processing and style of recitation. Lax was deeply concerned with the different types of rhythmic pattern which emerged from his work,[2141] treating sounds and words alike as "means of instantiating the pattern"[2142] – an "abstract entity"[2143] with remarkably concrete properties insofar as these are determined in terms of quantitative rather than qualitative intensities.[2144]

Yet for all these assertions, it is difficult to ignore that the poem possesses no directly chromatic qualities as such. Colour manifests only to the extent that we are able to equate the concept of colour, the verbal markers of colour, and the aesthetic associations these reiterations occasion, with colour in terms of its qualitative actuality. Such equation poses significant existential questions: where does the actuality of colour reside – in the quantitative dimension, or the physical part of the spectrum which a particular colour occupies; in the somatic sequence prompted by the sensory apprehension of its particular wavelength; in the idea of a particular colour; in the epistemological normalization of a particular colour by a concept and its predicates?[2145] It is of no small consequence that the interest provoked by this work rests on indicators of the minimalist aesthetic: sparsity, austerity, severe reduction, repetition, incremental subtraction, sudden inversion, a concern with scale and presence.[2146] Nonetheless, its principal concern with chromatic specificity cannot be reduced to an aesthetic position.

[2138] Stephen Bann, "Concrete Poetry and the Recent Work of Robert Lax," *Voyages* 2.1&2 (1968): 80.

[2139] On the significance of Lax's vertical style see Alexander, *Minimalism*, 185, 206.

[2140] Bann, "Recent Work," 80.

[2141] Alexander, *Minimalism*, 207.

[2142] Ibid.

[2143] Ibid.

[2144] On this point I disagree with Alexander's suggestion that such an abstract entity "cannot be said to exist in any physical or concrete sense" (ibid.), the reasons for which disagreement I discuss above – in short, that concept is material insofar as it relates to the materialism of thought, and also that concretism should be understood in quantitative rather than qualitative terms.

[2145] It is useful here to recall that idea and concept are complimentary with respect to the determination of belonging: where an *idea* expresses the set or class to which an object belongs, without itself situating the object in this belonging, the *concept* situates the object with respect to this set or class by indicating its properties or identity, but, in turn, is incapable of directly expressing the set or class in question. See page 324 of the present work.

[2146] Alexander (ibid., 185) and Bann (Bann, "Recent Work," 81) take note of some of these stylistic tendencies.

Determining chromatic specificity becomes a question precariously balanced between concept, matter and effect, and as such, a rehearsal of ontological fundaments. Lax was content with admitting the primacy of abstraction in his work,[2147] but any such overly rigorous classification threatens to miss the implicit distinction of colour as concrete taking-place, from colour as medium, and colour as exemplary ground upon which the distinction of primary and secondary qualities rests – reviving the problem, so significant to Descartes and Locke, which phenomenology imagined it had dismissed once and for all.[2148] Implicit in Alexander's assessment of Lax's colour poetry is the ascendency of secondary over primary quality, citing as basis Lax's own preference for relation over essence – "it doesn't matter if red is not red…what matter is red is not blue."[2149] Thus, Alexander believes that "it is the contrast between the elements that is important. It is not what they represent, nor what [they] are in themselves that is important. Instead it is the sheer difference between them that allows the poet to use them to suggest a pattern,"[2150] and that it is such patterning that ties Lax's poetry to the minimalist tradition,[2151] reflecting the essence towards which Lax's brand of concretism aspires.

On account of its verbal constitution, "Red and Blue" presents what we might call an unusual type of negative presentation – colour is rendered present by virtue of the persistence of its absence. By contrast, "Another Red Red Blue Poem" (Figure 103)[2152] effects precisely the species of presence with which minimalists are habitually concerned. Here the understanding of poem clearly presses beyond its conventional written forms towards a more inclusive understanding of the force of *poiesis* or production. Our ordinary understanding is that "the word, or at least a part of the word, is the minimal unity of poetry.…[but here] the poem is reduced to its essence as pattern."[2153] Although a strikingly austere visual work, there is little question that familiarity with Lax's concerns, methods and presentation enhances our comprehension of this work *qua* poem. [2154]

[2147] See Alexander, *Minimalism*, 196, 205-6, 219.

[2148] *AF*, 2. "By 'primary qualities,' one understands properties which are supposed to be inseparable from the object...properties of the in-itself," (ibid., 2-3) while secondary qualities pertain to "sensible qualities which are not in the things themselves but in my subjective relation to the latter" (ibid,. 2).

[2149] Robert Lax, "A Red and Blue Notebook," 4-8 October 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University, qtd. In Alexander, *Minimalism*, 213. This considered, we might look to the example of "Red Circle Blue Square" (Robert Lax, *Red Circle Blue Square* (New York: Journeyman, 1971) in which the word "red" is printed in red ink, "blue" in blue ink, adding a concrete if somewhat predictable self-reflexivity to the work.

[2150] Alexander, *Minimalism*, 213.

[2151] Ibid.

[2152] Robert Lax, *Another Red Red Blue Poem* (New York: Journeyman, 1971).

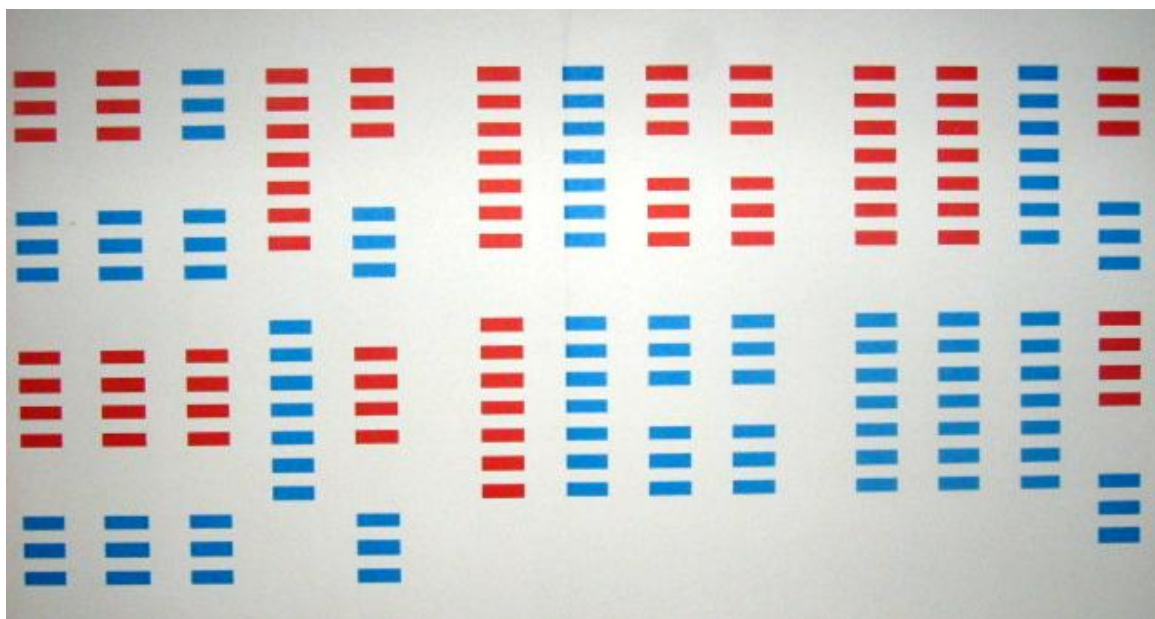[2153] Alexander, *Minimalism*, 218.

[2154] Ibid.

Figure 103: Robert Lax, *Another Red Red Blue Poem* **(1971).**

Although its principal means of presentation are undoubtedly visual, having been told that this is a poem, we are implicitly enjoined to explore the linguistic elements for which these blocks and columns of colour are presumably metonyms, substituting for their verbal equivalents – blue and red; equivalents of their potential articulation as words, as sounds. Thus we might imagine a verbal poem, most likely constructed in vertical columns, from left to right, arranged in three groups – the first of five columns, the second of four, the third of four; and alternating between groups of three, four and seven blocks.[2155] Doubtless these groupings are of symbolic as well as quantitative value. As Bann notes, for Lax there exists "an intimate relationship between simple devices such as inversion and repetition…and the spiritual or philosophical burden of the poem," [2156]and Mark van Doren describes Lax's poetry as a patient transcription of "a sort of bliss he could do nothing about[, l]east of all…express it,"[2157] and there are certainly significances tied to the numbers three, four and seven in Judeo-Christian mythology. Nonetheless, it seems wrong to overdetermine such molecular content, particularly when this work also clearly instantiates a powerful holism. Printed on a single sheet, the work is also a unit, the effect of which derives from the visuo-conceptual vibration of its parts *qua* the whole, in addition to the processes by which these might be viewed or read as additive or subtractive components.

[2155] Ibid.

[2156] Bann, "Recent Work," 81.

[2157] Mark Van Doren, "Mark Van Doren on Robert Lax," *Voyages*, 62 (62-4).

While to *read* the poem in a conventional sense might suggest that we process these units in terms of vertical rows arranged from top to bottom, rows which are then organized into three larger blocks which proceed from left to right, the overall lisibility of the work suggests several other strategies. It is possible, of course, to reverse or invert the direction in which the units, reading from top to bottom, or right to left – indeed, several more complicated patterns might plausibly be woven through this text. The substance of such patterning is distributed between the pattern itself and at least three other types of entity which we might substitute for the chromatic constituents of the poem: verbal entities, in other words *red* and *blue* ; numerical entities, in which case "1 2 3/ 1 2 3/ 1 2 3 4/ 1 2 3" acts as the purely quantitative equivalent of the left column; and sonic entities, if we understand that the poem as a type of score to be read aloud, sounding out the colours in question, and determining their pace and rhythms by their proximity and various gaps. The poem presents the *verbivocovisual* complex of concretism in particularly minimal terms – at once unified and immanent, while simultaneously the paradigm for a patterned, rhythmic extemporation of *poietic* taking-place. Concrete minimalism allows us to glimpse the atopia upon which *poietic* generation, effect, reflection and belonging are coincident: it is the example of its own *poietic* exemplarity.

d) Quantitative categories and the role of the example

Exemplarity presents the primary vehicle through which the interaction of theory and praxis, the basis for any poetics, is comprehended. Since exemplarity is furthermore intimately connected to the Real – the principal concern of both minimalism and concretism – it is necessary to examine which of the dominant models of exemplarity is best able to account for this remarkable intensification of an entity's knowability. Recalling that for the present argument it is quantity that lies at the heart of all Being, our initial contention is that inasmuch as exemplarity intensifies the knowability of an existent or entity, it also coordinates to some degree the quantitative categories by which it is possible to comprehend such entities. Extending the binarism of Aristotelian categorical thought,[2158] which asserts as its proper sphere the most elementary structures which organize those things which exist,[2159] Kant claims that the categories are *coordinate* rather than subordinate to one another.[2160] Coordination establishes non-hierarchical relationships between any of the terms of Kant's categories of judgment – quantity, quality,

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[2158] For example, the Aristotelian opposition of particular and universal is, in Kant's categories, mediated by the singular.
[2159] See Shields, *Aristotle*, 147-8.
[2160] Kant, *Pure Reason*, 137.

relation and modality – allowing for the understanding that these are potentially co-implicit with respect to a particular entity or object.

As Ferrara notes, Kant's strategy in this respect involves two distinct routes – "'subsuming under a concept' and 'bringing to a concept.'"[2161] Both refer to the coordination of quantity – of particularity, singularity and universality[2162] – the first, the *descent from universals to particulars* asserts the universality of the transcendental *a priori* aspect of pure concepts which precede as the essential conditions for the instantiation of concepts by particulars; the second, *the ascent from particulars to universals*, maintains that by virtue of aesthetic judgment, it is possible from the properties of a particularity to determine its position with respect to a pure concept. The Kantian addition of singularity as a separate category of quantity is significant in negotiating these two positions. He accepts the position from Aristotelian logic that the singular is a type of universal in which "the predicate of a singular judgment holds for the subject concept without exception."[2163] Singularity involves universality insofar as it constitutes a self-referential unity: it is universal in every instantiation of its singularity, but this singularity cannot simply be extended or applied as a concept outside of itself. Simultaneously, as Attridge notes, singularity indicates the emergent properties of an entity: while identifying it as a "particular manifestation of general rules…[and] a peculiar nexus…perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations,"[2164] singularity retains a sense of mutability, of being "eminently imitable,"[2165] and an "event…which takes place in reception"[2166]

The apparent incommensurability of these views is easily overstated, for do we not finally discover mirrored in the opposition of emergent and self-reflexive singularity, precisely the essential division of Kantian reflective judgment between teleological and aesthetic judgment? The former understanding of singularity corresponds to the notion that aesthetic experience has a purposiveness, a teleology not always pronounced, but which nonetheless may be presupposed. The latter presents the possibility that singularity is instantiated by self-prescriptive and auto-teleological entities. Both, finally, appear to conform to the Kantian understanding of singularity as the means of mediating between particularity and

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[2161] Alessandro Ferrara, *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), 53. See ibid., 19.

[2162] In categorical terms particularity, singularity and universality are, respectively, plurality, allness (totality) and unity (see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 124-5, 132-8.

[2163] Kant, *Pure Reason*, 124.

[2164] Attridge, *Singularity*, 63.

[2165] Ibid.

[2166] Ibid., 64.

universality, constituting *objects in search of a theory*, or, in more properly Kantian terms, an *ascent from particularity to universality*.[2167] Kant famously identifies at the heart of reflective judgment a free play of the imagination and understanding,[2168] and the sense of this claim is captured well in Ferrara's description of the "mutual feedback"[2169] between the faculty of imagination, which constitutes representations of sensory data, and the faculty of understanding, seeking concepts to regulate these representations. Most significantly, however, this "mutual feedback…instead of being brought to closure by the intellect through the production of a definitive concept, remains unamenable to closure and indefinitely active."[2170]

To understand this peculiar power of singularity, apparently instantiated with particular intensity in the case of aesthetic objects, it is necessary to recognize its singular energy as nothing other than the *force of exemplarity*. Of central concern in this respect is the manner in which certain aesthetic judgments – of taste, for example – adjure "universal assent"[2171] and universal communicability "without mediation by a concept."[2172] It is such immediacy to which exemplarity attends. For Kant, the example is a species of *hypotyposis* – an exhibition "making [a concept] sensible"[2173] or open to sensory intuition. "[I]f concepts are empirical, the intuitions are called *examples*. If they are pure concepts of the understanding, the intuitions are called *schemata*."[2174] Such *hypotyposis* is evidently vital in connecting objects of intuition to concepts, connections which furnish judgment with direction and force. Ferrara cautions as to the over-conflation of schemata with symbolic *hypotyposis*, or exemplarity, since "to treat...[examples] as *the same* as schemata means to betray their *exemplary* nature, to turn the process of 'merely' reflective judgment into one that eventually leads to the closure of determinant judgment."[2175] If "schemata contain

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[2167] Kant extends to singularity its "own special place in the category of judgments" (Georges Dicker, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Analytic Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 54), which affirms that "*allness* (totality)," the category that correlates with the singular judgment, "is nothing but plurality considered as unity" (Kant, *Pure Reason*, 136). To the extent that unity – universality from the transcendental perspective – runs up against the finite in any attempted relation to infinity, so singularity is limited by its actual implementation as a relation to the universal. As Robert Hanna reminds us, "all concepts are by their nature universal or general, it is only in their use that they have a singular interpretation" (Robert Hanna, *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 208), in which case the gap between singular and universal, unity and infinity (allness), is one that emerges through practical deployment of concepts in relation to objects. What makes these quantities associable in terms of logical extension, which ties to the infinite dimension of thought, does not carry seamlessly into applied (epistemological) knowledge, which requires unity or wholeness.

[2168] Kant, *Judgment*, 61-2.

[2169] Ferrara, *Force*, 27.

[2170] Ibid.

[2171] Kant, *Judgment*, 104.

[2172] Ibid., 162.

[2173] Ibid., 226.

[2174] Ibid., 225-6.

[2175] Ferrara, *Force*, 51. Such determinant judgment refers to strict equivalence determined by rules, principles or laws.

direct…exhibitions of the concept,"[2176] it is because they subsume entities under a concept, to recall the argument above. In contrast, "exemplary validity is best understood in terms of *creating* an example rather than *applying* an example,"[2177] and in this creative action, exemplarity brings its activity *to a concept*. In this light, exemplarity might be described as a special type of validation in which the example, as singularity, demands universal assent, effecting a reconciliation between particularity and universality. It is this reconciliation which validates the commonplace that a given example is potentially applicable in every situation within which it is exemplary.

Unresolved in the Kantian discourse is that the example remains curiously dislocated from the *force* of exemplarity itself, in which case it might be argued that it is really just a particularly convincing illustration of a concept, and not itself an instantiating force. From the perspective of aesthetic judgment, exemplary force involves mapping the relation between example as entity and those things which the example enhances. Typically we encounter "the capacity possessed by the exemplary work of art to induce an aesthetic experience beyond the bounds of its context or origin without relying on external principles or laws."[2178] Kant identifies this force with "analogy…in which judgment performs a double function: it applies the concept to the object of sensible intuition; and then it applies the mere rule by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the former object is only the symbol."[2179] Exemplarity, for Kant, is not a force in itself. Rather, it is a type of "indirect exhibition,"[2180] a shared reference that takes place as an increased resonance with "the rules by which we reflect on the two [proximate entities in the operation of an example] and on how they operate."[2181] Such analogical force is inextricably linked to the Kantian notion of *sensus communis* and *universal assent*. In this light, the example can be seen as the embodiment of a process which formulates contingent, non-conceptual rules for the perception and connection of specific entities. Implicit here is that the force of the example is transitory and impermanent. We might even argue that herein lies the appeal of exemplarity: it produces temporary intensifications of experience which remain open and do not require final commitment or universalization under a transcendental principle, yet which are universal enough to be agreed upon.

Accepting the Kantian position, it is possible to adopt relatively uncritically Ferrara's traditionalist claim, that "[e]xamples orient us in our appraisal of the meaning of action not as schemata, but as well-formed

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[2176] Kant, *Judgment*, 227.

[2177] Ferrara, *Force*, 53

[2178] Ibid., 39; 61.

[2179] Kant, *Judgment*, 227.

[2180] Ibid.

[2181] Ibid.

works of art do: namely, as outstanding instances of congruence capable of educating our discernment by way of exposing us to selective instances of the feeling of the furtherance of our life."[2182] If Ferrara's proposition retains many merits of the Kantian project, it also fails to recognize that its conception of norms is itself disappointingly normative. It has been suggested that exemplarity is threatened when the example is handed over entirely to the universal. This is not to miss or subvert the Kantian argument that an example presents, through the force of an analogy, the mediation of particular and universal. What requires emphasis, however, is that it is nothing other than the Kantian association of exemplarity with singularity – that the example is singular rather than particular or universal – which makes it subject to the type of coordination which, to my mind, always seems to reinvest the universal, at however subtle a level. Similarly, the Kantian identification of exemplary validity with analogy remains equally problematic, for it is far from certain that analogical connectivity is sufficiently strong to justify the faith Kant and many other thinkers place in it. Analogy doubtless provokes novel connections between entities and plays a significant role in facilitating communication. This does not, however, make it equal to the task of universal validation which genuine exemplarity claims for itself. Displacing exemplary force from the relation between the exemplifying entity and the exemplified entity to the level of a vague analogical force of shared principles or rules, is problematic precisely in its vagueness.

e) The example is para-ontological rather than para-epistemological

Turning to the work of Agamben, we discover a voice of startling insight on the force of the example.[2183] For Agamben, the example and exception constitute a symmetrical system[2184] in which inclusion or exclusion – conditions of belonging which ordinarily reflect a position coordinate to, but not co-extensive with, Being – autopoietically constitute their own ontology.[2185] Although structurally defined by negation – "whereas the exception is included through its exclusion, the example is excluded through exhibition of

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[2182] Ferrara, *Force*, 61.
[2183] Paraphrases of Agamben's argument refer to two different versions of *What is a Paradigm?* The earlier is a lecture offered at the EGS (Agamben, *What is a Paradigm?*); the more recent is the first part of *The Signature of All Things*.
[2184] *HS*, 21; Agamben, *Signature*, 24.
[2185] Although ontologically distinct, Agamben suggests that the "exception and example are correlative concepts that are ultimately indistinguishable and that come into play every time the very sense of the belonging and commonality of individuals is to be defined" (*HS*, 22).

its inclusion"[2186] – the consequences of this system are unambiguously existentially positive: in short, the recognition of the situation in which *seeming is Being*.[2187]

Following Aristotle, Agamben recognizes not only that which is exemplified as being rendered increasingly intelligible by the example, but also that the example itself, by its means of relation, is that which is *more knowable*. An idiosyncratic amplification emerges: because it is more knowable, by containing in itself an "excess of knowability,"[2188] the example renders something else, to which it is related, more knowable. The Kantian analogical explanation suggests that such amplified knowability occurs as the result of a shared appeal to rules of belonging or genus. Agamben, however, maintains that "[t]he important thing is not that the two are homogeneous but precisely that one is more knowable"[2189] – a question of existential "intensities."[2190] It remains to be explained, however, why and how the example – or paradigm[2191] – is more knowable. Discovering in Plato an alternative explanation to the categorical view which passes from Aristotle to Kant, Agamben suggests that the effective force of the example arises from the fact that "the [exemplary…] relationship takes place between the single phenomenon and its intelligibility. The [example…] is a singularity considered in the medium of its knowability. What makes something intelligible is the paradigmatic exhibition of its own knowability."[2192] Paraphrased elsewhere, the example is a "singular case that is isolated from its context, only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes."[2193]

The radical move here is the refusal of any *a priori* universal or substrate.[2194] Hence Agamben is able to claim that the example cannot be comprehended by the manner in which singularity mediates between particular and universal, but "entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity, and, without ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori."[2195] The exemplary validity of the example does not precede it as knowability, nor does it function, as Kant might have it, through some form of judgment, since the latter, no matter how subtle, appears always to reaffirm the primacy of the concept. In the medium of its knowability, that the example

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[2186] Agamben, *Signature*, 24.
[2187] Ibid., 32; See Giorgio Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin," *Potentialities*, 174 (160-74).
[2188] Agamben, *Paradigm*. See Agamben, *Signature*, 19.
[2189] Agamben, *Paradigm*.
[2190] Agamben, *Signature*, 20.
[2191] It should be noted that, for Agamben, *paradigmicity* and *exemplarity* approximate one another (ibid., 11, 18).
[2192] Agamben, *Paradigm*.
[2193] Agamben, *Signature*, 18.
[2194] Ibid., 21-2, 26, 30-1.
[2195] Ibid., 22. See ibid., 19.

is self-reflexive affirms not its identity in its normal medium of presentation, but in the medium of its knowability. This is a distinctly minimalist proposition, not entirely inhospitable to the scholastic notion of *haecceity*, and would certainly support the intuition that minimalist works as various as La Monte Young's drone work, Dan Flavin's light art and Robert Lax's poetry do indeed establish their own aesthetic paradigms. Accepting thus that the exemplary entity self-reflexively defines its own singularity in its very taking-place,[2196] it becomes clear that Attridge's contention – that aesthetic "[s]ingularity is not the same as autonomy, particularity, identity, contingency, or specificity; nor is it to be equated with 'uniqueness'"[2197] – holds not only from the perspective of judgment, but also from that of the entity or artwork itself.

The resultant situation presents a shift from an epistemological view of knowability to an essentially ontological one[2198] – a *para-ontology*, which "refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being," constituting "an ontology which is still to be thought"[2199] as that which partakes of Being but is *beside* Being. Significant resonances emerge between this para-ontological position and that which Meillassoux indicates in the *arche-fossil* as an absolute, external to the correlation of subject and object. Indeed, if in minimalism we discover an exemplary para-ontology, it is because the concrete quantities which constitute its aesthetic press so persistently against the boundaries of the absolute. Finally, to understand what it means to *exemplify the Real* – a significant clause of the present thesis – it is necessary to distinguish between the *para-epistemic* and *para-ontological* models of what it means for the example to be *more knowable*. According to Gasché, "[w]here cognition fails, aesthetic judgment ensures a minimal mastery and minimal identification of something for which no determined concepts...are at hand."[2200] In this sense, "aesthetic judgment holds its place as equal to cognition. This para-epistemic dimension of judgments of taste is the hallmark of Kant's aesthetics."[2201] Most models of exemplarity constitute such a para-epistemology: a sphere of knowability, initially minimal, which radiates between a concept and its intuition by which an example establishes an increase in knowability *qua* knowability – an increase which, through self-reflection, reopens that which otherwise would be epistemically closed, and situates itself thus as the knowability *beside* regular intelligibility.

[2196] In passing, it is worth noting that there are significant similarities between that which Agamben intends by *taking-place* and Attridge's understanding of singularity in terms of an *event* (Attridge, *Singularity*, 64).

[2197] Ibid.

[2198] Agamben, *Signature*, 32.

[2199] Agamben, "Paradigm."

[2200] Gasché, *Idea of Form*, 4.

[2201] Ibid.

However, the actual existential intensity of the example cannot be contained either in epistemic or para-epistemic terms, for these leave unattended the properly ontological dimension of exemplarity. In the first instance, we might understand para-ontology as the recognition that if the example is to exceed its reduction to epistemological terms, it must be shown to be a force independent of judgment. For Agamben, the exception and the example – the principal terms of his understanding para-ontology – involve both an essential suspension of judgment and a constitutive undecidability: the example is "whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself…and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging."[2202] Moving decisively beyond any conception of *sensus communis*, Agamben suggests that the example "come[s] into play every time the very sense of the belonging and commonality of...[particularities] is to be defined."[2203] The example "escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular,"[2204] constituting instead a "force field traversed by polar tensions"[2205] – a threshold upon which belonging can be indicated by self-reflexivity alone. Exemplarity emerges as a special function of affirmatory auto-exclusion: "[neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that shows its singularity. Hence the pregnancy of the Greek term…*para-deigma*, that which is shown alongside."[2206] In short, "intelligibility does not precede the phenomenon; it stands, so to speak 'beside' it (para)."[2207] Agamben is able to assert in this light that "the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it delimits it…The example is thus excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it."[2208] The para-ontological force evades both particular and universal through its being simultaneously an auto-reflexive, autopoietic and auto-demonstrative operation – the "innermost exteriority"[2209] of every exemplary entity which assures its singularity. Para-ontology is like a *halo*[2210] which "dwells beside the thing…so close that it *almost* merges with it,"[2211] a "supplement added to perfection – something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges."[2212]

[2202] *CC*, 87.

[2203] *HS*, 22.

[2204] *CC*, 9.

[2205] Agamben, *Signature*, 20.

[2206] *CC*, 10. See Agamben, *Signature*, 27.

[2207] Ibid.

[2208] *HS*, 22.

[2209] *CC*., 15. To recall, this is the term which Agamben employs to characterize the ontological process of taking-place.

[2210] Agamben develops this concept from Benjamin's of *aura* (see Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 44-6).

[2211] *CC*, 101.

[2212] Ibid., 55.

Agamben's is an account as evocative as it is compelling, yet his theory of exemplarity does not articulate satisfactorily such exemplary force itself. Certainly Agamben demonstrates an ample awareness that this force exists, and that it necessarily emerges from the example itself: he considers it variously a force of transformative modelling,[2213] a force of belonging,[2214] a force of intelligibility,[2215] a force of analogy,[2216] and a force of differing intensities.[2217] This, however, is to define a force by what it does, and by that which it draws together, which is not the same thing as confronting the force itself. Nor do we approach a satisfactory argument be endorsing the para-ontological maxim that seeming *is* Being,[2218] which certainly rests on the existence of a productive exemplary force, but does not directly describe it. The present suggestion is that to understand this force of exemplarity we must progress from the view that the example is simply self-reflexive, to one in which this self-reflexivity is directed towards *autopoiesis* and self-demonstration, thus establishing the example as universal insofar as its validity extends to every situation in which it is able to establish its own belonging. It is somewhat disappointing in this light that Agamben ultimately affirms that the example "is strictly linked to the problem of analogy."[2219] In my view, the connective force of analogy remains intrinsically open-ended, allowing numerous and rapid superficial connections to be established. In one sense these are its strengths, making analogy the most pervasive mode of connectivity.[2220] However, from the perspective of an autopoietic para-ontology, a reliance on analogical examples seems always to invite external intervention – some form of reflective judgment – in which case para-ontology cannot guard itself against the possibility that it may revert to a para-epistemological understanding of the example. In such a situation, the essential force of the example remains unexpressed, and Agamben's reliance on analogy culminates in the familiar tactic of substituting exhibition for explanation,[2221] according to which it is unnecessary to describe the force of the example; we can simply demonstrate it.[2222]

[2213] Agamben, *Signature*, 11, 21-3.
[2214] Ibid., 17, 24, 29-30.
[2215] Ibid., 19, 22-4, 26-8, 30.
[2216] Ibid., 18, 20.
[2217] Ibid., 20.
[2218] Ibid., 32.
[2219] Agamben, "Paradigm."
[2220] Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* , trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), 66.
[2221] On this point, Agamben's brief but potent exposition of the term *thus* as mark of demonstration *qua* Being is instructive (*CC*, 103).
[2222] Of the example's self-productive aspect, discussing Goethe's proposition of *Urphänomen*, Agamben writes that "insofar as they are paradigms, 'they are the theory'" (Agamben, *Signature*, 30).

f) Exemplary force

Although it is now clearer that the force of the example resides in its para-ontological operation, and that this force is knowable by the self-reflexive operation of exclusion by virtue of self-inclusion – hence the example stands apart *qua* its exemplarity – the actual force of the example remains to be defined *qua* force. A possible solution is discovered in shifting our attention from analogy to homology, from seeming or likeness to structural correspondence. Through homological coherence, the compossibility of *autopoiesis*, auto-reflexivity and auto-demonstration is conceivably actualized. Homology is perhaps best understood in terms of isomorphism, the discovery of a shared deep structure or structural forces between like or unlike elements.[2223] Indeed, we do well to recall that the Noigrandes poets insisted upon isomorphism as the defining mark of exemplary concretism.

While homology is acknowledged as offering a "valuable model[…of] formal correspondence founded in reality,"[2224] restricting their operation to an essentially logical character, the present discussion recognizes in isomorphism a properly ontological force. Exemplarity is thus intimately related to the structures and structuration of the Real. The example functions not *because* it is isomorphic and homologous to the Real, but rather because it reveals that isomorphism is the very force of *ontological structuration* itself – a force which *is* Real. Exemplarity names an operation of independent structuring of the Real which, ordinarily unintelligible except in retrospect, is knowable through a specific structured, exemplary entity. As opposed to an analogical model of exemplarity, homology or isomorphism cannot simply be deduced. It must realize itself, or rather, expose itself as Real. The Real emerges not by any dramatic gesture of affirmation, however, as it is in fact the persistence of the Real which makes epistemic affirmation possible in the first place. Although the Real is not a metaphysical ground as such, it functions homologously since it remains indifferent to questions of origin and telos, even as it shapes the manner in which they are phrased. The Real, finally, is a synonym for ontological naturalism.

If, as Badiou suggests, pure Being *qua* multiplicity is unstructured, it becomes necessary to suppose that some process of contingent structuring takes place beside such multiplicity in order for entities to exist concurrently in Being through a process of structuration. Such is the function of metastructure, which structures ontological structure itself, insofar as the latter fails with regard to pure multiplicity. Indeed, we might say that it is an isomorphic force of structuration which connects all Real entities or existents, and

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[2223] For a discussion of some of the general principle of isomorphism, see Bartelanffy, *General Systems Theory*, 36-7.
[2224] Ibid., 85.

which renders them knowable in terms of the very medium of their knowability, which is to say, structure. If isomorphism marks the structuring force of the Real, as well as the force of the example, it follows that these are in a significant sense co-extensive. Such force finally speaks of the physicality of metaphysics, in which light I find it difficult to imagine that any force exists which is not, finally, identical to the very fundamental force which allows existence to cohere and to persist.[2225] The example is an aperture to the Real which operates as, and through, an isomorphic para-ontology. The proximity of this assertion to the thesis of the present work – that minimalism exemplifies the facticity of the Real – is clearly discernible. Indeed, it draws together the productive knot of exemplarity, persistence, minimalism and the Real in a provocative manner. It remains only to identify this knot at its most concrete.

g) Concretism as minimalist para-ontology

> I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice, and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves, so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.[2226]

This text constitutes the basic material of Alvin Lucier's legendary work of autopoietic concretism, *I Am Sitting in a Room* (Track 47).[2227] Self-productive, self-reflexive and self-regulatory, the work draws together linguistic, sonic, and spatial media in a sound-sculpture which, subjected to a specific process – technologically mediated, reproduced, exposed to certain physical laws and properties of spatial limitation – is eventually entirely transformed, as are the media from which it takes its form. There may be no finer example of the two principal quantitative operators of minimalism, drone or sustenance and repetition.[2228] LaBelle summarizes the aesthetic process: "sound sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard."[2229] As in any transformation, the moment we pay sufficient attention to the transformative process to slow it down or arrest its strictly processual operation, we are

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[2225] Across history, numerous attempts have been made to delimit this force in terms of the elements, gravity, electricity, atomic and subatomic forces, and even in terms of antimatter.

[2226] Alvin Lucier, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, libretto, 20 November 2011, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/lucier.html>.

[2227] Alvin Lucier, *I Am Sitting in a Room*. Lovely Music, 1990.

[2228] See Strickland, *Minimalism*, 281.

[2229] Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 123.

compelled to take note of a deep paradox: that it is considerably more difficult than one might expect to distinguish between *poiesis* and destruction; making and unmaking.[2230]

The work is indubitably *autopoietic*: the composer literally performs his own dictates. Sitting in a resonant room, he records his voice which he plays back into the room, recapturing it with additional resonance – a process which is repeated relentlessly over forty-five minutes. Resonance comes to dominate to the extent that language gives way to noise, the effects of which are at times quite unsettling. That the remnants of pitch and of rhythm remain, despite the significant processual decomposition of Lucier's work, owes to the clear non-fluency of Lucier's speech[2231] which adds both pattern and irregularity. As the initial repetitions progress, they also effect a sonic deepening, the extended *s* taking on a whistle and the non-fluent *r* retaining a syncopated irregularity. To the attentive listener the initial strengthening instantiated by repetition soon gives way to an increasingly complex interaction of resonance and interference as the accentuated treble and bass tones begin to pull further apart, distinctly undermining the integrity of the voice. Simultaneously, a deep pitch, the beginnings of a drone, emerges from the deep, sustained pitch of the dipthong [aɪ]. Yet, as the duration of its disembodiment increases, so the voice becomes hard, metallic – an uncanny mechanistic double; a voice increasingly divorced from any sense of integrity as self-presence becomes an entirely mediated quality. Bass tones are almost completely eroded by the exponentially increasing resonance, replaced by an irregular pitch which lags significantly behind its articulation, while the *s* sounds give way to a constant atmospheric whistle, punctuated by shrill, aggressive chirps.

However, what initially appears a purely destructive process begins to effect a significant reconstitution. The atmospheric ground becomes more stable and upon it the whistle, itself more substantial now, reveals a rhythmic play between two pitches. As the composition moves towards its conclusion, we are not submerged in pure noise or chaos, but, rather, exposed to new singularities. Here is a compelling example of minimalist transumption: extremely limited material, subjected to characteristically minimalist aesthetic processes,[2232] transposed to an atopian locus – that is, one which cannot be localized in an ordinary sense, nor to a specific medium – from which is *poietically* subtracted a work which nonetheless

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[2230] Schlegel's fragments provide considerable insight in this regard. The majority of *autopoietic* gestures, even thoroughly *poietic* gestures, rapidly consume themselves, dissipating generative energy by their incapacity for adaptive self-monitoring. Their desire to be "entirely isolated...[and] complete," (Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragment 206," *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 251) results, for the fragment, in the paradoxical situation of *autopoietic poiesis* as "the point…continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction" (Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragment 51, *German Aesthetics*, 247).
[2231] LaBelle, *Background Noise*, 126.
[2232] Strickland describes this as a "Minimal process-piece" (Strickland, *Minimalism*, 281).

evidences a singular concretism, an unambiguously *poietic* quantity. The semantic material of the work self-reflexively distributes its *poietic* substance in a manner which undermines its coherence only to transpose and affirm its persistence at another. Between text, voice, architecture, music and sound sculpture – a situation literally amplified by its technological mediation – the *poietic* heart of the work is predicated transumptively, within the para-ontological atopia which the autopoietic force of the example instantiates in its very taking-place.

I phrase this *subtractive autopoiesis* in the sense Badiou reserves for the former of the terms, since while it contains a negation, this negation does not exhaust or destroy the generative multiplicity that inheres in the work: transformation and manifestation are simultaneous – the voice becomes noise, but noise becomes a new entity, a new type of rhythm and melody. In the *poetic* alternation between creativity and destruction, the singular importance of *subtractive autopoiesis* lies in that it transposes the self-regulatory subject entirely into process, while still acknowledging the intrinsic excess which inhabits the process of subtraction. It is thus weighted, ultimately, towards *poiesis* or generation.

In certain situations, it appears that the self-reflexive force of the example is so great as to become fully *autopoietic* – in knowing itself as example, it produces itself as example. This *autopoiesis* subsequently manifests a singular internal subtraction, an ontological torsion so that even as the example affirms itself *qua* example,[2233] it manifests beside itself a para-ontology. Thus, the example is *autopoietic* in a manner which involves negation of its independence and the subtraction through this negation of a new, para-ontological field which renders it not only knowable as such, but as a force of knowability. This *autopoietic* operation – reflection, negation, extension, concrete novelty – seems to me remarkably close to the process identified above in relation to Lucier's work as *subtractive autopoiesis*. In this sense I suggest symmetry might be noted: *subtractive autopoiesis* instantiates an example of exemplarity, and exemplarity functions by a logic of subtractive autopoiesis. If exemplarity is, as Agamben suggests, an "ontology still to be thought,"[2234] I contend that it might well be in this properly minimalist field that such thinking potentially takes place.

[2233] In this situation of meta-exemplarity, is the specific force of the *meta* not that of structuration itself, in which a torsion between self-determined belonging and the concreteness of an entity's knowability produces exemplarity *as* Being.

[2234] Agamben, *What is a Paradigm?*

15. A TYPOLOGY OF MINIMALISM

a) Transumption and the typology of minimalism

The attempt to grasp and communicate the very essence of *poiesis* is the abiding concern of minimalism – a claim which has been argued repeatedly in the present work, and which is evidenced beyond the particularities of medium, aesthetic quality and historical epoch. Minimalism approximates *poiesis* by affirming the essentially quantitative nature of Being. However, pure quantity – multiplicity – proves elusive, in light of which the minimalist object is obliged to press its quantitative concerns only obliquely: by the essentialization of quality, by the radicalization of the form and so, too, the sense of presence conveyed by the work, and by the self-reflexive pursuit of the force by which such presence is knowable. We term this last force exemplarity, which, manifesting a para-ontological field to entity, displaces the question of a work's *poietic* essence to an *atopia*. An *atopia* is a non-space, the formulation of which is necessitated by two recognitions. The first is that since the entirety of an entity resists representation within the field of knowledge – which assigns epistemic values to ontological properties – it is necessary to posit a subsidiary topos to account for those elements which escape the Count. As a field of *knowability* such a *topos* mediates between Being – with which it is non-identical – and knowledge – to which it cannot be reduced – manifesting a para-ontology which radiates from the heart of an entity towards its normalization by concepts. At once reflective and productive, we term this *force* of the example *poietic*, even though its domain is not pure *poiesis*. Hence our contention that an *exemplary para-ontology* is locatable only in terms of a *poietic atopia*.

A good example of minimalism exemplifies well the quantitative force of Being by offering para-ontological testimony to the taking-place of the Real. The minimalist entity is *transumed*[2235] – "transferred from one part or place to another,"[2236] as Bann suggests; the materially[2237] marked correlate of the paradigmatic movement which Agamben recognizes is one from singularity to singularity, rather

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[2235] It is important to distinguish *transumption* from what Danto intends by *transfiguration*. Both involve the transposition of aesthetic concerns to an atopian locus, and a consequent transformation of the significance of the aesthetic object itself. The implications of this atopia are, however, notably different: transfiguration marks the transformation of non-art to art, whereas transumption involves the clarification of mediality, place and taking-place in art; transfiguration emphasizes a self-reflexive quasi-transcendence, while transumption involves a field of immanence from which novelty is drawn by the sheer indifference of the objects to its status as art or non-art.

[2236] Bann, *Transumption*, 7.

[2237] To recall, *material* has been used in a broader sense throughout the present study.

than between universals and particulars[2238] – from its quantitative location to that of its *poietic* taking-place. That this transumption is effected by a force which is unambiguously Real allows us to recognize in exemplary entities the reflection of *poietic* force in the *example*, and of *exemplary* force in the *poietic* entity, in both cases affirming the facticity and persistence of the taking-place of quantity. It is in this respect that minimalism constitutes a radical field of potentiality with regard to the exemplification of the Real. Finally, accepting these theses, which have consistently been argued and exemplified throughout the present work, it is possible to offer, in conclusion, a typology of minimalism.

The first part of this work demonstrated that aggregating minimalism to particular properties, and organizing these in terms of a stable movement, *M*inimalism, fails to account for its dynamic *taking-place*. Minimalism is neither a spent force, nor one with an orthodox beginning, and to grasp it adequately, it is necessary to attend to its existential logic – its manner of existing or *taking-place* within the Real. The existential logic of minimalism – the intuition of "the formal set of relations"[2239] by which minimalist entities manifest in existence – is transumptive, and such transumption is expressed by three principal types or modalities: containment, distension and distribution.

b) The minimalist logic of containment

The majority of minimalism, whether by design or not, expresses itself as a species of the aesthetic modality here termed *containment*. In the case of minimalist *containment*, the parameters of the work are defined by various notions of monadism, restriction, unification, containment, *poietic* action within specified limits, or the disintegration of such limits from within a situation which nonetheless appears severely limited. In short, the forces of production and perception *converge* upon a contained work, and it is through this very containment, and their temporary impotence with respect to such containment, that such minimalist works effect the transumption, or atopian predication, which marks minimalism *qua* force. Key minimalist sculptors offer useful terms in this regard: Judd's *specific objects*, Morris' *unitary forms*, and Flavin's *primary figures*[2240] all offer monadic conceptions of minimalist containment.

[2238] Agamben, *Signature*, 19, 31.
[2239] Badiou, *SMP*, 31.
[2240] Here we refer to the artist's self-assessment regarding his earlier and more austere work, since, as will be argued, the majority of Flavin's work is, in fact, subject to a *distributive* logic.

Containment habitually expresses itself in unitary or monadic forms – self-contained and self-containing, eschewing external reference and preoccupied self-reflexively with their objectal status. Progressing from the most abstract to the most concrete of media, although numerous singular cases of sonic containment have been noted in the present work, we do well to identify three principal techniques through which minimalist containment is clarified: sustained drones, repetitive continua, and sparse soundscapes. That sonic containment should be particularly evident in drone music is somewhat paradoxical, as such composers as La Monte Young, Harold Budd, Pauline Oliveros, Charlemagne Palestine and Rhys Chatham habitually create works of considerable duration and with gradually undulating structures, resisting any simple unification by perception. However, in a significant sense, the

musical material of many drone works is significantly self-contained and self-containing. Rhys Chatham's *A Crimson Grail* – a composition for four hundred electric guitars (Track 48)[2241] – exemplifies the manner in which the force of sheer musical quantity is potentially self-limiting, as elementary music substance is unfolded in a manner at once strikingly beautiful and apparently contained. Equally significant are the repetitive continua of such composers as Riley and Glass, the miniature forms and strict predetermination of material in compositions as distinct as Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 10* and Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata*, and the sparsity of much of Feldman's composition, *Vertical Thoughts 1* (Track 49)[2242] for instance, which, recalling Lucretius and Leibniz, presents the lonely fall of sonic monads within a severely restricted soundscape.

In prose, the logic of containment is most evident in works which explore the possibility of event- and content-free narrative. Not only imaginatively difficult to accomplish, but also requiring technical virtuosity to sustain, convincing examples of such work are scarce. Regarding canonical minimalism, it might be argued that certain of Raymond Carver's most severe narratives approach this condition, but, in general, more convincing arguments can be made for *containment* in the elliptical repetitions of Gertrude Stein's writing, the relentlessness of Robbe-Grillet's descriptivism and its subsequent incorporation of self-generative techniques, and, in particular in the later prose of Samuel Beckett, to which the discussion will return. Most conspicuous amongst literary approaches to *containment*, however, are those self-reflexive and ostensibly autonomous poems in the calligrammatic tradition of Apollinaire, and the ideogrammatic mould of the Noigrandes poets and their early Concrete associates. In particular we might

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[2241] Rhys Chatham, *A Crimson Grail*. Table of Elements, 2007.
[2242] Morton Feldman, *Vertical Thoughts 1*, 1963.

consider two remarkable works – Emmett Williams' "like attracts like" (Figure 104),[2243] and Frans Vanderlinde's "Elimination/Incarnation" (Figure 105).[2244]

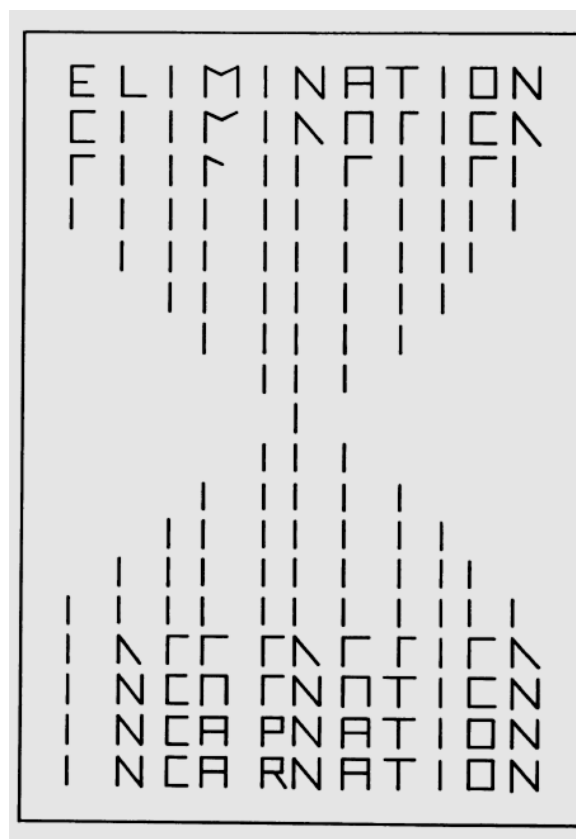**Figure 104: Emmett Williams, *like attracts like*, 1958.**

Figure 105: Frans Vanderlinde,*Elimination/Incarnation*. Date unspecified.

Theses masterpieces of *autopoietic* concretism at once prescribe and execute their *poietic* taking-place. In Williams' work the word *attracts* is centred in each of thirteen lines, flanked by two identical, equidistant words – *like* – which, following the semantic stipulation of the poem, start fairly far from one another and move closer together with each new line, until the three words are completely overlaid, the *likes* occupying the same space as the word *attracts*. Here self-prescriptive containment – at a concrete level, *like* does attract *like*, encapsulating the work of the poem – and subtle semantic subversion complement one another. For Williams' poem presents a reversal of the commonplace *opposites attract*, a semantic

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[2243]Emmett Williams, "like attracts like," *ACP*, 314.

[2244] Frans Vanderlinde, "Elimination/Incarnation," *CRAC*, 77.

distortion which owes in part to typographical convenience,[2245] and in part to the concrete intuition that, by subverting conventional meaning, the poem is able better to reinforce its *autopoietic* substance and to contain its productive capacity.

The conceptual precursor to this logic of concrete containment is arguably the *fragment* as conceived by the poet-philosophers of Jena – that experimental form which, "like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself."[2246] Yet, despite this strong claim, it is apparent that the fragment – existing in a state of "essential incompletion,"[2247] "forever...becoming and never...perfected,"[2248] and fluctuating between creation and destruction, reduction and elaboration, contraction and expansion – moves uncomfortably through a referential world upon which, in one sense, it is clearly dependent, yet in its compactness and self-sufficiency, it simultaneously eschews. Is this not precisely the *poietic* dynamic at play in Vanderlinde's "Elimination/Incarnation"? Here, however, the poem's semantic element engages explicitly with *poietic* activity itself. Directly confronting the relationship between negation and sublation which grounds the Hegelian dialectic, the poem's containment within a single system of elimination and incarnation, destruction and creation, appears to pivot on the increasing definition and isolation of a quasi-subject – the *I* – typographically and symbolically situated at the heart of the poem. The sole remnant of the progressive disintegration of the word *elimination*, this quasi-subject is also the pivot upon which the *poietically* reconstitutive *incarnation* is set in motion. A powerful minimalism, the work fixes, through a rapid and markedly tense *poietic* containment, the complicity of form, formation, language and letter. The quasi-subject marks both the spectrality of the poet as productive agent and the emergence of a constructive spectator in the manner which Foster emphasizes as of minimalism's most consistent features.[2249]

In this sense, minimalist containment rests on the degree to which its impassivity is able to compel the beholder to affirm its separateness as object, in which case the spectator is in a significant sense displaced, indeed *transumed*, to the centre of the container, as it were – to the heart of the *poietic* process itself.[2250] Indeed, such a minimalism of *containment* is strongly in evidence in the tradition of monochromatic painting which simultaneous captivates and resists. In this regard, we do well to compare

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[2245] The word *like* has four letters which, when doubled, equal the number of letters of the word *attracts*, so that the words may be perfectly spatially overlaid by the end of the poem, whereas this would obviously not be the case had the Williams used the word *opposite*.

[2246] Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragment 206," 251.

[2247] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 42.

[2248] Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragment 116," *German Aesthetics*, 249.

[2249] Foster, *Return,* 47, 50.

[2250] The Michael Fried of "Art and Objecthood" would find this suggestion abhorrent.

the mesmeric quality of Klein's *IKB* paintings, the unremitting intensity of Reinhardt's black canvases, the manifest effort contained in the thickness of Ryman's white paintings, and the monochromes of Baer, framed as they are by thick, black, painted edges (Figure 106).[2251]
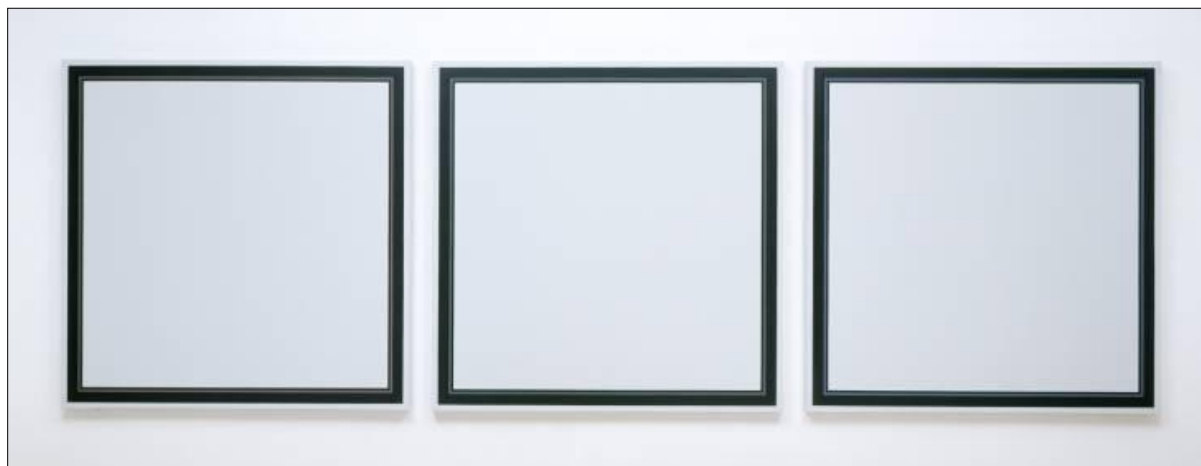

Figure 106: Jo Baer, *Stations of the Spectrum (Primary)***, 1967-9.**

A similar ambivalence is evidenced in much of Brice Marden's monochromatic work, in which the artist confronts the very radical structure of his materials[2252] to create "thickly worked, opaque surface[s] of oil colour mixed in a medium of wax and turpentine."[2253] By the sense of their "presence," what initially appear to be uniform surfaces reveal an opaque density[2254] – a "compressed weighty feel"[2255] and physicality[2256] which simultaneously draw the spectator towards their apparent depth, yet repel this advance by the impenetrability of their waxen "epidermis."[2257] The capacity of paintings such as those from *Grove Group II* (Figure 107)[2258] to captivate while resisting the viewer is achieved by applying layer upon layer of Marden's characteristic matte admixture, "as thick as butter"[2259] – a process closely linked

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[2251] Jo Baer, *Stations of the Spectrum*, 1967-9. Tate, London.

[2252] Marden uses principally oil and wax, and charcoal and wax admixtures for his monochromatic work.

[2253] Stephen Bann, "Brice Marden: From the Material to be Immaterial," *Brice Marden: Paintings and Drawings and Prints 1975-80* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981), 7. "When applying colour to the canvas, I mix standard artist's oil colour (paint) with a medium of wax and turpentine" (Brice Marden, "Selected statements, notes and interviews," *Paintings*, 54.).

[2254] See Marden, "Selected statements," 55; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 27; Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 24; Meyer, *Minimalism*, 31; Roberta Smith, "Brice Marden," *Paintings*, 46.

[2255] Ibid.

[2256] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 78.

[2257] Mario Codognato, "A Cut Through the Frieze of Time," *Brice Marden: Works on Paper: 1964-2001*, ed. Mario Codognato (London: Trolley, 2002), 12; See Smith, "Brice Marden," 46.

[2258] Brice Marden, *Grove Group II*, 1973. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[2259] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 30.

to the manner in which colour[2260] acquires a significant materiality of its own, containing rather than being contained by the work.[2261] Marden refers to the manner in which colour *holds* a visual plane,[2262] "'turn[s] back into itself...reveal[s] itself to you while at the same time it evades you.'"[2263]
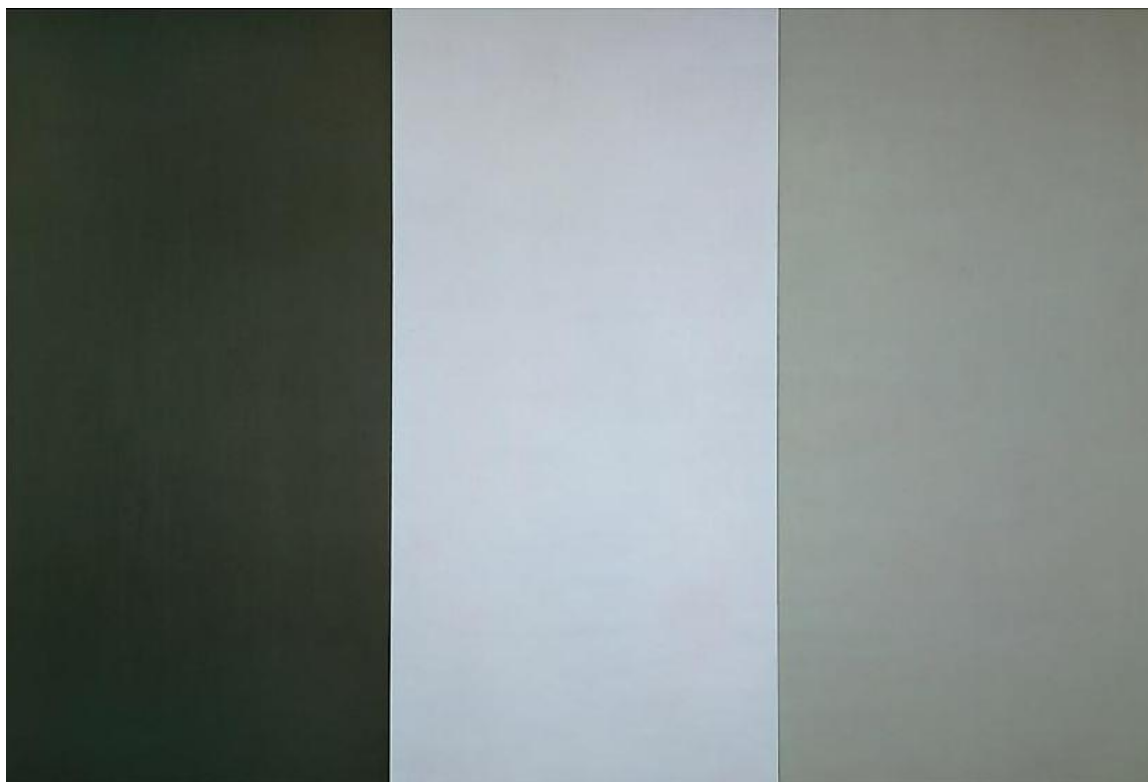

Figure 107: Brice Marden, *Grove Group II*, 1973.

Marden's monochrome drawings (Figure 108)[2264] offer an interesting clarification of minimalist containment. While they share the opacity of his painting, they do not resist so much as reflect the efforts of the viewer. This reflection is as literal as it is metaphorical, for the thick application of its wax-infused graphite might easily be mistaken for a "primitive mirror...[as] from two feet away you can see a hazy image of yourself."[2265] This much is clear from the reflection in the image produced below, demonstrating the manner in which perspective does indeed shape our relationship to minimalist objects and the manner

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[2260] The subdued hues of Marden's early monochromes escape easy chromatic classification. See Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 29; Smith, "Brice Marden," 46.

[2261] On the imbrication of colour and matter, see Bann, "Brice Marden," 14.

[2262] Marden, "Selected statements," 55-6.

[2263] Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 29.

[2264] Brice Marden, *Grove Group (1-5)*, 1972. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[2265] Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "From," *Brice Marden: Recent Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1978), 6.

of their containment[2266] – the viewer is crucial, certainly, but also evanescent with respect to the indifferent persistence of the object. Belonging to a "unique tradition of immanence"[2267] – a tradition of incarnation, to recall Vanderlinde, which ties together the material and the metaphysical – the uniform measure of Marden's work is its sense of *presence*.[2268] Yet presence is guaranteed by containment in this species of minimalism – and of this we should not lose sight. Marden recognizes the "strict confines"[2269] of his work, the manner of their "holistic self-sufficiency,"[2270] which at once succeeds in "locking in the painting and locking out the world." Yet at the centre of this dynamic of containment, Marden retains a thoroughly poetic sensibility:[2271] "[t]he rectangle, the plane, the structure, the picture are but sounding boards for the spirit."[2272]

Figure 108: Brice Marden, *Grove Group (1-5)*, 1972.

[2266] Ibid., 5.

[2267] Bann, "Painting," 11.

[2268] Ibid., 8.

[2269] Marden, "Selected statements," 54.

[2270] Strickland, *Minimalism*, 27.

[2271] See Bann, "Painting," 8.

[2272] Marden, "Selected statements," 54.

Although Beckett never admits such sentimentality into his work without considerable irony, it is possible to draw from an image that pervades his later *oeuvre*,[2273] the "[s]epulchral skull,"[2274] a powerful minimalist vision of the stakes of containment[2275] – the same sense of strain between interiority and exteriority, *poiesis* and negation, persistence and desistence, to which Marden's monochromaticism attends. Indeed, the skull is a theoretical object *par excellence* – at once the tomb of fading consciousness and a monstrance of the incarnate imagination; a cipher for the closed spaces in which Beckett's prose of an entire decade[2276] is claustrophobically located. According to Davies, these works, which Finney insightfully identifies as "narrative ideograms,"[2277] should be assessed as a cycle,[2278] set in motion by "All Strange Away," and continued in "Imagination Dead Imagine," "Ping," "Lessness," "The Lost Ones," and "For to End Yet Again."[2279]

Their principal concern is encapsulated in the opening line of "All Strange Away," – "Imagination dead imagine"[2280] – a clear paradox upon which the persistence of the imagination is affirmed self-reflexively in situations in which its disappearance seems imminent. We discover in "Imagination Dead Imagine" a provocative, minimalist revision of its earlier model. This work tests our capacity to "reconstruct[...] whole worlds out of minimal fragments."[2281] Here is a prose emaciated and compressed, contained by the sparsest spatial and temporal coordinates, and which presents the remnants of a world tentatively mimed, then almost eliminated by the intensity of self-reference which marks Beckett's work.[2282]

This granted, the solidity and specificity of the closed spaces or containers within which these works are situated is of immense significance. Both "All Strange Away" and "Imagination Dead Imagine" take

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[2273] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 530.

[2274] Beckett, "For to end," 246.

[2275] On the explicitly minimalist implications of Beckett's short prose, see Barbara Trieloff, "'Babel of Silence': Beckett's Post-Trilogy Prose Articulated," *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Lance St John Butler and Robin J. Davis (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), 89; Richard Kearney, "Imagination Wanted: Dead or Alive," *Samuel Beckett 100 Years: Centenary Essays*, ed. Christopher Murray (New Island: RTE, 2006), 113; Brian Finney, "*Assumption* to *Lessness*: Beckett's shorter fiction," *Beckett the shape changer*, ed. Katherine Worth (London: Routledge, 1975), 79; Paul Davies, *The Ideal Real: Beckett's Fiction and Imagination* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994), 136.

[2276] The closed space works were principally composed in the 1960s and early 1970s, although Beckett's preoccupation with restriction and containment significantly predates this period (see Rubin Rabinovitz, "The Self Contained: Beckett's Fiction in the 1960s," *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama: Texts for Company*, ed. James Acheson and Kateryna Arthur (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987), 51.

[2277] Finney, "Assumption," 75.

[2278] Davies, *Ideal Real*, 132-3, 137.

[2279] Samuel Beckett, "All Strange Away," *CSP*, 169.

[2280] Ibid.

[2281] Kenner, 176.

[2282] See Rabinovitz, "Self Contained," 50.

place in enclosures of severely restricted dimensions. The former is "[f]ive foot square, six high, no way in, none out,"[2283] "gradually becoming smaller as memory diminishes" [2284] in the failing coherence of its narrative. The latter is situated in a miniscule cylinder[2285] containing two figures, back to back, immobile, and imperceptibly alive but for the condensation which would appear were a mirror held to their lips,[2286] and the terrifying image of "the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible."[2287] Both are ciphers for the skull, the dome-shaped[2288] setting of "For to end yet again," the eighth of Beckett's short prose *residua*,[2289] and the attempts of consciousness to dislocate itself from its encasement in the "dark place"[2290]of the skull.[2291] Indeed, it is interesting that the blinding white light which pervades "All Strange Away," "Imagination Dead Imagine," and "Ping" is replaced here. "The Lost Ones" is dimly lit by an eerie, lifeless, yellow light – one in which the wandering of two hundred and five bodies in a "flattened cylinder,"[2292] "each searching for its lost one"[2293] in this "entropic abode,"[2294] periodically promises points of improbable egress[2295] – and by a dark void in "For to end yet again."

Where external light sources appear dim, brilliant white light seems to have its source in the closed spaces themselves. Taking light as metonym for consciousness, the ultimate concern of these works is then the manner in which consciousness is at once limited, and yet rendered substantial, by embodiment. For it is the struggle of an apparently immaterial consciousness with its material substrate which lends an *autopoietic* force to its self-reflexivity, a consistency by which the "[f]luidity pointing to chaos" in Beckett's early work, "is replaced by rigidity enclosing the void."[2296] The embodied imagination tests itself against infinity. This much is clear in the post-apocalyptic futurity of "Lessness:" a "[l]ittle body

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[2283] Beckett, "All Strange Away," 169.

[2284] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 11.

[2285] Beckett, "Imagination," 184.

[2286] Ibid.

[2287] Ibid.

[2288] Davies, *Ideal Real*, 158.

[2289] On this term see Kearney, "Imagination Wanted," 113; Finney, "Assumption," 64.

[2290] Beckett, "For to end," 243.

[2291] As Davies notes, "[c]onsciousness alive and imagination dead make an inhospitable home for man, who is still there on the scene whatever atrophies he may have undergone" (Davies, *Ideal Real*, 141).

[2292] Samuel Beckett, "The Lost Ones," *CSP*, 202.

[2293] Ibid.

[2294] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 325.

[2295] See ibid.; Dermot Moran, "Beckett and Philosophy," *Samuel Beckett 100*, 95.

[2296] J.E. Dearlove, *Accommodating the chaos: Samuel Beckett's nonrelational art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1982), 108.

little block beating ash grey only upright"[2297] – the persistent vertical presence of a person, "face to endlessness,"[2298] in an infinite landscape which is revealed when the container in which this person existed collapses. Yet, apparently free, and indulging in "a wild imagining the blue celeste of poesy,"[2299] it becomes evident that every action is always frustratingly situated in the imminent future, which, however close, remains potential only: "[h]e will curse God again,"[2300] "[h]e will go on his back face to the sky," and he will die.[2301] "Figment light never was," Beckett tells us, and illumination here evokes only the pathos of a tragic hope – the desistence of persistence in the face of actual infinity.

The unavoidability of our encounter with the Real, and its persistence even in the most minimal imagining, is the painful price of consciousness in Beckett's estimation. As Kearney notes, imagination

> has ceased to operate as a human agency, of expression, will and creativity and become instead a mechanical pulse of repetition...But this entropic decline of imagination into emptiness [is itself unreliable]...For even as we imagine imagination dead, we still find ourselves caught in the reflexive spiral of imagining."[2302]

"[A]n inexorable force in life,"[2303] imagination is, as Pilling echoes, "less and less a matter of exercising the will and more and more a matter of waiting for the mercies vouchsafed by inspiration."[2304] Yet, luminescence in Beckett's closed space works is habitually blinding rather than revealing. The quasi-transcendence promised by the imagination in such minimalist *poietic* situations rests of the transumption of consciousness, the dislocation of consciousness to an atopian exterior[2305] from which it might be possible to view such minimal instantiations of a contained existence objectively. Such externality is also the concern of the minimal sound of the *ping* which punctuates the tiny, isolated cubic structure – its "[w]hite walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen"[2306] – of Beckett's eponymous work.[2307]

[2297] Beckett, "Lessness," 198.

[2298] Ibid.

[2299] Ibid., 199.

[2300] Ibid., 197.

[2301] See Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 318.

[2302] Kearney, "Imagination Wanted," 115-8.

[2303] Davies, *Ideal Real*, 153.

[2304] John Pilling, "Shards of Ends and Odds in Prose: From 'Fizzles' to 'The Lost Ones,'" *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1986), 175.

[2305] On the implicit atopianism of these works see Finney, "Assumption," 77; Rabinovitz, "Self Contained," 50, 58.

[2306] Samuel Beckett, "Ping," *CSP*, 193.

[2307] Stylistically, "Ping" offers a fine example of minimalist containment: its words, far from unpatterned, present the reader with an austere potentiality, with numerous possible permutations of pattern and significance, revealed

Lodge draws attention to the dissenting views on whether *ping* is a noise external or internal to the discourse.[2308] The present contention is that Beckett's view necessitates that we comprehend this sound, and by analogy the question of containment itself, as simultaneously internally and externally produced, simultaneously *autopoietic* and the consequence of induction. As a minimalist modality, containment reveals the threshold of example and exception upon which inclusion and exclusion are necessarily undecidable. Thus, repeatedly flanking the *ping* which marks this threshold, we discover that the work is at once "fixed"[2309] and "fixed elsewhere."[2310] The logic is explicitly transumptive and atopian – a displacement to a non-space in which the minimal but unambiguously *poietic* essence of the work is predicated. In this sense, containment is neither final nor static, but rather a *poietic* modality of stabilization which discovers its most forceful instantiation through minimalism. Yet, contingent stability is also the mark of potential change, and it is the imminence in minimalism of internal torsion and transformatory processes which the present work terms *distension*.

c) The minimalist logic of distension

Although in terms of its immediately visible qualities the dominant logic of minimalism, with its emphasis on the predication of unified objects, appears to be that of containment, minimalists are in fact equally concerned with the exposition and taking-place of process in their work, or, indeed their work *qua* process. It is to such process that the logics of distension and distribution attest. Regarding the first of these, we encounter a means of reflecting upon the constitutive heart of the work in its transformatory tenor, yet without departing from the work entirely. For such is the wager of *poietic* distension: a transumption of *poietic* essence, prompted from within, by virtue of the reflexive arrangement of parts and the internal torsion, and hence transformation, of these parts implicit to the processual taking-place of the work. The transumption is of ordinary spatial location and temporal occurrence, to a processual *atopia* which is at once integral to the work, yet always in the process of reflexive re-integration. In this sense,

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through various techniques of repetition, addition and subtraction, which nonetheless emphasize in its language a sense of minimalist objecthood (see Trieloff, "Babel of Silence," 90).

[2308] David Lodge, "Some Ping Understood," *Critical Essay on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 125.

[2309] Beckett, "Ping," 193.

[2310] Ibid.

the logic of distension marks the processual field upon which the introspective logic of *containment* and the extroverted logic of *distribution* are mediated.

Central to any analysis of distension is the implicitly temporal understanding and elaboration of process. Thus, although a distinction is made in what follows between temporal distension and spatial distension, it should be understood that temporality – indeed, the temporality of the Real as it has been defined and deployed in the preceding discussion – is the implicit substrate of both. Here McTaggart's distinction of A series, B series and C series in his epochal essay, *The Unreality of Time,* is instructive.[2311] The A series is marked by relative temporal positions, "from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and the far future."[2312] The B series involves a more fluid progress "from earlier to later."[2313] The C series, by contrast, "is not temporal, for it involves no change, but only an order."[2314] The present contention is that the ancestral time of Meillassoux offers significant endorsement of the validity of the A series.

As Meillassoux demonstrates, a reaffirmation of the Real in an age of correlationist doubt requires that we rehabilitate an understanding of time which is independent of perception, cognition and access. The strong Absolute figure of the *arche-fossil*,[2315] the proposition and formal proof that there exists no legitimate refutation of the existence of material prior to its givenness, allows us to situate entities in an irrefutably solid past, and to regard with equal realness the present and the future. Our concern then shifts from disputing whether or not time is real or unreal, to the task of identifying the proper time of the Real. In my view, there exists no impediment to affirming that such a time is identifiable as the temporal A series, or Meillassoux's ancestral time. This does not, however, entirely resolve the apparent disparity between the indifference of temporal passage, and the manner in which temporal fluctuation and inconsistency are felt.

The temporal and spatial distension which marks much minimalism, attempts to account for this phenomenon in aesthetic terms by prompting a reconsideration of ancestral time from the perspective of the processual object. In short, art which attempts to grasp its own processual taking-place defines what here is termed distension. More closely still, distension refers to a transumptive, internal torsion – an

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[2311] J. Ellis McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind*, New Series, 17.68 (1908): 457-74.
[2312] Ibid., 458.
[2313] Ibid.
[2314] Ibid., 460-1.
[2315] *AF*, 9-10, 16.

internal expansion proper to the constitution of the entity in terms of its processual objecthood – which occurs when an artwork attempts to grasp itself, either in spatial or temporal terms, in the midst of this process. Distension thus refers to operations *internal* to the object which manifest by a certain externalization, but which finally affirm the coherence of the object. In the case of temporal distension, the *poietic* work occurs in its transumption to an atopian point at which the entity emerges *qua* process; for spatial distension, *poeisis* is located in a quasi-object which offers itself in spatial terms in the very midst of its processual taking-place.

Amongst the most significant and radical works of minimalism operate by a logic of distension. Samuel Beckett's "Quad," for instance, exemplifies the manner in which distension is at once a turn outward and a return inward; an expression of the manner in which disparate media – geometry, text, movement and colour – come to be held as one. Equally exemplary is the kinetic weight of effort, still discernible in many of Richard Serra's lead sculptures, the numerous process-oriented concrete poems examined above, and the generative fiction of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the tropes of which express very precisely an *autopoietic* expansion and contraction. However, the most productive unravelling of this processual aesthetic emerges, unsurprisingly, in the manner in which it exemplifies itself *qua* process. With respect to temporal distension, we need look no further than Steve Reich's epochal composition *Piano Phase*,[2316] while an especially fascinating model of spatial distension is discovered in the *poem machines* of Liliane Lijn.

The Parisian avant-garde of the 1960s offered an environment at once stimulating and receptive of Lijn's experimental endeavours with the atomization and deconstitution of language, and the subsequent contrapuntal reconstitution of its constituents.[2317] Sympathetic experiments were being conducted by the Beats,[2318] Lettrists and Spatialists, and it would be no exaggeration to claim that Lijn's poem machines instantiate a comparably compelling form of kinetic, minimalist concretism, although, curiously, her work is seldom examined in this light. Of particular interest are the conical structures of the *ABC Cone*[2319] and *Act as Atom*.[2320] The spinning cone, on account of its tapering surface area, has the unique capacity for generating the illusion of different rotational speeds. In fact, the axis of a cone rotates at a consistent

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[2316] Steve Reich, *Piano Phase (for two pianos or two marimbas)* (London, Universal Edition, 1980). All references to the score are to this edition.
[2317] David Alan Mellor, *Liliane Lijn: Works 1959-80* (Coventry: Mead Gallery, 2005), 40, 43-4.
[2318] Burroughs openly expressed his admiration for Lijn's work and his desire to collaborate with her in constructing new poem machines.
[2319] Liliane Lijn, *ABC Cone*, 1965. Collection unspecified.
[2320] Liliane Lijn, *Act as Atom* , 1966. Collection unspecified.

speed, but, were a vertical line to be drawn from top to bottom, two points upon this line would recur at different times – more regularly at the apex, and more irregularly at the base.

The result, in the case of *ABC Cone* (Figure 109; Clip 4), is a significant spatial distension, one which stresses the integrity of the perceptual and conceptual fields within which the individual integrity of the letter and its sequential identity are determined.[2321] In this work, Lijn has lettered the entire alphabet on the cone: towards the top we discover the first few letters, in various repetitive patterns reiterated in three separate but aligned horizontal rows, while at the base the remaining letters are arranged in a continuous band. As soon as the cone is set in motion, each row takes its own path at a specific pace and intensity, but also exposes various dynamic relationships between repeated letters and rows.

Figure 109: Liliane Lijn, *ABC Cone*, 1965.   **Figure 110: Liliane Lijn, *Act as Atom*, 1966.**

Lijn's is a remarkable minimalism: the elementary units of writing, shape and basic motion generate a *poietic* field of considerable force. The *transumption* effected by the work derives from the interaction of

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[2321] Mellor, *Liliane Lijn*, 39-40.

real motion and apparent motion, and acts upon the constituent letters of the work, constituting a *distensive* medium in which the physicality of letters bleed into a non-linguistic *poietic* continuum. By varying the velocity of rotation, letters dematerialize at a typographical level, only to materialize a particularly stimulating and concrete flux, altering the direction of flow as well as the consistency of our visual perception. This phenomenon is particularly clear in Lijn's transparent cones. *Act as Atom* (Figure 110; Clip 5), for example, presents from top to bottom in a sucession of carefully angled orbits the words or phrases, *atomation*, *automation*, *instead of*, *action atom*, *act as atom*, followed by three rows of symbols at the top. These are arranged in such a way that when the cone is in motion, they conform to the various orbits, ellipses and helixes by which intermolecular forces are usually illustrated . This thoroughly *autopoietic* work effects a symbolic distension from the representational field of language to the presentation force of subatomic particles, and a material distension from simple typography upon transparent perspex to the dynamic facticity of its *poietic* taking-place.

The processual experience of distension is amplified further in the temporal paradigm of minimalist objecthood instantiated by such works as Reich's *Piano Phase*. Much has been written on the considerable technical accomplishment of this composition. By radically minimal means – melodic fragments constructed from a consistent flow of eight notes and eighth note rests, and from only a few pitches – it presents a complex array of effects when its very simple melody, played simultaneously on two pianos in unison, is gradually shifted out of phase. *Piano Phase* was the composer's first purely instrumental attempt at phase-shifting or phasing, a process he had discovered in his earlier tape compositions.[2322] Phasing involves the displacement with respect to one another of two or more musical fragments, initially sounded together, by a process of relative acceleration and/or deceleration. All phasing combines temporal linearity – the composition begins and ends – with temporal cyclicality. The latter is clarified in the structural process itself: generally short fragments are played identically by two voices; one voice accelerates with respect to the other, moving them progressively apart until, at the point of greatest temporal distance,[2323] they once more begin to converge until they have returned to their original relative positions.[2324] Within this overall process, the alternation of "fuzzy transitions"[2325] – in

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[2322] Potter, *Four*, 167-8; Strickland, *Minimalism*, 186-7.

[2323] Ibid., 184.

[2324] This is the case in a fully cyclical process of phasing. See Potter, *Four*, 184; Paul Epstein, "Pattern Structure and Process in Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*," *The Musical Quarterly*, 72.4 (1986): 495. Structurally, *Piano Phase* consists of three full cycles, also called sections. The first and third consist of a single melodic fragment held by both pianists, while the second consists of two distinct melodies: that of the first pianist reminiscent of the melodic material of the first cycle, and that of the second foreshadowing the material of the third cycle. A detailed discussion of the melodic is offered by Epstein (ibid., 495-8; also Potter, *Four*, 183-5, 187).

[2325] Ibid., 180.

which voices are out of phase with one another – and contingent stabilities – in which voices are in phase with one another – produces considerable sonic interest.

Epstein's rigorous formal analysis provides significant insight regarding the shift from formal arrangement to effect.[2326] Perceptual ambiguity arises when temporal fluctuation is juxtaposed with contingent stability; phase shifts or fuzzy transitions with sections of rhythmic coincidence and melodic stability. That such ambiguity[2327] should dominate our experience of *Piano Phase* is in fact an indicator that its logic is thoroughly distensive, as the maximally ordered system is plunged into disorder with a procedural clarity rare even in Reich's *oeuvre*, in which "compositional process and a sounding music …are one and the same thing,"[2328] Indeed, a *restless simultaneity* of equally plausible temporal trajectories is evident: a condition of temporal multiplicity in which several possible temporal trajectories exist with respect to a particular entity or process.

The first of these is the indifferent, ancestral time of the Real which, regardless of the temporal complexities of perception, simply takes its course – the *absolute becoming* that Savitt characterizes in terms of a temporal passage or "ordered occurrence of events."[2329] For Savitt, there is no *intrinsic* connection "between this sort of passage and either freedom, spontaneity, and emergence on the one hand, or determinism, necessity, and reductionism on the other."[2330] *Piano Phase*, by "always extend[ing] farther than…can [be] hear[d],"[2331] testifies to the manner in which such becoming is at once proper and indifferent to both entity and perception of the entity: both are merely perturbances upon the uninterruptable path of the Real with respect to its absolute becoming.

Second, the composition instantiates numerous individual but parallel temporal trajectories, deduced simultaneously from its *fuzzy transitions*, the contingent unities established on either side of these transitions, and the idiosyncratic temporality of every realization or performance of the work, and, moreover, of the unique experience of every listener. Stoianova's claim, that minimalism "generat[es] the present at each moment...without beginning, multi-directional motion without cause or effect,"[2332] gains

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[2326] Epstein, "Pattern Structure," 494-502.

[2327] Ibid., 497.

[2328] Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," *Writings on Music: 1965-2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 35.

[2329] Steven F. Savitt, "On Absolute Becoming and the Myth of Passage," *Time, Reality and Experience*, ed. Craig Callender (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 160.

[2330] Ibid*.,* 165.

[2331] Reich, "Gradual Process," 35.

[2332] Ivanka Stoianova, qtd. in Mertens, *American* , 89.

momentum in this light not simply as a response to the inherent multiplicity of the work, but also to multiplicity in the experience of the listener – the productive subtraction of numerous temporal lines from the inexhaustible becoming of the Real. Thus might we also account for Mertens' identification in minimalist process music of a conflict between so-called clock time, which he associates with the dialectic progression of history, and macro-time, which he claims is a "higher level…beyond history…which has been called *now* or *stasis* or *eternity*."[2333] He concludes that minimalism "attempts to unite the historical subject with non-historical time"[2334] – a provocative analysis, but one which overlooks that no necessary conflict exists between absolute becoming and multiple temporal strands, since the latter are simply subtractions from, rather than negations of, the former.

The third temporal exposition of *Piano Phase* suggests that its cyclicality offers us an alternative temporal frame to ancestral time. Cyclical time identifies a split between that which is perceived as progressive change, and that which is perpetually in a process of recurring. In this it appeals to the proposition of eternal recurrence[2335] which Nietzsche develops from the dominant Greco-Roman understanding of a "circular and continuous"[2336] time, and the later Stoic *kairos*, an "infinite time…at once delimited and made present."[2337] In this light, the temporal distension of minimalism might be interpreted as a formalist aspiration for the eternal – a temporality in one sense transcendental, but in another imbued with an immanent transformative energy. Analysis of *Piano Phase* habitually leads towards such cyclicality.[2338] That the same melodic material is phased against itself in the first and third cycles accounts for the composition's simultaneously symmetrical and cyclical structure. Given a limited amount of melodic material and a steady pulse, repetition subject to a continuous minimal displacement in relation to itself, does reveal a distinct cyclicality. A singularity can be structured in such a way that a continuous displacement of its elements will amount to a return to the original material.

This proposition is significantly close to the remarkable formulation which Derrida offers near the conclusion of "Ellipsis:" "[t]hree is the first figure of repetition. The last too, for the abyss of representation always remains dominated by its rhythm, infinitely."[2339] Yet, to my mind, it is unclear whether or not the self-reference which underpins cyclical progression, either in quantity or quality,

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[2333] Ibid., 92.

[2334] Ibid.

[2335] Nietzsche, *Reader*, 251-2.

[2336] Agamben, "Critique of the Instant and the Continuum," *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 100.

[2337] Ibid., 111.

[2338] Mertens, *American*, 49.

[2339] Derrida, "Ellipsis," 378.

constitutes a suitably stable point from which such cyclicality might be deduced outside of the indifferent progress of ancestral time.[2340] Finally, the present wager is that it does not: cyclicality presents a particularly seductive illusion of identical recurrence, but its repetitions are in fact similar rather than the same, and finally the assertion of the latter over the former lacks ontological force.

Only when these three temporal trajectories – of ancestral, parallel and cyclical time – are traced simultaneously does the full significance of temporal distension become apparent – as a principal modality of *Piano Phase* specifically, but also as the temporal distensive logic which moves through much process-oriented minimalism as an internal displacement. In brief, for minimalist processual objecthood to be knowable as such, the indifferent passage of ancestral time must be shown to exist in an intimate dialectic relation to multiple and cyclical times, which measure themselves against the Real, of which ancestrality is the guarantor. While such restless simultaneity is certainly *sublime* from the perspective of perception – a play of oppositions prompted aesthetically, between form and formlessness, pleasure and pain, control and powerlessness which is quite evident in *Piano Phase*[2341] – we understand distension best by a late excursus through Agamben's analysis of potentiality.

Agamben proceeds, through a close examination of Aristotle,[2342] to suggest that potentiality (that which *can be*) cannot simply be cancelled by impotentiality (the potential to *not-be*). Nor is it sufficient to note that potentiality always implies impotentiality, and that in moving from what is potential to what is actual, impotentiality is spent. Rather, Agamben contends that "what is truly potential is…what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it [impotentiality] wholly into the act as such."[2343] In other words, any act brings into actuality the potentiality to not-be, which threatens to cancel not only potentiality prior to the act, but the act itself. However, to the exact degree that in a situation such a cancellation does not occur, impotentiality also carries tremendous promise. If impotentiality is not exhausted (in the process of cancellation) it carries anew its constitutive opposite, potentiality.

[2340] How many repetitions does it take to present a suitably stable ground in the absence of stable or convincing point of origin? This is certainly the question addressed by Derrida in *Ellipsis* , and one which permeates all repetitive minimalism.

[2341] Kant, *Judgment*, 98.

[2342] The exact line cited and commented on is from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" (Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 183.

[2343] Ibid.

When an act is still potential, when it has not yet taken place, the potentiality to be is balanced symmetrically by the potentiality to not-be. However, when potentiality becomes act, the act does not exhaust impotentiality. Impotentiality does not just disappear, but is carried fully into the act, as the possibility of the act's cessation. But inasmuch as impotentiality enters into activity, so does potentiality, since as has been noted, they are constitutively bound. That which seemed to have been spent in the act, is restored, is recharged once more from within the very same act as, in the midst of the act, impotentiality is converted to potentiality. The charge of potentiality, the charge of a future, is tied to the fact that impotentiality does not exist merely as the shadow of potentiality, but as a producer of excess potentiality, or that which carries excess potentiality into the act. Thus, there exists a certain reserve of potentiality that does not have to be spent in the act, but which is always in excess of the act, oriented towards the future, and which seems to propel current activity towards future activity. Under conventional conditions, potentiality might be described as the charge of the future *in* the present (the *being-able-to-become* act situated *in* the present). Agamben suggests that true potentiality is the charge of the future *as* the present (the *being-able-to-become* act *as* the present, to the extent that the present is itself an act which incorporates fully action and impotentiality). In seeming to be spent in the act, potentiality is actually conserved. The shift is from a static model of dynamics, to a dynamic model of dynamics.

This is also the precise formulation of futurity implicit in the notion of *taking-place* and of the Real, as they are offered in the present work. The charge of the future thus resides not *in* the present but *as* the very presentation of the present – its *taking-place qua Real*. Here the resonance of Lyotard's formulation of the sublime in terms of the interrogative is significant: "*Is it happening?*...[T]he mark of the question is 'now', *now* like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now."[2344] Lyotard's move from the indefinite, sublime, suspension – "nothing might happen now" – to the predicative "the nothingness now," matches closely the manoeuvre required by Agamben in realizing that impotentiality abandons its relationship of strict negation to potentiality, and is incorporated into the act. The *nothingness now* thus comes to figure for the presentation of impotentiality in the act.

Lyotard suggests that the mark of the event, particularly as it is felt in aesthetic terms, is its sublime uncertainty – will it happen, will it not? As such, it evades any normal presentation, since it precedes manifestation. Offered to the senses, taking place as its own uncertainty, there is something of this offering that remains unpresentable. Here we have a precise, sublime formulation of *poietic atopia*. Indeed, we come to understand that the stakes of the minimalist logic of distension are not aesthetic so

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[2344] Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 92.

much as they are existential. Distension, in both its spatial and temporal expressions, offers itself as a positive *poietic* charge – *that* things happen and acts take place, but also that "potentiality…survives actuality [its being consumed in the passage from potential to act], and in this way, *gives itself to itself*."[2345] This last phrase is of considerable moment, since it comprehends the very heart of the fact that what is at stake in the act is, simply put, the very taking place of the future. What Agamben marks in the act, Lyotard affirms through the sublime question. If Agamben's act ultimately presents the ground upon which potentiality *gives itself to itself*, securing the future, then, for Lyotard, the sublime question is what allows the unpresentable (the positivity of the event) to give itself to presentation as negative presentation – the future guaranteed by the event *now*. The positions are close to symmetrical. They also reflect the understanding reached in minimalist aesthetics that, precisely because the *poietic* act offers itself in the radical terms it habitually does, that *taking-place* remains at its centre – a centre which in the truest sense is *atopian* and *transumptive*, marking in material terms that which has not yet materialized; futurity in the immanence of the present.

d) The minimalist logic of distribution

Minimalism's *distributive* logic defines the clearest examples of the relation between the transumptive displacement of *poietic* force and the constructive role of the perceiver in defining the parameters of the artwork.[2346] This logic is subtly at work in most minimalist narrative. Minimal, concrete, linguistic terms appear to be the *telos* of a process of progressive reduction, but, in fact, prompt a significant transumptive redistribution as they are processed. A dynamic intermediary field is generated – one upon which the work is distributed between concept, language and the most austere representational markers of both. The distributive dynamic habitually pivots upon the sudden extension or contraction of the linguistic sphere. This is nowhere clearer than in concretism – an extended discussion of which precedes – and it is no exaggeration to say that intermedial distribution is so central to the work of such poets as Lax, Williams and Finlay, that their proper medium can only be described with any accuracy in terms of an intermedium.

[2345] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 184.
[2346] To recall, for many critics this is the most salient mark of minimalism, especially in the visual arts.

Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (Track 50)[2347] presents a particularly compelling example of minimalism's distributory logic. A composition for tape and string quartet, its melodies are very evidently derived from carefully chosen and interwoven narrative samples. As Reich reports,

> The idea for the pieces comes from my childhood. When I was one year old my parents separated. My mother moved to Los Angeles and my father stayed in New York. Since they arranged divided custody, I travelled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942 accompanied by my governess. While these trips were exciting and romantic at the time I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains.[2348]

The natural melodic qualities of these vocal samples are intensified as they are transmediated – taken up by a string quartet, subtly transformed, and woven into the next sample. That the aesthetic substance of the work should thus be distributed – *between* voice and instrument, live performance and recording – locates it very precisely upon an intermedial *atopos*. Without sacrificing the best of minimalism's attributes, Reich's work exhibits the vision of a subtle narrator. At once "documentary and musical reality,"[2349] the imbrication of musical, verbal and visuo-conceptual elements – what Reich describes as a "theater in the mind"[2350] – reflect an art which is integrated to the precise extent that its *poietic* essence is also distributed.

However, perhaps the finest example of the minimalist logic of transumption, its manner of exhibiting itself *qua* medium and in the very process of mediation, is discovered in the light art of Dan Flavin. What we gain from Flavin's work is an acute understanding of the potential migrancy of the artwork: its movement between *poiesis*, creativity, and the possibility or impossibility of creation *ex nihilo* on the one hand; and *aesthesis*, or art's expression and perception through physical sensation, on the other. In short, trying to comprehend the objecthood both explicit and implicit in the light-art of Dan Flavin emphasizes the atopian location of the minimalist artwork with some force – its migration between the physicality of location, the insubstantiality of its medium, and the *poietic* force which some imagine underpins its emergence. Even a cursory encounter with this work reveals, as Jeffrey Weiss suggests, the continuation

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[2347] Steve Reich, "America – Before the War," *Different Trains*. Nonesuch, 1988.
[2348] Steve Reich, "Different Trains," *Writings on Music*, 151.
[2349] Ibid., 158.
[2350] Ibid.

of a tradition of both abstraction and transcendentalism, of "the transformation of painting and sculpture into a third medium that both transgresses and transcends the first two."[2351]

This observation regarding transmedial synthesis reveals a radical transgression not only of the exhibitionary spaces reserved for the conventional media of the visual arts,[2352] but also of art's constitutive media themselves. The proper medium of the work appears to migrate: it is at once the physical light fixture; the chemical light-producing reaction within the fixture; the light itself, as it irradiates; and complex boundaries this mediation encounters in terms its environment – the architectural space, the space of other objects (often including other light-art) and the physicality of the viewer.

[2351] Jeffrey Weiss, Preface, *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004) 10.

[2352] Flavin's work is exhibited in five principal ways. The first is his wall-mounted fixtures in which cases the fittings effectively occupy the space traditionally reserved for painting. The second is the free-standing works, in which case the fixtures are associable with sculpture. Third, are those fixtures which lean against wall, particularly corners, which offer a point of conjunction of the pictorial and sculptural (a similar technique can be noted of John McCracken's leaning planks). The fourth means of presentation pays careful attention to the architectural aspects of the environment. Finally, we might include Flavin's large-scale architectural installations which appear intrinsic to the architecture itself, such as the celebrated installation at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Tracy, to celebrate the love of a lifetime)*, 1992. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Figure 111)

Figure 111: Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Tracy, to celebrate the love of a lifetime***), 1992.**

Addressing the complex of physical, conceptual and perceptual location implicit in the light art of Dan Flavin goes some way to understanding the manner in which certain objects, by virtue of their *atopianism*, draw attention once more to the question of *poietic* force, now not merely in terms of its knowability, but in the fullness of its transumptive potential to dislocate in the act of distributive relocation of its material (the artwork). In this work, a minimalist *atopia* takes on its most material face. Far from an instance of pure perception, it is clear in this art that something of formative significance occurs prior to perception – to furnish the sense with information, but also to account for the distributed objecthood of the work, which is evident regardless of how the work is apprehended. Tiffany Bell ends an essay on Flavin's art by commenting that "[j]ust as you cannot really delineate the material boundaries of a Flavin installation, you cannot pinpoint the precise moment of its making. The lights shine in a continuous present."[2353] Examining this statement in relation to one of Flavin's iconic corner pieces,

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[2353] Tiffany Bell, "Fluorescent Light as Art," *Dan Flavin*, 127.

untitled (to the real Dan Hill) 1b 1978 (Figure 112),[2354] we encounter an exemplary case of such *distributive minimalism*. Attempting to grasp the process of transumptive emergence in the very midst of its relocation or taking-place *qua* force, this work allows us to rehearse the fundamental concerns of *atopian* objecthood with particular clarity.

Figure 112: Dan Flavin, *untitled (to the real Dan Hill) 1b*, 1978.

Flavin's work clarifies the manner in which in *distributive* minimalism, the transumptive process through which the minimalist object manifests is coherent despite frequent expectation that it ought not to be. A similar phenomenon is observable in Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, in which no adequate anticipation of the sublime effect of energy distributed by repeated lightning strikes can be offered, either by concept or by the work's physical configuration. Transumption of such work always occurs upon a threshold – a sequence of occurrences, conceptual points, or physical configurations, able to present a *parataxis* of quite distinct processes. Considering Flavin's light art, for example, we find a homologically

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[2354] Dan Flavin, *untitled (to the real Dan Hill) 1b*, 1978. Museum of Modern Art, Antwerp.

compelling example of distributive transumption as a whole. Such art paradoxically is both produced and deconstituted by a dissipating energy – the irradiance of light *qua* medium, the dissipation of which is precisely what enables its convergence as an *aesthetic-poietic* form. Finally, might we not recognize here the meeting of the *sublime* (the putting-into-form of formlessness) and the procedurally *poietic* (the putting-into-form of formation) as defining the *work* of distributive minimalism.

The distributive immediacy of this work – a position of significant productive paradox – is clarified only by a close examination of *untitled (to the real Dan Hill)* itself. Six clear processual elements are distinguishable: the production of the light fittings; the conceptualization of the work; powering the situation; the irradiance of the fixtures; the physicality and limitations of the physical environment in which irradiances occurs; and the perception of the work.

Regarding production, as was the case with many minimalist, Flavin made exclusive use of premanufactured, commercially produced, fluorescent fixtures for all of his *proposals*.[2355] Thus, Flavin's art is in the first instance conditioned upon a situation of production not directly related to either the artists or the work: industrial manufacture.[2356] Adapting the primary palate of blue, green, pink and yellow, *untitled (to the real Dan Hill)* is structurally elementary, consisting of four connected fluorescent tubes, two facing forward and two facing backward. These premanufactured objects, which Flavin stressed should retain their union labels,[2357] enter what Meyer describes as the "netherworld of dada…non-referential abstraction,"[2358] leaning like forgotten functional light fixtures in the corner of a gallery space, allowing the work to retain a sense of externality and autonomy within its subsequent artistic situation. Nonetheless it is clear that some form of conceptual work is underway – a sort of intervention of the imagination upon such basic materials, a notion which Flavin confirms by executing draughtsman-like plans of all of his work which were issued as certificates, doubling the proposal in an important sense,[2359] but at the same time pointing to the significant problems which persist regarding the materiality of the concept, particular as progenitor of rather abstract artwork.

[2355] In characteristic resistance to the critical establishment, Flavin insisted on referring to *proposals* rather than works (Govan, "Irony and Light," 71), *situations* rather than installations (Brydon E. Smith, "Recollections and Thoughts About Dan Flavin," *Dan Flavin*, 138), and *expositions* rather than exhibitions (Bell, *Fluorescent Light*, 116).

[2356] As noted above, the emphasis on eliminating artistic facture, and on using premanufactured objects, is a hallmark of the minimalism visual arts (Meyer, *MAP*, 186).

[2357] There are a number of reasons for this instruction, largely legal, or related to the goodwill of workers involved in the assemblage of proposals or situations within the exhibitionary space.

[2358] Ibid., 106.

[2359] In this way, Flavin's certificates formalize a certain split between conception and execution of the work.

Regardless of whether a fluorescent fixture is deployed in the commercial context as a source of functional lighting, or, through its conceptualization, formation and (retrospectively) perception, as fine art, such operation requires a very real activation in terms of its powering. Of course, this occurs in the banal act of switching the fixture on or off, yet this act locates very precisely two sources of power: the individual will, at once internal and external to the artwork, and the indifferent source of power, genuinely external to the object. A decision having been made, a predetermined distributory process is set in motion: sealed tubes of gasses (aragon and mercury) glow when electrified and cause the coated tubing of the fixtures to fluoresce and give off light of a particular colour or hue which depends on either the phosphors or pigments which coat the tubes.[2360] Through its irradiance, the proposal extends itself considerably and extremely rapidly. Although certain hues are directed – blue and green forward, yellow and pink backward – by its very nature radiance exceeds itself, and so these cannot simply be contained.

A principal virtue of light-art is that it takes place at the speed of light, making questions of perception immediate, emphasizing a certain understanding of sublime, minimalist presence. At the point of perceiving the artwork *qua* light, it is possible to say that the distributive character, mediatory parataxis, and the paradoxically ethereal materialism of the work coincide. However, to validate the transmediation of the work – from fixture and concept, to power, act and irradiance – the concrete encounter of light with its physical environment must be recognized as the principal means by which Flavin's proposals, quite literally, take their shape. Flavin's work in u-shaped bunkers in Marfa, Texas is exemplary in this respect (Figure 113-4):[2361] what appears at first to be two separate sources of light, have in fact a single source – a two sided proposal in a u-shaped tunnel, each light of sufficient strength to instantiate the situation in which a single work is distributed in a plural manner in a specific spatial configuration.

[2360] Govan, "Irony and Light," 59.
[2361] Dan Flavin, *untitled (Marfa Project)*, 1996. Chinati Foundation, Marfa.

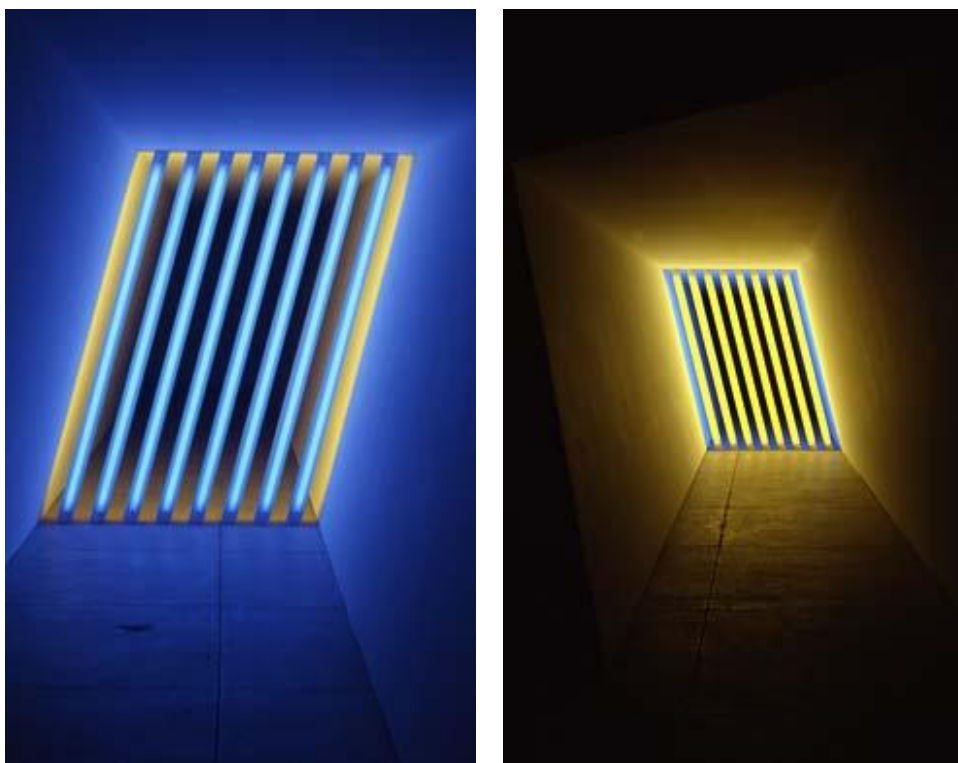**Figure 113:** *untitled (Marfa Project)*, **1996.**

Figure 114: Installation views of Dan Flavin, *untitled (Marfa project)*, **1996. These offer views are from opposite sides of the same proposal. .**

The ultimate *form* of light art is significantly altered not only by the concrete physical aspects of its exhibitionary environment – the shape of the gallery, the walls it encounters, the degree to which the space is enclosed – but also by the existing light situation of this environment. As Meyer notes, "the actual space of the room could be disrupted and played with,"[2362] affirming the work's ability to "transcen[d] the medium upon which it reflects…it does not cover the wall, but exposes it."[2363] The distribution which marks Flavin's work offers an important and difficult extension of the *aesthetic* and *poietic* quantity of the work: the latter insofar as the union of production, conception, illumination and dissipation encapsulates the distribution of novelty itself; the former to the extent that it is our perception of these numerous aesthetic properties, our "direct vision,"[2364] which finally draws together the distributive logic of the work.

Yet it would be a significant error to suggest that the minimalist logic of distribution – indeed of any of its transumptive modalities – necessarily *ends* with the perceptual or conceptual ordering of space. The atopia within which is discovered the predication of the minimalist poetic, extends across and beyond any simple separation of nature, technology or art. Its province, to recall, is the Real: the indifferent taking-place of contingent entities *qua* their ontological quantity. The exemplarity of minimalism does not, however, reside in its capacity to produce, or even influence the Real, but rather as a means of reflecting the sheer consistency of the Real in the face of pure multiplicity. The minimalist object persists, and through its persistence it clarifies the facticity of the Real. Minimalism offers the aesthetic means with which to maintain the crucial if often minimal distinction between Being and Void, existence and inexistence, order and chaos: this is its exemplary vocation.

In this spirit, we look to the far corner of Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta*, backed by woodland and facing the untamed landscape from which its *poietic* substance has been wrought, to discover Finlay's most iconic work: *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future – Saint-Just* (Figure 115).[2365] The *poietic* and prophetic force of these words – each chiselled on a giant slab of rock, powerful fragments of a great existential logic, of the conflict of radical and revolutionary logic[2366] – confirm the sense that one has reached both a physical and a *poietic* threshold. Its medium is massive, brutal, and durable. Yet, these words are fragments – broken, partial and rendered coherent only by immense force and effort. Theirs is a

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[2362] *MAP*, 102.

[2363] Ibid. It should be noted that Meyer is referring to a different work from the one presently under consideration, and so my following statements in this regard should be viewed as expansionary and not contradictory.

[2364] Baker, *Minimalism*, 19.

[2365] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future, Saint-Just*, 1983. Little Sparta, Dunsyre.

[2366] These are, after all, the words of the French Revolutionary and co-architect of the Terror, Saint-Just.

minimalism which expresses itself in contingency, and which takes its tentative shape precisely within the indifferent passage of time – within the Real, the facticity and persistence of which it exemplifies with a tenacity which strains across every medium, across history, and across thought itself. Minimalism reflects a profound sense of vulnerability, but also persistence, which inhabits the entire *poietic* enterprise.

Figure 115: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future, Saint-Just***, 1983.**

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