

## Between Object and Human Domain: Lotte Lyon's Gestural Minimalism

### I. Introduction: The Inheritance of Minimalism and Its Modification by the Indexical

Lotte Lyon mainly works in three distinct artistic genres. One is the creation of sculpture made of wood or plywood, basically maintaining rectangular, box-like shapes. The other is a series of photographic records of the spatial arrangements of three-dimensional structures made of such neutral or readymade objects as pieces of paper, chairs, and blankets. Drawing also constitutes an important domain, but the first two kinds of artistic production strongly indicate that Lyon works in the vein of Minimalism; her preference for simple, geometrical forms, limited use of color, simple technique and use of inexpensive everyday materials confirm her faithful observation of the basic Minimalist principles of the reduction of visual presentation to geometrical forms and the minimal demonstration of technical expertise, as well as the use of industrial materials. Lyon's inheritance of Minimalism, however, is not limited to its formal characteristics; she attempts to reenact the power of Minimalist objects to sharpen the spectator's perception, performance, and association by making her own alterations. For this purpose, she applies a unique method of inserting "gestural" or "indexical" elements into her geometrical constructions.

The word "gestural" here refers to the ability of a small, concrete detail to indicate, by way of association and analogy, an action, an object, or a context beyond what is directly visible, by frequently connecting the present expression to human or natural conditions. Lyon's sculpture, or three-dimensional objects, frequently present such details. For example, *Untitled* (2007), a paravent consisting of two wooden panels attached, has dark purple paint applied evenly to its entire surface, except for a narrow area on the uppermost part, which is left unpainted, leaving a narrow triangular area, to the effect of making the outline of the sculpture's upper edge slanted. This small alteration creates the optical illusion of erosion, suggesting that a solid sculpture is in the process of dissolution. The effect connects the apparently immobile, inorganic object with a natural phenomenon. The detail thus endows the impersonal, abstract sculpture with meanings that lead to a natural or human domain. This ability of a small detail to evoke a larger context through a structural or physical analogy and association with something that belongs to another domain of experience is called "metonymical" in rhetoric. The critic Rosalind Krauss calls this metonymical detail by the special term "index." The index, according to Krauss, is a "type of sign" that establishes their meaning, not through the symbolic, one-to-one correspondence of parts, but "along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents"; being "marks or traces of a particular cause," indexes are like "footprints or medical symptoms."<sup>1</sup>

The "indexical" attitude constitutes the basic conceptual principle of Lyon's artistic practice. By presenting details or relations of objects that suggest certain evocative gestures, her artwork indicates a transition from the formal to the physical or imaginative experience, and modifies the rigidly purist definition of Minimalist objects by calling attention to the link between their formal artistic character and contemporary human life. The indexical, in Lyon's case, then, should be largely interpreted as the use of formal details in an irregular manner to disrupt the object's homogeneous identity, and bring in the heterogeneous context in the present situation, to change the spectators' perception of the object and themselves, both physically and conceptually. There are three basic modes of Lyon's indexical method: 1) the insertion of a gestural detail in the geometrical construction in order to evoke human or natural contexts through association; 2) the reconstitution of a two-dimensional plane as a three-dimensional structure, which synthesizes contradictory elements, in order to reveal the plural constitution of any object, and 3) the construction of a sculpture that divides the installation space to endow it with a special atmosphere and induce the spectator's physical interaction with it. But before elucidating on the practical functioning of Lyon's "indexical" method, we must ask what are the perceptual, performative, and associative potentials of the Minimalist sculpture.

## II. Minimalism's Conceptual Domain: The Perceptual, Performative, and Associative Potentials of the Minimalist Object

There is a commonly-established assumption that the Minimalist sculpture or object excludes any referential meaning outside of its palpable material presence. <sup>2</sup> It is true that the historical Minimalists, including Donald Judd and Robert Morris, defied the representational reproduction of an "illusion" of reality, calling for "a specific object" or a "non-imagistic sculpture."<sup>3</sup> But they did not reject the phenomenological experience induced by the object's formal presence, which often elicited the spectator's physical responses that in turn inspired some psychological reflections. Morris, for example, emphasized how such physical conditions as light, space, and the size and positions of the sculpture influenced the spectators' integral comprehension of the sculpture, including its physical affects and psychological implications (a large size indicates a sense of greatness, thus placing distance between itself and the viewer, for example), by stating that "the major aesthetic terms ... exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and the viewpoint of the spectator," while Judd observed that through the serial repetition of identical forms, the physical impact of the object can be increased until the accumulated effect reinforced the sculpture's irreducibly unique presence.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Morris's and Judd's experiential emphasis, Robert Smithson, as a contemporary theoretical supporter of Minimalism, interpreted the Minimalist repetition of geometrical form as an allegorical reflection of the "vapid and dull" mood permeating their contemporary reality by recapitulating the repetition of New York's high-rise buildings, rows of suburban housing installments, and stacks of product boxes on supermarket shelves. <sup>5</sup> In spite of their different points of emphasis – Morris on the performative, Judd on the perceptual, and Smithson on the associative –, the three artists equally support the sculpture's capacity to go beyond its formal autonomy toward the construction of a meaning that is relevant to, and integral with, the fundamental experience of the human body and mind.

## III. Three Ways To Make Objects Human: the Associative, Perceptual, and Performative Aspects of Lyon's Sculptural Construction

Lyon attaches a meaning to impersonal geometrical forms by adding an indexical detail that evokes a human gesture or a natural phenomenon, or by installing them in relation to other objects or to architectural elements in a room, in positions that suggest an analogy with human activities. The associative evocation of external contexts disrupts the sculpture's formal autonomy, while expanding its field of reference. In her 2004 sculpture *Untitled*, for example, a large plywood box-like object is placed diagonally against the wall, with casters attached at the bottom, but only on one side; in another sculpture, *Untitled* (2005), a lidless rectangular plywood box is also placed diagonally against the wall; the large inside area is painted white, with the paint coming over the edge of the raised bottom part. In each case, the gestural associations of details and positions indicate human actions like moving (like an accident?), or the natural phenomenon of a liquid – milk? snow? – flowing over the steep edge, thus bringing the sense of process into the experience of solid, immobile objects. Each "gesture" or context evoked may infer more specific situations and details, according to the spectator's individual memory, but the "true" meaning of the gestures remains undetermined, leaving other possibilities for imagination.

Such an indexical presentation of objects enables the spectator to move from the sculpture's formal to conceptual domain. Although the evocation of a context is made purely through the sculpture's visual information, the associative link inspired by a gestural detail appeals to the spectator's physical register of actions, places, or situations, enabling him or her to bring together heterogeneous phenomena and moments from distant situations. This process and functioning of the gestural evocation, induced by Lyon's sculptural arrangement, resembles those of involuntary memory, elaborated in Marcel Proust's novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. The following passage vividly captures the reconstruction of memory through the chain of associations evoked through the physical positioning of the body and details registered in the speaker's physical perception:

My body, too benumbed to move, would try to locate, according to the form of its fatigue, the position of its limbs, in order to deduce from this the direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, in order to reconstruct and name the dwelling in which it found itself. Its memory, the memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulders, offered in succession several of the rooms where it had slept... And even before my mind...had identified the house by reassembling the circumstances, it – my body – would recall the kind of bed in each one, the location of the doors, the angle at which the light came in thorough the windows, the existence of a hallway.... (ellipsis mine)<sup>6</sup>

Lyon's 2005 sculpture, *Untitled (Boudoir)* also enables the spectator to make a transition from the visual to the tactile experience by setting up a situation in which a gestural analogy of a visual detail enables the spectator to experience the object and its surrounding space physically, causing the synthesis of heterogeneous senses. A rectangular box of approximately human height with a partial opening of the side wall revealing the dark-painted interior allures the spectators to peer inside; the act may set off their personal memory, while making them aware of their altered relationship to the object, in which they are no longer looking at the aesthetic object from a distance, but entering into a situation that demands an active interaction and interpretation. The work also confirms the symbolic function of a geometrical form, as indicated by Smithson, which can be found ubiquitously in everyday human life.

The second characteristic of Lyon's indexical method is the alteration of a flat and continuous plane into a three-dimensional object or structural arrangement, in order to reveal the multi-layered constitutions of a single object that can contain different dimensions and shapes within its apparently homogeneous appearance. This operation finds its exemplary case in Lyon's 2009 photographic record of the three-dimensional arrangement of paperwork, entitled *A Series of Sixteen B&W Photos*. In this series, small rectangular pieces of paper are put together and propped up with stationary clips. The relations of pieces can suggest certain gestures, while shadows cast by the objects indicate their physical relation with space. One picture shows a strip of paper rolled up and fastened together by the clip to create a free-standing columnar object. The temporary fastening leaves the end of the slip peer out of the rounded outline, to suggest the slip's original rectangular form. This free-standing paper sculpture embodies the plural constitution of a simple object that synthesizes many contradictory characteristics: created out of a two-dimensional piece of paper through the simple performative act of rolling up and fastening; it possesses the three-dimensional structure containing a hollow space inside and casting an amorphous shadow outside, also showing a curvilinear outline created by the rectangular form consisting only of straight lines.

Another such example is seen in her 2006 photographic record, *A Series of Thirteen Color Photos*. In this humorous and light-spirited exercise in Minimalist composition, using only white sheets of paper without cutting or using equipment, Lyon creates a three-dimensional structure by folding or stacking individual sheets of paper. Various relations constituted by the sheets' different positioning – standing, lying, supporting or being supported – indicate human gestures and situations. Extremely simple but richly suggestive, one picture shows two sheets of paper placed in a constructive relation to each other. One sheet, loosely folded round, containing empty space inside, supports another sheet, which is lightly placed on the curved back of the folded sheet, and keeps the sheet underneath in a folded position by putting weight on it. This structural arrangement may indicate such situations as a slope or two human figures engaged in an abstract dance, but the main point of the artwork is that two rectangular sheets of paper can make up a three-dimensional construction that shows a graceful curve, which is maintained only by the tension and gravity produced by their mutual supporting to keep their balance. With both examples of her photography of paper arrangements in 2006 and 2009, Lyon presents her own unique version of a "specific object," defined by Judd as a three-dimensional figure that gains its unique presence from its actual relation with space. <sup>7</sup> Hers is a fragile object with an improvisational appearance which does not signify any representational figure, but induces associations while embodying the inherent complexity of a mere object that unfolds its plural elements unimaginable from the original two-dimensional plane; through the synthesis of contradicting elements, the object also integrates the process of its own making.

The third mode of Lyon's indexical method is the sculpture that divides the surrounding space in order to induce the spectator's action. This sort of sculpture as a performing device has appeared in Lyon's repertoire since 2003. But its most typical examples are found among the box-like plywood structures, created in 2007, with one or two side panels removed, and parts of the inside painted or patterned with stripes and grids. Although such structures also possess their associative functions, they strongly urge the spectators' physical commitment by inviting them to stand inside or walk around it, so that they could feel the specific nature of the new space. Standing with an approximately human, or more than human height, the object marks the distinction between the front and the surface, the inside and the outside, creating some half-concealed corners or walls to hide behind. The interaction with the object enables the spectator to understand, physically, the specific atmosphere of space according to his or her position; the physical, or tactile, perception of the new space relates the viewer more personally to the place than the rational understanding acquired through vision.

The object as a device to induce action may recall Robert Morris's 1961 seminal sculpture, *Box for Standing*, a box made for the purpose of having a person stand inside. But Lyon's emphasis on the sculpture's demarcation of space that gives it a specific atmosphere finds resonance in the idea of sculpture as an object that creates a special area of co-existence around it, offered by the Japanese artist Kishio Suga. A representative practitioner and theorist of Mono-ha, which is the 1970s' avant-garde movement and the Japanese counterpart to Minimalism, Suga extracted, from his observation of a dividing stone that stood on the boundary of a village, a comprehension of the sculpture's space demarcated as an area of belonging, created by the relation of an object to its surroundings, constituting a "world" that expanded through the contact and interrelations among objects, persons, and space.<sup>8</sup>

Lyon's 2008 sculpture, *Untitled*, encourages the spectator to explore the relation of his or her body to the space created by the object's division of the room's neutral space. The object consists of two rectangular wood plates that are attached together in the middle and open out diagonally in different directions, evoking a Japanese folded screen, and creating an alcove-like empty space in the inward-bending area between the two rectangular planes. Installed near the room's wall, the object makes several corners between itself and the wall. The natural yellow hue of the wood plates, with grid patterns painted all over in yellow, would inspire an illusion of the object melting into the white expanse of the wall and the floor, and reappearing at other moments, according to the varying effects of light. The object's many angles, marking the inside and the outside, and the grid patterns drawn over them, together encourage the impression of folds dividing the room's interior in complex ways. The work's formal simplicity also enhances the spectator's performance and associative interpretation, thus integrating the three aspects of Lyon's indexical operation.

#### IV. Toward the Fragile and Ephemeral: Lyon's Minimal Sculpture in the Temporal Domain

Lyon's art receives and extends the experiential aspects of Minimalist objects through her unique sculptural execution that uses the object as a medium for altering the spectator's perception of space and body, while enriching his or her experience by evoking a personal memory through gestural association. She brings further adjustments to her inheritance, however, by providing a sculptural experience much simpler, and more ephemeral and flexible than her historical predecessors'. Her paper arrangement, for example, radically deviates from the historical Minimalism's insistence on the solid materiality of the specific object, but nevertheless conveys the physical effects that can be attainable only when a three-dimensional object actually interacts with space and light. The addition of such banal everyday details as casters, or application of paint and patterns to sculpture's parts may violate the purity of the Minimalist form by equipping it with everyday associations. But the decision connects the object with the human domain. The ephemeral and temporary nature of many of her sculptural compositions emphasizes their nature as an event, the occasion to stimulate the spectator's perception, imagination, and action. This inclination to lightness, fluidity, and ephemerality (including the connection with the secular) may be a sign of Lyon's commitment to her time, the uncertainty of which makes the artist more attentive to the physical affects of objects and their psychological implications than focus on its solid materiality. In the age of mass consumption, an ephemeral art work

that has a character of an event has the better chance of survival in the spectator's memory, as it offers a genuine knowledge of the close relation between body and mind, telling them how to retain their contact with the phenomenological world through the physical affects that conjure up imagined scenes.

## Notes

1 Rosalind E. Kraus, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 198.

2 James Meyer cites many of such delimiting assumptions that accompanies Minimalism today, as well as in its historical period, in his revisionist attempt to understand the diverse purposes and directions of Minimalism, in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 201), p. 1.

3 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1965) rpt. In *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Nova Scotia, Canada and New York: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 2005), p. 83; Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture" (1966) rpt. in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1968), p. 224.

4 Judd, pp. 188-9; Morris, p. 234.

5 Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966) rpt. in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 13.

6 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 10

7 Judd, p. 184; Judd announced that "actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than a flat surface" and whose direct definition of a specific object was a work that offered an "interesting experience," but Lyon's transformation of a sheet of paper through the act of folding or simple spatial arrangement finds a predecessor in the Japanese artist Jiro Takamatsu's work, *A Slack of Cloth*, a series made during the 1960s, in which a white sheet, with deliberately-left folds, was presented on the floor.

8 Kishio Suga, *Selected Writings of Suga Kishio: Spheres Will Not Be Closed* (Yokohama: Yokohama Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 105-107, p. 169: "Scattered objects have their surroundings (mainly existing spatially), and the surrounding objects and space can constitute a continuous expansion of situations created through their contact with one another; this expanded area can be called the 'world' of the objects" (169).