The Persistence of the Gesture in Minimalism

Aaron Martin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

M.FINE ARTS (Visual Art)
(by Research)

DECEMBER 2017

School of Art

Faculty Of The Victorian College Of The Arts And The Melbourne Conservatorium Of Music

The University of Melbourne

Produced on archival quality paper
Abstract

1960's North American Minimalism, with its slick “industrial elegance” instigated a rupture in abstract art by rejecting the gestural abstractionism of the preceding decades. This research argues that despite an apparent denial of the gesture, by many of the artists associated with Minimalism, it persisted. It identifies the critical role the gesture played in expanding Minimalist painting and sculpture during this period. It exploits contradictions within the Formalist doctrinaire of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried and returns to assess the Minimalists’ objects themselves.

The research is practice-led that positions itself within the modes of contemporary reductive and abstract art. It seeks to draw from and expand on a legacy of Minimalist art and Modernist Abstraction. Central to the research is a studio practice that explores a diverse range of methods and materials and employs gesture as a strategy to realize painting and sculptural outcomes.

The written dissertation makes compelling links between the gesture of Jackson Pollock and the sculptural methodology of many of the Minimalists: including Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Richard Serra and Eva Hesse. The research closely considers how the Pollockian gesture became embedded within the Minimalist practice and the manner in which it became a generative method for a group of artists who facilitated an expansion of media and practice.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is 11,700 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies

Aaron Martin
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor Dr Mark Shorter, for his support, guidance and patience during this research.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of the MFA research coordinators Dr Stephen Haley, Dr Bernhard Sachs, and Dr Kate Just.

I would like to thank all of my MFA cohorts, too many to acknowledge here, but a special thank you to Ray Carter, Jimmy Langer, Corinna Berndt and Kellie Wells.

I also extend a thank you to Craig Easton, PJ Hickman and Patricia Todarello for assistance with all things gallery related and their inputs into this project.

Thank you to my mother Lynette Martin and my daughter Chantelle Martin they show belief and enthusiasm in my endeavors, even in my times of doubt.

Finally, I would like to thank the most supportive person in my life my partner Misuzu Ueda.

Oh, and lastly, my fur friend Laika, who seemed very happy to take long walks and discuss all things art and philosophy.
## Table of Content

Abstract
Acknowledgements
List of Figures
Introduction

### Chapter 1
*Gesture, Formalism, Presence, and Theatricality*

1.1: Greenberg & Fried, Opticidity and the Gesture  
1.2: Robert Morris, An Activation of Space  
1.3: Greenberg and Fried, Presence and Theatricality  
1.4: Morris and Judd, the Pollockian gesture

### Chapter 2
*Gravity, Gesture, and Movement*

2.1: Pollock and Morris, Operations of Gravity  
2.2 Radial: Tyres, Gravity, Stress, and Deformability  
2.3: Richard Serra: Gesture through Movement  
   - actual and implied  
2.4: Arc (floor to wall), Peak (corner proposition),  
Open Span: Suspension of Gravity

### Chapter 3
*Repetition, Seriality and the Gesture*

3.1: Bochner, Muybridge, Seriality, and Repetition  
3.2: Judd’s stacks/progressions, and Hesse’s response  
3.3: Vertical Span v.1-3

Conclusions
Bibliography
Appendix
List of Figures

Figure 1  Jackson Pollock, *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950, oil, enamel, and aluminium on canvas, 221 x 299.7 cm (87 x 118 in.) The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 2  Robert Morris, One-person installation view, 1964, Green Gallery, New York Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 3  Robert Morris, *Untitled (threadwaste)*, 1968, Felt, asphalt, mirrors, wood, copper tubing, steel cable, and lead, Dimensions variable, approximately 21 1/2” x 21’ 11” x 16’ 9” (54.6 x 668 x 510.5 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 4  Jackson Pollock at work in his studio, 12 images, photograph, 1950, Photos by Hans Namuth Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 5  Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm* (detail) 1950, oil, enamel, and aluminium on canvas Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.) Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 6  Robert Morris, *Wall Hanging (Tenture)*, 1969-70, cut felt, 250 x 372 x 30 cm, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 7  Robert Morris, Felt, (partial view), 1967 (creation), felt, The University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois, United States) Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 8  Aaron Martin, *Radial*, 2014, installation, rubber, dimensions variable Source: Artist’s image

Figure 9  Aaron Martin, *Radial*, 2014, installation, rubber, dimensions variable Source: Artist’s image

Figure 10  Richard Serra, Throwing lead performance, Castelli Warehouse, New York, 1968, Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, New York


Figure 12  Richard Serra, One Ton Prop (House of Cards), 1969 (refabricated 1986), lead antimony, four plates, each 48 x 48 x 1" (122 x 122 x 2.5 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 13  Richard Serra, Equal (Corner Prop Piece), 1969-70, lead antimony, Plate 48 x 48 x 3/4" (122 x 122 x 2 cm), pole 7' 1/4" (210 cm) long x 4 3/4" (11 cm) in diameter, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Figure 14  Richard Serra, Strike: To Roberta and Rudy, 1969-71, hot-rolled steel, 8 feet 1 inch x 24 feet x 1 1/2 inches (246.4 x 731.5 x 3.8 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Panza Collection, 1991, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 5 November, 2017)

Figure 15  Aaron Martin, Arc (floor to wall), 2015, hoop pine, plasterboard, tape, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 16  Aaron Martin, Arc (floor to wall), 2015, hoop pine, plasterboard, tape, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 17  Aaron Martin, Peak (corner proposition) (partial view), 2016, plywood, bolts, 3250mm x 1800 mm x 80mm
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 18  Aaron Martin, Peak (corner proposition), 2016, plywood, bolts, 3250mm x 1800 mm x 80mm
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 19  Aaron Martin, Open Span, 2017, aluminum, 6000mm x 25mm x 10mm
Source: Artist’s image
Figure 20  Aaron Martin, *Open Span*, 2017, aluminum, 6000mm x 25mm x 10mm
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 21  Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968, stainless steel, Plexiglas, Overall (10 units): 22.9 x 101.6 x 78.8 cm (9 x 40 x 31 in.), Art Gallery of Ontario
Source: Artstor.org (accessed 1 November, 2017)

Figure 22  Judd, Donald, (Progressions) Marfa: North Artillery Shed: interior, Permanent installation of fifty-two works by Donald Judd, Chinati Foundation
Source: Artstor.org (accessed 1 November, 2017)

Figure 23  Eva Hesse, *Sans II* 1968

Figure 24  Aaron Martin, *Vertical Span*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 25  Aaron Martin, *Vertical Span*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed
Source: Artist’s image

Figure 26  Aaron Martin *Twofold*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1500mm x 1200mm
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 27  Aaron Martin *Twofold Two*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1676 mm x 1981 mm
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 28  Aaron Martin *Small Lateral Shift*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1500mm x 1270mm
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 29  Aaron Martin *Vertical Span V.3*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 30  Aaron Martin *Open Span*, 2017, aluminum, 6500mm x 25mm x 10mm  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 31  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 32  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 33  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 34  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 35  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 36  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Introduction

Through most of the ’50s the dominant style was very loose painting—it was all Abstract Expressionist painting, so there was almost no idea for art that wasn’t very sloshy....

Donald Judd, 1971

They wanted geometry...as means to reduce the sense of the human gesture and to get a clean, anonymous edge to their work. Kirk Varnedoe, 2003

1960’s North American Minimalism, with its slick “industrial elegance” instigated a rupture in abstract art by rejecting the gestural abstractionism of the preceding decades. This dissertation will argue that despite an apparent denial of the gesture, by many of the artists associated with Minimalism, it persisted. It will identify the critical role the gesture played in expanding Minimalist painting and sculpture during this period, and how it continues to be an increasing influence on contemporary minimalist and reductive practices.

---


3 Throughout this paper, I apply the term Minimalism with hesitation. James Meyer is amongst many critics in this field that note “all the artist identified with Minimalism distanced themselves from the label” because it “implied a stylistic and theoretical and coherence to which none of them subscribed.” This position is supported by David Batchelor who suggests despite their difference in approach the group the “loose group of artists” ”had enough in common” to discuss as “something like a movement.” The term Post-Minimalism, coined by the critic Robert Pincus-Witten, is omitted from this paper to avoid confusing classifications.
Chapter one, *Gesture, Formalism, Presence and Theatricality*, initiates the inquiry with a return to Clement Greenburg and Michael Fried's formalist doctrine on Modernist Abstraction. A particular focus is on the critics’ method of opticality: a method that Greenberg arrives at through a teological quest to distill painting’s essentials. To tease out these ideas further I draw on scholarship from the period, and argue that Greenberg/Fried’s proclivity to centralize opticality as a primary form of analysis neglects the gesture and other formal qualities within abstract painting. The middle section of this chapter addresses two critical aspects of Minimalism: the notion of theatricality and; the phenomenological experience for the spectator. A rereading of Michael Fried’s 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood* assists in addressing the notion of "presence" and its concomitant concept of theatricality. In this seminal piece, the critic speculates that Minimalist sculpture is fundamentally theatrical, and this manifests jointly through: the encounter with the sculpture - that he asserts is "equivalent of encountering another body" - and the Minimalist’s "preoccupation" with time.4

The concept of the phenomenological experience of the Minimalist object is explored through the sculpture and writing of Robert Morris. Morris in his early Minimalist work produces a series of mute and almost featureless objects that reorganize open space by expanding into it. With an interest in how the art object is experienced and received, Morris attempts to create a new participatory role for the spectator and in doing so reshuffles the hierarchical positions of the spectator/art-object.

---

Jackson Pollock’s gesture is a central motif of this inquiry. Pollock’s method to enlist gravity as an inventive technique to extend gesture, along with his technique of reorienting the canvas from floor to wall during its production, becomes a crux in understanding the gesture for many of the Minimalists. In Chapter 2, *Gravity, Gesture and Movement*, I determine that Robert Morris and Richard Serra centralize and develop the Pollockian gesture within their practice. Morris’ method of cutting into industrial felt and Serra’s propulsion of molten lead are both paragons of the type of sculpture that evinces the practical potential of gravity to form gesture. The critic Rosalind Krauss suggests that Morris’s incisions into the industrial felt – that she links to Pollock’s exploitation of the horizontal and vertical axis – is just one of the many ways the Pollockian gesture manifests in Minimalism. Drawing on the Pollockian gesture (channeled through Morris and Serra), I utilize recuperated automotive tyres and develop a series of sculptural installations. These carefully arranged installs reflect Morris’ interest in the “Antiform” and place an important emphasis on the positioning of the objects within the room. In a second body of work I draw on Serra’s *Prop Pieces*: in which the artist combines architecture and heavy industrial materials to construct finely poised assemblages. My interpretations of Serra’s tectonic arrangements employ lightweight industrial materials and realize gesture through an activation of space and architecture.

Chapter 3 examines the gesture within the Minimalist’s methodology of repetition and seriality. In his 1967 essay, *The Serial Attitude* Mel Bochner asserts that the Minimalist’s proclivity for repetition and seriality is traceable to the photography of Eadweard Muybridge, and further contends that
Muybridge’s frame-by-frame moments of frozen time served as a base for the Minimalists to insert their repetitive formulations. In an effort to expand on Bochner’s hypotheses, I make a comparative study of two artists who worked in this manner, Donald Judd and Eva Hesse. The precise nature of Judd’s *stacks* and *progression* appear static and obdurate when equated to the unrestrained materiality of Eva Hesse’s work. Hesse’s reply to Judd’s sequential constructions was a series of imprecise three-dimensional grids molded from fiberglass and latex and exposes the artist’s interest in the Minimalist seriality and repetition. In a deliberate act, she applies materials that falter under the persuasion of gravity, tempering Judd’s rigorous adherence to the obdurate object, and suggests the gesture is locatable within the parameters of the repetition and seriality. My sculptural response to the Minimalists’ concept of repetition and seriality is in the form of a modular assemblage that employs standardized units to create a car jack tower. In a method that reflects Judd’s stacks, the tower completes an extension between the floor and the ceiling. In its conception, it applies the Minimalists’ logic of repetition, yet its method of construction deliberately exploits the fallibility inherent in Hesse’s methodology. In the last section of this chapter I explore a suite of monochromatic paintings that are currently being developed in the studio. These works intend to explore methods of seriality, process, the body, and to respond site-specifically to their environment.
Chapter 1: Gesture, Formalism, Presence, and Theatricality

Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is - among many other things – continuity, and unthinkable without it.

Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible. Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, 1960\(^5\)

**Section 1.1: Greenberg & Fried, Opticallity and the Gesture**

…the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion…..but it does and must permit optical illusion. Clement Greenberg

*Linear history has unraveled somewhat.* Donald Judd, *Specific Objects*, 1965\(^6\)

By the early 1960’s the formalist art critic Clement Greenberg had simplified his teleological equation of modernist painting, this had developed, or rather reduced, to such an extent that he declared that painting’s defining quality lay in its flatness and “flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art.”\(^7\) This was consistent with his ideas on medium specificity.\(^8\) Aware, however, that flatness alone came equipped with its own dangers: a trajectory towards an undesirable endgame of the monochrome and a potential slide into literalness - the all-white or all-black paintings of Rauschenberg being a case in point -

---


\(^6\) Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Year Book 8* (1965). 181

\(^7\) Greenberg.

\(^8\) Greenberg’s specificity encourages a distillation in each of the mediums to arrive at a specific element that is shared with no other medium. For sculpture it is three-dimensionality; for painting it is flatness. See ibid.
Greenberg included a second essential property of “opticality” into his prescriptive formulation; stressing, along with flatness, its importance in the creation of the pictorial.  

For Greenberg opticality meant an "analogue of vision itself," an opportunity to create a transcendental picture plane and in so doing avoid the need for illusionist space within that plane. In his essay *The New Sculpture* he declared:

To render substance entirely optical, and form .......as an integral part of an ambient space-this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage.

Greenberg’s optical method was quickly adopted and then extended by Michael Fried. In his criticism of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, he advocated for opticality to be the sole method in perceptual understanding, denying any relationship to the materiality or actual space outside the limits of the painting plane.

The skeins of paint appear on the canvas as a continuous, allover line which... [creates] a kind of space-filling curve of immense complexity.... [The] other elements in the painting.... are woven together... to create [a]... the homogenous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all. That is, Pollock’s allover drip paintings refuse to bring one's

---

9 Ibid.  
attention to a focus anywhere. This is important. Because it was only in the context of a style entirely homogenous, allover in nature, and resistant to ultimate focus that the different elements in the painting—most important, line and color—could be made, for the first time in Western painting, to function as wholly autonomous pictorial elements.\(^\text{13}\)

From the outset, Greenberg and Fried's proclivity for opticality, and their tendency to centralize it within their formalist structure received criticism from critics and artists alike. Most of the dissenting scholarship focused on the inflexibility of the method. It was highlighted that the optical method was provisional on an exclusivity of a vantage position; many noted that the closer one moves to the painting/sculpture the less efficient the method of opticality became. One of the first to pick up on the method's fallibility was Toby Mussman. In 1966, he suggested that to insist on reading Pollock's "paint-strewn or paint-laden surface as a single synoptic image," is to neglect Pollock's gesture and the materiality of the work. He went on to say that the "all-over line," suggested by Fried, creates a "homogenous visual fabric," that "tends to ignore the manner in which that field was made."\(^\text{14, 15}\)

He addressed the subject in his 1966 essay *The Literalness and the Infinite*:


From far away, the consideration of opticality is certainly a crucial one: but close to, the issue of opticality vanishes, and one is absorbed with how the pools of dried paint have formed and how one color may have become mixed with another.  

In construing “opticality vanishes” with proximity (the closer one moves to the painting the more ineffectual the method of opticality becomes), Mussman challenged the dialectical oppositions of the optical and the material. Moreover, Mussman’s statements implied a need for a re-equilibration between the pure optical and the literal; it meant a dissolution of the distinctions between the optical and material. This coextensive formal approach became central in the reading of Pollock’s process for an ensuing group of artists that included the Minimalists.

\[16\] Mussman, Toby, *Literalness and the Infinite*, in ibid. 242
Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, oil, enamel, and aluminium on canvas, 221 x 299.7 cm (87 x 118 in.)
The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Section 1.2: Robert Morris, An Activation of Space

*Column, then, is at one level a kind of abstracted figure; the performance a reduction of dance to a single, elementary movement, shorn of gesture or expressiveness. David Batchelor*\(^{17}\)

*Simplicity of form is not necessarily simplicity of experience. Robert Morris*\(^{18}\)

Robert Morris’s work from the early sixties eschewed all notions of opticality, the gesture, and painting incident; he made sculpture instead that considered the condition of spectatorship: the perception and encounter of a work, and the


relationship of the spectator’s body to the artwork. He shaped a new participatory role for the spectator based on a background in dance, performative art and an understanding of Pollock’s action painting. In 1964, with an opportunity to test these concepts, Morris fabricated a series of plywood sculptures that he exhibited at Green Gallery, New York. The works were monochromatic polyhedron shapes; each object had an applied light-grey color to an almost featureless uniformed surface. The objects’ configuration in the small gallery was in a centrifugal arrangement; with some works mounted, so they projected from walls, and others protruded from the floor, together they occupied most of the available space and compressed it. One of the works Untitled (Cloud) performed a seemingly gravity-defying act; suspended from the wall on concealed fittings it floated above the entrance of the gallery and obliged the visitor to duck underneath it as he or she moved around the space.

"Morris’s work blurred the distinction between aesthetic and actual space," it was couched in theories of phenomenology and the Gestalt and drew heavily on the recently published work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his manifesto-like publications Notes on Sculpture 1 and 2 he expanded on the condition of the aesthetic experience of the spectator and the art object:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one’s awareness of ones-self existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many

internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.  

As he demonstrated in this show and subsequent shows, Morris’s form of Minimalism offered a proposition: it aspired for a reorientation of the relationship between the two entities. The sculptures with their contingency on positioning; and their hermetically closed forms; undifferentiated surfaces and divested of all painting incidence, avoids a conventional understanding of the pictorial, spatial or optical properties of sculpture, and instead deflects an awareness to the body of the beholder. The forms, with their deficiency of expressive mark in the surfaces, inherently proffer a transference to the gestures of the body of the beholder, who became implicated in the work. In this regard, Morris’ approach varies to some of his contemporaries, Judd for instance, who declared an ambivalent attitude to the spectator; Morris’ work, on the other hand, necessitated a continuity of the viewer/art object relationship.  

---


21 Morris’s ideas of the body/sculpture relationship sit remotely from Judd, who considered the viewer’s body as a disruption of space.
Section 1.3: Greenberg and Fried, Presence and Theatricality

It’s no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there’s a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives. Barnett Newman

I don’t consider the viewer. Donald Judd  

Greenberg’s response to Minimalism came in the form of his 1967 essay the *Recentness of Sculpture*; in the essay, he made a number of moves against Minimalist sculpture. The first of these was to charge some of the Minimalists’

---

22 Meyer, 158
23 Battcock.
work – he named the work of Judd, Morris, and Andre - with existing on the threshold of acceptability between Art and Non-art.\textsuperscript{24} He qualified this by declaring that some of the Minimalists are acceptable as they exhibited the required optical and expressive characteristic and only "flirt[ed] with the look of Non-Art. The second move he made was a risky one that threatened to destabilize much of his modernist doctrine. He made the move to accommodate sculpture into his theories of opticality –a domain that had previously been the exclusivity of painting- and, as a result, he needed to suspend his doctrine of media specificity before proceeding, in 1967 he wrote:

The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; it is eyesight alone, and eyesight has more freedom of movement and invention within three dimensions than two. It is significant, moreover, that modernist sensibility, though it rejects sculptural painting of any kind, allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases. Here the prohibition of one art’s entering the domain of the other is suspended.\textsuperscript{25}

The third move Greenberg made in his ontological criticism of Minimalist sculpture, is one he had initially applied in reviewing painting, but now discovered its effectiveness when referred to sculpture:

Truitt’s sculpture had this kind of ‘presence’…that sculpture could hide behind it – just as painting did- I found out only after repeated acquaintance with Minimal work of art.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} Greenberg, \textit{Critical Essays}.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
The notion of “presence” and its eventual evolution into “theatricality” became the central argument – alongside arguably the dissolution of media specificity - in the criticism of Minimalist sculpture. It contained at this time, however, different meanings for artists and critics alike. Greenberg had borrowed the word from younger artists - the minimalist painters - of that period who had substituted word into the common terminology used by the preceding generation of artists. For them “presence suggested the bodily impact of a powerful work,” “where abstract-expressionists would apply terms like tough and strong to denote a successful painting; younger artist’s spoke of the work’s “presence.”  

27 In Greenberg’s interpretive use of the term he attached a negative meaning, denoting that “presence” – and its proclivity towards immensity of scale - shielded the object, something “sculpture [can] hide behind” he declared.

Fried expanded on Greenberg’s notion of “presence” in his seminal 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood.*  

28 Fried applied the term in slightly different way – while he continued Greenberg’s negative inflection, he extended its use to the “theatricality” of art. For Fried, Minimalism and its exclusion of the pictorial fails in its attempt to “suspend” or “defeat its objecthood,” and therefore can only be defined by the beholder’s experience or “presence” of the object.  

29 The Literalist’s (as he referred to them) work reinforces its case as theatrical because “it is concerned with the actual circumstance in which the beholder encounters [the] work.” “An experience that is equivalent of encountering

---

27 Meyer. 232
28 Fried, *Art and Objecthood in Minimal Art / Edited by Gregory Battcock.* 116-147
29 Ibid.
another body.”³⁰ For Fried, a second affirmation of the Minimalists impetus towards theatricality manifests in the time or duration of the experience. (This is closely related to the Gestalt nature of much of the Minimalists’ work.) Fried asserts that when viewing a Literalist work, the beholder (subject) and the work (object) takes place in time (or duration) much like we experience theatre.³¹ A conjecture he defends by expanding on his concept of time and the durational experience of Minimalist art:

The literalists preoccupation with time – more precisely with the duration of the experience – is, I suggest, paradigm theatrical; as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time....[which] theatre addresses is a [sense] of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding.³²

Proceeding with his criticism of theatricality, Fried asserts that is a significant disparity between the Literalists and others making work in a post-Pollock environment. In the essay, he refers to the "optical" based works of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and sculpture of Anthony Caro that he considered as paragons of Modernist art. He claims the disparity between the two groups lies in the Literalist "preoccupation" with time (theatre). He suggests, conversely, the success of the optically based works of other artists (Noland, Olitski, Caro) is they immediately reveal themselves; he construes this notion as "presentness," and declares, "every moment the work itself is wholly manifest."³³

---

³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Ibid. 140
³² Ibid.
³³ Ibid. 145
Section 1.4: Morris and Judd, the Pollockian gesture

*When Judd or Andre looked at Pollock, they did not see pure opticality; they saw house paint poured out of a can, with no mediation. What was thrilling and exciting to them in Pollock’s paintings were the properties of paint as a material: its relationship to gravity, the way that it hit the canvas; its immediacy and physicality. Kirk Varnedoe, 2003*[^34]

*Today Pollock is still seen for the most part as essentially arbitrary, “accidental,” but a new generation of artists has arisen that considers this an asset rather than a liability. Clement Greenberg, 1967*[^35]

In the late 1960’s, and with a renewed interest in Pollock, Morris’ work foregrounds the gesture. His sculptural installations from this period demonstrate an effort to renovate process by introducing a broad and disparate range of unconventional materials. He continues to maintain a participatory role for the spectator and explicitly responds to Pollock’s gesture. These concepts are exemplified in his series of thread-waste installs. In an in-situ interview with Rosalind Krauss, the artist suggests being in amongst the thread-waste is equivalent to being inside the field of a Pollock work: “there is a force in the work,” he contends, “that has to do with horizontality... with increasing scale,


[^35]: Greenberg, *Critical Essays*. 252
that is a scale for the body." And expanding on the relationship between Pollock and the body in *Notes on the Phenomenology of Making* he writes:

Until Pollock, art-making oriented toward two-dimensional surfaces had been a fairly limited act so far as the body was concerned. At most, it involved the hand, wrist, and arm. Pollock's work directly involved the use of the entire body....Of any artist working in two dimensions [he] acknowledges the conditions of both accident and necessity open to that interaction of bodily and materials as they exist in a three-dimensional world. And all this and more is visible in the work.36

---

Figure 3. Robert Morris, *Untitled (threadwaste)*, 1968, Felt, asphalt, mirrors, wood, copper tubing, steel cable, and lead, Dimensions variable, approximately 21 1/2" x 21' 11" x 16' 9" (54.6 x 668 x 510.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

36 Morris. 81
Figure 4. Jackson Pollock, Jackson Pollock at work in his studio, 12 images, photograph, 1950, Photos by Hans Namuth  
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

Morris’ relationship to Pollock was significant. Like many artists of this period Morris’ understanding of Pollock was formed through his experience with the paintings and the critical reviews, and just as importantly through the films and still photography of Hans Namuth. (In which the documenter records the artist in the physical act of painting). For the minimalists who were interested in the body and performance, such as Morris, Hesse, and Serra, the documentation served as a way to find new meaning between the body and the artwork. Pollock’s movements, as he executed the “drips and pours” onto a canvas laid out on the floor of his Hampton’s barn, significantly supported Morris’s theories on "bodily participation," in the "perception" and "construction" of art.\textsuperscript{37}

Donald Judd’s interest in Pollock was remote from that of Morris. Where Morris reads Pollock’s gestures as an index of Pollock’s bodily contortions, for Judd Pollock’s gestural field functions as a "unified whole" a kind of "evening out" of "parts and aspects." This is Judd’s strategy to orient Pollock’s work towards a new objectivity and literalism. A trajectory that he considered painting has been

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 89
on for some time. Judd’s reading of ‘wholeness’ was distinct from Greenberg/Fried’s methodology of “all-overness” that was predicated on opticality. Judd postulated that Pollock’s paintings arrived at their “wholeness” through a “relations between part and whole” and importantly, he states, they arrive at this “wholeness” without obscuring the “parts.” In his 1967 review of Pollock, he writes, ”The quality of the parts is like the quality of the whole” (my italics). Fried conversely read the gestural mark-making of Pollock’s drips and pours as a residual illusive space, claiming they function as volumes in space, the “dripped lines exist purely and simple as line” he wrote in 1966. Fried purposefully suggested this to “pull-away” from any “literal reference outside itself”; it is an effort to deny the canvas and its support. In contrast, Judd found immediacy and literalness in Pollock’s paintings, which were not limited to the canvas and its support - he wrote of the literal implications; the depth of Stella’s stretcher bars in Specific Objects - but included the paint itself. In his 1967 review, for example, he wrote, “the dripped paint in most of Pollock’s paintings is dripped paint,” and so inferred the unmediated “immediate” and “specific” condition of Pollock’s paintings.

From Judd’s declarative statements of Pollock, we can derive another distinction, one that offers an insight into the viewing or reception of the work. When Fried referred to the composition or illusive aspects of the work, one

38 Battcock. 148
40 ”Specific Objects.”
41 Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints. 195
assumes, the work is being viewed from a single or optimal vantage point, which
would be inline with an Albertian “window to the world” or the "disembodied
eye." In contrast, what can be learned from Judd’s descriptive observations
where he spoke of Pollock’s "gestural web" or "most of the drips.... are dripped
paint", is a demand for the work be viewed from disparate vantage points: near,
middle distance and far.\textsuperscript{42} To achieve the "all-over" composition of the painting
one is required to view the work at a distance, or conversely, to recognize the
"drip" requires a close encounter with the painting. A close encounter has a
relationship to the aforementioned "presence" and carries suggestions of
Barnett Newman's ideas on the viewer's proximity to the work.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, a
close vantage point reveals the application and materiality of the work: the
"simple, immediate perception of paint and canvas," the nuances of brush/hand
and other gestures. \textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 195
\textsuperscript{44} Donald Judd, "Helen Frankenthaler," in \textit{Arts Magazine}, (March 1960) repr in Judd, \textit{Complete
Writings 1959-1975 : Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports,
Statements, Complaints}. 13
Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the pivotal role Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's formalist's doctrine of *opticality* played in challenging the minimalist sculpture. By highlighting a number of contradictions in the formalist structure, I proposed that Greenberg/Fried's proclivity to the "opticality" method eschewed an accurate reading of the gesture, and offered little support for the materiality of the work. The middle section of the chapter expounded the notion of presence - its evolution into theatricality - and the implications for the minimalist endeavor. Robert Morris' mute sculptural installs offered an opportunity to draw focus to the paradigmatic shift that occurred during the Minimalist period: a shift that shaped a new relationship between the spectator and the art object. In the final section, I contended that Donald Judd's literal reading of Pollock's all-over gesture challenged Fried's opticality and positioned...
painting as an immediate physical object. Furthermore, Judd (and Newman's) alternative method of reading painting encouraged a different perceptual experience for the spectator.
Chapter 2: Gravity, Gesture, and Movement

...on the other hand, painterly-artistic elements were cast aside, and the materials arose from the utilitarian purpose itself, as did the form. K. Malevich

I depend on gravity; I let the paint hit the canvas, walk away and let it do its thing. Pat Stier

This chapter investigates the employment of gravity as a means to form gesture. Section 1 explores how Jackson Pollock, and a succession of color-field painters after him, employ the ‘operations of gravity’ to realize gesture, and how this methodology is then transported to Minimalist sculpture. I expand on the association between Pollock’s gesture and gravity by engaging the writings of Rosalind Krauss; who reveals the specific significance of these methods in the sculptural installations of Robert Morris. In Section 2 I posit a series of my sculptural installations as an expansion of Pollock and Morris’s methodologies. Utilizing discarded automotive tyres, I realize three of exhibitions that test the practical potential of gravity to form gesture. In the second component of these installs, an audiovisual display presents a looped-video that effectively illustrates the behavior of the pliable material under durational stress. Section 3 explores the early works of Richard Serra. Serra’s performance-based sculpture is a paragon for work that explicitly references the Pollockian gesture to direct a

45 Morris.
sculptural outcome. Other works by Serra from the same period expose his interest in forming gestures through the posture or stance of a sculpture. In Section 4, Serra’s use of obdurate materials to form gesture is extended to a series of studio investigations, where I apply rigid materials to form gesture and tease apart the notions of “presence’ and "theatricality."

**Section 2.1: Pollock and Morris, Operations of Gravity**

*The stick that drips paint is a tool that acknowledges the nature of the fluidity of paint. Like any other tool, it is still the one that controls and transforms matter. But unlike the brush, it is in far greater sympathy with matter because it acknowledges the inherent tendencies and properties of that matter. Robert Morris*47

*For Morris did not look at the structure condition of the mark, nor at the theamtics of the man standing over the supine field. He looked instead at the operations of gravity, of the horizontal is a force that pulls against the vertical, pulling it down. Rosalind Krauss*48

Pollock started experimenting with gravitational effects as a means to "extend his gestures"; a pursuit that saw him move away from the limitations of conventional methods of easel painting, i.e., use of a brush. Gravity was for Pollock; however, merely a means to an ends; a way to realize his gestural ambitions, and he had very little interest in exploring it beyond this. For a succession of artists following Pollock, the potential for gravity to generate

---

47 Morris. 58
48 Krauss. 294
gesture and, in doing so, negate any direct involvement of the artist's hand, came to be a centralized concept of inquiry. In post-Pollock painting, color-field painters such as Morris Louis and Paul Jenkins both developed methodologies to form painterly gestures that required the use of gravity. They discovered that by “folding, pleating, gathering and funneling the canvas” they could "channel the pigment into temporary groves, [and let it] run down the inclines and curves," and thereby "capture a wide multiplicity of transient gravitational flows."\(^{49}\)

In the same period, the Pollockian use of gravity was transported into sculptural practices. It became pronounced in the methodology of sculptors who found it a useful way to articulate gesture. In particular, the sculptors Richard Serra and Robert Morris made it an integral part of their practices. Morris' sculptural pieces based on his theories of Antiform are an apposite example of this type of work. The thread-waste and felt works were a practical realization of Morris' theories on “Antiform,” and his ambition to develop three-dimensional work that would "subvert a priori intentions" and was "unpredictable" and "indeterminate." For Morris, the work of this period imposes a "purposeful detachment" from the "gestalt-bound" forms or the "regularized units" and "symmetrical intervals" of earlier minimalist work.\(^{50}\) The materials in Morris’ Antiform works varied from previous sculpture; to realize the installs Morris often sourced material such as the aforementioned thread-waste as well as felt, metal, mirror, and other non-precious material such as debris and waste. The work was either stacked, piled or scattered, meaning it would vary each time it

\(^{49}\) Cernuschi and Herczynski.  
\(^{50}\) Morris. 59
was installed and was portable and temporal. In his defining text on the subject of *Antiform*, 1968, Morris proffers Pollock as the source of the development of his new work:

> Until Pollock, art-making oriented toward two-dimensional surfaces had been a fairly limited act so far as the body was concerned. At most, it involved the hand, wrist, and arm. Pollock’s work directly involved the use of the entire body. Coupled to this was his direct investigation of the properties of the materials in terms of how paint behaves under the conditions of gravity. 

Morris’ work from this period typically applies the use of gravity to delineate the gesture. The industrial felt works, in particular, are apposite examples for their method of construction. Rosalind Krauss in the *Optical Unconscious* speculates that Morris’s interest in Pollock’s process is not limited to his gravity-induced gestures but profits by an understanding of the *horizontal* and *vertical* positions of Pollock’s work. She suggests that similar to Pollock’s dyadic process, where the work begins on the horizontal and ends in the vertical (the wall); Morris’ industrial felt works begin with a “process of systematic cuts”, which finds “irregularity” when the work is lifted onto the wall and suspended there by “hooks or wires”. Krauss further contends that the reorientation process activates a "gravity pull" that "opens gaps in the fabric surfaces." She suggests this technique is unique to Morris and varies from others of that period who arrived at the Pollockian gesture by more immediate and direct methods.

(Krauss posits the graffito tracings of Cy Twombly as an example of an artist that

---

51 Ibid. 78
52 Krauss.
53 Ibid. 293
uses a direct method). Whereas Morris' gesture, she declares, is only revealed after the “operations of gravity” have come into effect.  

Figure 6. Robert Morris, *Wall Hanging (Tenture)*, 1969-70, cut felt, 250 x 372 x 30 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)

---

54 Ibid. 293
Figure 7. Robert Morris, *Felt* (partial view), 1967 (creation), felt
The University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois, United States)
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)
Section 2.2 Radial: Tyres, Gravity, Stress, and Deformability

It was a dark night, and there were no lights or shoulder markings, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. Tony Smith, quoted by Michael Fried in Art and Objecthood, 1967

In 2013 I began to retrieve shredded and blown out tyres commonly seen dotted along the city's highways and arterials, with the intention to exhibit them in a gallery space. This project was, in part, generated by an interest in Robert Morris' industrial felt and thread-waste works. This important body of work began as a method to delineate the gesture through sculptural practice; with a central consideration of the found-tyre work being the behavior of materials under the persuasion of gravity or stress and its potential to realize the gesture. The tyres were exhibited over a span of eighteen months and under the title Radial and had three distinct permutations in three separate galleries. In two of the exhibitions, a short video was installed as an adjunct to the sculptural objects. Tire Force Test, 2'13” sec, 2013, is found footage of a tyre undergoing testing in a scientific laboratory. These kinds of tests are analytic and deductive; they examine the structural integrity of material through force and stress with products such as masonry for building or tyres for the aeronautic and automotive industries. Tire Force Test, 2013, is set in a purpose-built research facility to simulate road conditions. In the video, a giant robotic arm spins a tyre

---

55 Fried, Art and Objecthood in Minimal Art / Edited by Gregory Battcock. 130
at a maximum rotation, it applies an immense amount of downwards and sideways pressure, which causes the tyre to vibrate and squeal uncontrollably. The visuals coupled with the sound of the machinery build to a whirling crescendo until in the final frames the tyre is reduced to a shredded mess. *Tire Force Test, 2013,* forms a bridge or synthesis between the actual objects (the shredded tyres) and itself. This diagrammatic video espouses a universal understanding of the kinetic capacity of the tyre and articulates the destructive capabilities of acceleration, friction, and gravity. The placement of the video and objects, within proximity to each other, promotes the synthesis to occur.
Figure 8. Aaron Martin, *Radial*, 2014, installation, rubber, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image
Across the three exhibitions, the recuperated objects were deployed with a minimum of intervention, and as such the objects reflect their ‘discovered’ state. The allusion to an environment outside of their immediate placement is unavoidable: the grey concrete of the gallery floor can serve as a surrogate road’s edge while the twisted forms of the tyres prescribe an understanding of their previous existence for movement and the mechanical. Akin to Morris’ Antiform exhibitions, the dimensions and the scale of the installs were variable and were determined by the space that was available. The provisional use of space was made apparent in one install, where, I purposely avoided the center of the gallery and chose to move the tyres close to the edge of the gallery – where the floor meets the wall. Using of the peripherals – the corners and edges - of the room in this way promoted a compression of the space; to this extent, the work shared a kinship with Morris’ earlier Green Gallery show, that I suggested, was predicated on careful and deliberate positioning within the gallery. Drawing on Morris’ use of space it is now easy to see how the blurring between the disciplines of painting and sculpture impacted on decisions during this period. Many artists during this time applied the use of three-dimension space predicated on concepts derived from painting. In *Notes on Sculpture VI*, Morris highlights how his use of three-dimensional space was influenced by painting when he contends: the idea of "painting up to Pollock" was "more or less diaphanous surface that ended at the edge." That is most of the image was gathered toward the center of the work. One of the achievements of Minimalist painting was to extend a continuation across the entire painting surface.

---

56 As I signaled in Chapter 1, Greenberg’s ideology of media specificity became redundant during the Minimalist period, and artists regularly find a comparison between painting and sculpture. 57 Morris.
flattening or evening out the picture plane. This method, Morris reminds us, was firstly initiated in Jasper John's flag paintings and put "heretofore unimagined weight on the edge." Within Minimalist painting/sculpture the whole surface of the painting becomes articulated and activated, the edge included.

Figure 9. Aaron Martin, *Radial*, 2014 installation, rubber, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image

58 ibid.
Section 2.3: Richard Serra: Gesture through Movement - actual and implied

It was perhaps inevitable that sculpture would respond to that same impulse to airiness and luminosity which has recently informed current painting. But instead of the chromatic brilliance and sensory power which earmarks the canvases, the sculpture concentrates on bodily and tactile coefficients of the painterly development. Max Kozloff 59

The earliest problem of sculpture was to reproduce the verticality of the human being in contrast with the horizontality of the earth. Robert Pincus-Witten 60

A sculptural assimilation of Pollock’s gestures is found in the early work of Richard Serra. Serra, like Morris, at this period was interested in Pollock’s subversion of gravity and its proximity to the vertical and horizontal axis, moreover, he was interested in realizing the gesture through the means of movement and propulsion. In an intense and energetic performance piece in a warehouse in 1969, the artist employed a dipper into a tank of hot lead then proceeded to fling the lead into a corner of the warehouse. Part performance, part art-object, after the lead had cooled Serra used a crowbar to pry it from the corner and later exhibited it as sculpture, Castings, 1969. In another work of the same year One Ton Prop (House of Cards), 1969, the gesture was revealed in a more nuanced way. One Ton Prop (House of Cards), was Serra’s response to the minimalist cube; in the work, four sheets of lead antimony lean precariously inwards, only connected by a series of small and discreetly concealed, hinged brackets. The work is axiomatic and transparent in its making; in that its

"material," "formal" elements, "decision making" and its "processes" of "construction" are all "self-evident."\textsuperscript{61} One Ton Prop (House of Cards), signalled a new direction for Serra's sculpture, but importantly, the use of new material and construction suggested an adherence to gesture and a search for alternative methods to reveal it. Serra had in earlier works applied more direct methods to reveal the gesture. For example, in the action based performance (the throwing of the lead) the gesture was indexed with (like Pollock's) the resulting art-object (Castings, 1969), in One Ton Prop (House of Cards) the gesture emerges through the precarious posture of the structure. As the title describes the amassed weight of the sculpture is one ton, and it is contingent on an even dispersal of weight across each of its lead sheets to maintain its upright posture. The subtitle House of Cards also indicates Serra's interest in balance or a state of suspension, where the object is tittering on the edge of a potential collapse. Gesture manifesting through balance, or equilibrium, is further revealed in Serra's 1969-71 'prop pieces' series. In Equal (Corner Prop Piece), 1969, Serra combined two straightforward "prime objects" a square lead plate and lead cylinder to produce a very delicate and poised piece. The plate projects from the corner of the gallery and is held steadfast by the weight of the cylinder; this, in turn, straddles the upper edge of the plate and intersects with both converging walls as it angles across the corner.\textsuperscript{62,63} This work is an important example of Serra's strategy to include the gallery's architecture as an extension of the work. Furthermore, this


\textsuperscript{62} Serra was not the first to activate the corner; famously Malevich's black square was hung across the corner in a gesture that represented an icon. Serra noted, that after discovering the corner the crucial role it played in the prop pieces, and how integral it was to their construction. He suggested it enabled new opportunities for making and by using it "redefined the space of the room."

strategy exposes the inherent tectonics that necessitates the sculpture's verticality. In another of Serra's site-specific prop pieces, a large sheet of rolled steel bisects a gallery space, *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, 1969, implies a divisional compression of space. It signals a phenomenological experience for the participant that reflects, and also contrasts with, the perceptual encounter of Morris’ Green gallery show.

Figure 11  

Figure 12  
Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969 (refabricated 1986), Lead antimony, four plates, each 48 x 48 x 1” (122 x 122 x 2.5 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Source: Artstor.org (accessed: 1 November, 2017)
Serra’s work oscillates between a perceptual encounter of the work and a playful experimentation in tectonics. His tectonically organized assemblages, project their dependency on gravity and weight. They develop unique strategies of structural transparency making them immediate and logically readable. His sculptures contrast with other Minimalists for their emphasis on the rawness of material and their solid state. His materials are not disguised or manipulated to represent something else, more so, he is interested in “the problem of what sculptural properties may encompass”, his prop pieces are reflexive to material and site and avoid the conventional understanding of sculpture as static or
obdurate, insofar as [they] "exist as a work", they "exist only during the time for which [they] are set up."\textsuperscript{64}

---

\textsuperscript{64} Pincus-Witten. 37
Section 2.4: Arc (floor to wall), Peak (corner proposition), Open Span: Suspension of Gravity

The notion that the gesture can reveal itself through implied movement in the object’s posture is a central consideration of a series of studio experiments I began in 2015. *Arc (floor to wall), 2015, Peak (corner proposition), 2016, and Open Span, 2017,* were successful outcomes of these inquiries, works that simultaneously respond to Serra’s precarious structures and to his formalist language. *Arc (floor to wall)* forms a quarter arch extension between the floor and wall (between the horizontal and vertical planes), and is contingent on gravity and friction to maintain its upright position. The work is composed of twelve canvas-stretching frames (with their canvas removed), plasterboard offcuts, and painter’s masking tape. The work has an edited "bare-bones" appearance that insists on immediacy and structural transparency: to the extent that there is only a minimum of material to necessitate the sculpture's upright posture, equivalent to Serra’s prop pieces. The work likewise parallels Serra’s method of a tectonic organization and simplicity of the construction that is immediate and readily understandable. The work, however, extends Serra's and many of the other Minimalists' works in its applied material, weight and mass. The selection of lightweight repurposed material – hoop pine and plaster – convey a flimsy or "just constructed" look: it refuses the heavy metals of Serra's constructions that explicitly state their weight and mass and contain implications of heavy labor. The material instead re-affirms its own existence, one of temporality, lightness, and portability.
Arc (floor to wall) plays with the delineation of sculpture and painting. The work represents painting and draws from painterly methods in many nuanced ways. The materials, as previously described, are purposefully selected for supporting a relationship to painting. The sculpture is arranged in a very careful and deliberate position so that the arc of the structure strikes the wall at the precise point where paintings conventionally hang. Contact with the wall is made with the edge of the painting stretcher, as opposed to the conventional backside, and this further complicates the understanding of the painting/sculpture relationship.

Figure 15 Aaron Martin, Arc (floor to wall), 2015, hoop pine, plasterboard, tape, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image
Figure 16  Aaron Martin, *Arc (floor to wall)*, 2015, hoop pine, plasterboard, tape, dimensions variable
Source: Artist’s image
Peak (corner proposition) enlists Serra's activation of the corners, weight, and gravity. The sculpture is a triangular formation constructed from three oversize plywood members. It resembles a piece of architecture and tangentially alludes to an estranged piece of structure that has an awkward presence in the gallery space. It juts from the corner and angles boldly into the center of the gallery’s space, therefore forming a complex relationship between the architecture, the sculpture and the room. The corner provides of structural support for the sculpture; functioning as a type clamp, the two intersecting planes restrict the object’s lateral movement and assist in the sculpture's stability. The work is not fixed at any point and rests or balances on two apexes: the first apex makes contact with the floor and the other with the corner of the gallery. Pivoting on these extremities the sculpture operates on the very limits of stability. The work is dramatic. Its drama emanates from its scale and the demands it places on the space. The drama is intensified when it intersects with the architecture of the gallery: installed against the gallery’s windows the work pushes against the glass threatening its integrity. Architecturally scaled, Peak (corner proposition), challenges all notions of scale: purposefully constructed at a length of 3250mm it exceeds the ceiling height by 250mm, eliminating all possibility of an upright posture. It expands into the space and occupies three-quarters of the floor space, to this end, it responds to and challenges the gallery's architecture and spatiality. It refuses the notion of the architecture overshadowing it. In an intractable manner it bisects the corner, and in doing so, duplicates the corner by creating two more corners. Installed, the work occupies most of the available space; the interstitial spaces on each side of sculpture are condensed and only allow for two body-widths.
Figure 17  
Aaron Martin, *Peak (corner proposition)*, (partial view), 2016, plywood, bolts, plywood, bolts, 3250mm x 1500 mm x 80mm  
Source: Artist’s image
Open Span, 2017, is a sculpture that exploits the notions of gesture, painting, extension, and spatiality. It was made following Peak and constructed late in this research and thus benefits from accumulated knowledge from the research. The work in its planning and execution is site responsive. A length of square aluminum rod is inserted through a small incision in the wall in an otherwise empty gallery space. The rod is 6000mm x 25mm x 10mm and has a polished machine finish, beginning at one end of the rectangular gallery, it spans almost the entire length terminating only millimeters from the adjacent wall. The
gallery space is divided precisely in half by the rod: a bisection that disrupts the continuity of the gallery and by definition the open space. The work occupies much of the gallery space and forces a compression of it. Following Serra’s *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, the sculpture impairs the participant’s movement within the gallery space: disrupting the natural flow of the gallery; a quality it shares with Serra’s corner intervention. The object’s physical presence initiates a dialogue between the space and the viewer: to move around the object requires a negotiation, for example, if the participant wishes to move from one half to the next he or she is required to pass underneath by ducking or crouching.

The rod functions within the space on a manifold of levels; the first of these relates to the concepts of size and scale. The rod exploits an elongation of the space and in doing so exaggerates the expansiveness of the small gallery. At the point where it passes through and extends beyond the wall it is supported by bracing. The brace system remains uncovered, revealing to the viewer the construction method. The brace is just one of the two attendant mechanisms that govern the flexibility of the rod, the other being internal steel rod insets concealed within the rod’s hollow core; they are unfixed and can be repositioned to make the rod more or less rigid. The rod insets function as dampeners (the type used in leaf springs on trains or in the automotive industry): they mediate the amount of the pliability of the aluminum.
Open Span, 2017, is sculpture, but its ontology lies in painting; it applies the language of painting without succumbing to the activity of it. Its hybridity is attributable to its physical constituents and its location within the site. The puncture in the wall is at the precise height where paintings conventionally hang (a property it shares with Arc (floor to wall)). In pure painting terms the delineation of the space evokes the parallel divisions in a Newman or Stella’s painting, this holds true for the gesture, like that of Serra’s, is derived from the operations of gravity. Moreover, the physicality of the puncture is concomitant
to the gestural incisions in Morris’ felt, that, as signaled earlier, were derived from Pollock’s gestures (or a further reference can be made to the perforations in a Fontana canvas – that are the residual ideas derived from abstract expressionism and Minimalist painting). The “plane of the wall” is flat, it is a surrogate canvas from which the rod projects outwards; a horizontal protrusion that expands into space and reiterates the wall’s flatness. The rod’s perforation of the wall makes clear its reliance on the wall, the wall becomes consumed into the work, and by doing so activates what is otherwise a neutral space. The length of the rod seems almost static as it hovers parallel to the floor. However, movement is implied through the arc of the rod as it falls away in a failed endeavor to span the void. To this extent, the work reengages with Morris and Pollock, and it is only after the "operations of gravity" have come into effect that the gesture is formed.

---

Judd, "Specific Objects." 181
Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I described how the use of gravity can form the gesture, and how it became embedded within the methodology of many of the Minimalist’s practices. An analysis of the work of Robert Morris and Richard Serra assisted in an understanding how an inventive use of material, space, and architecture can be utilized to form the gesture. I carried these ideas forward into in my studio practice and applied them to enable new strategies of making. The result was a series of sculptural works that culminated in a publicly testing through a series of exhibitions.
Chapter 3: Repetition, Seriality and the Gesture

In this chapter, I examine the use of repetition and seriality in relation to the gesture and Minimalist sculpture. In Section 1, I examine Mel Bochner's assertions that the roots of repetition and seriality are traceable to the photography of Eadweard Muybridge. In Section 2, I make a comparative study of the works of Donald Judd and Eva Hesse and how the gesture is conversely denied or actuated in each of their practices. In Section 3, the ideas generated in section 1 and 2 form a base for an analysis of one of my sculptural works. This work responds to concepts of modular repetition and the gesture being formed under the coercion of gravity and aligns with painting and the Minimalist's method of activating of space. Section 4 provides an opportunity to expand on a recent suite of monochrome paintings. These works are generated to test ideas of repetition and seriality, process, the body, and the painted surface.

Section 3.1: Bochner, Muybridge, Seriality, and Repetition

[Repetition] is a means of organizing the world. It is a means of disordering and undoing.

It can be utopian or dystopian. Briony Fer, 2004

We produce something new on condition that we repeat – once in the mode which constitutes the past and once more in the present of metamorphosis. Giles Deleuze, 1968

In his 1967 essay, *The Serial Attitude* Bochner proposes that serial method – that he defines as being distinct from working in series – finds root in the sequential photographs of Eadweard Muybridge. Bochner supports his claim by finding correlations between the two distinct practices. He asserts that Muybridge’s photographs, that frame by frame dissect human motion into a sequence of discrete images, form a base of the seriality that he identifies in the methods of Judd, Andre, Le Witt and Hesse. From these works, he isolates several fundamentals upon which he forms his definition of seriality and repetition.

Firstly he specifies that within seriality the internal organizations of the work - "the interior divisions" he describes them - are derived "by means of a numerical or otherwise systematically predetermined process." He posits Jasper John's "Number paintings" as an example of a simple logic preceding the work; likewise, he offers Judd’s "progressions" as a more sophisticated version of these "multiple variants." He also notes that within seriality the completed work is "parsimonious" and can be self-exhausting. Secondly, Bochner identifies the use of repetition within the modular: "where works are based on the repetition of a standard unit"; proffering Carl Andres' bricks or Judd’s "stacks" as the epitome of repetition within the modular.

---

Section 3.2: Judd's stacks/progressions, and Hesse’s response

The particular lure of Muybridge’s ghostly images speaks also to a kind of archaism, of bodies petrified against a backdrop traced as a graph: continuous movement rendered discontinuous, standardized units. Briony Fer⁶⁹

Judd’s work from mid-sixties onwards can be quickly assigned into two distinct categories – those of "progressions" (seriality) and "stacks" (modular repetition). The progressions and stacks are characterized by their horizontal or vertical placement; presented either sitting side by side or in a vertical column; they are an exemplary embodiment of what Judd declares as “one thing after another.”⁷⁰

In each of the sequences the components are identical in size, shape, material, and color; within the progressions, there is variation: that is, a developing of combinations of the internal components, without any variation in the exterior dimensions or appearance from one unit to the next. Each standardized unit is positioned in a precise relationship to its antecedent, and performs a symmetrical repetition between the negative and positive spaces; a symmetrical distribution of “solids” and “voids” that implies they are "intrinsically reversible."⁷¹ The stacks ascend the full height of the wall on which they are mounted, making the works not necessarily site specific but site responsive, so that the ceiling height, or rather the distance between the floor and the ceiling, determine the dimensions of the stack. They cantilever from the wall that makes them appear suspended in space and visually accentuates the space between each unit, which replicates the height of the solid.

---

⁶⁹ Fer. 69
⁷⁰ Judd, "Specific Objects." 184
⁷¹ Fer. 78
Figure 21  Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968, stainless steel, Plexiglas, Overall (10 units): 22.9 x 101.6 x 78.8 cm (9 x 40 x 31 in.), Art Gallery of Ontario  
Source: Artstor.org (accessed 1 November, 2017)
Eva Hesse’s works in the late sixties specify a style of making that, at once, includes the gesture and continues to cohere to the Minimalists’ imperative of repetition. In the exhibition co-curated by Mel Bochner and Elayne Varian *Art in Series*, Hesse presents a work that problematizes Judd’s progressions and stacks and challenges his “assumption that repetition and structural legibility goes hand in hand.” Making explicit reference to Judd’s dictum (one thing after another), *Addendum, 1967*, is made from seventeen light grey paper-mache hemispheres evenly spaced along a wooden relief, which is mounted horizontally on the gallery wall. Like Judd’s progressive wall reliefs (as opposed to his stacks), there is a variation with each progression. Each of the hemispheres contains a single length of cord that hangs irregularly to the floor. The intersecting of the horizontal and vertical and the use of gravity to form gesture alludes to Morris’s industrial felt works, while the entanglement of the cords or as Hesse describes them the “irrational flow of lines on the floor” at

---

72 Meyer, 182
once “contradicts” the “rational series of semi-spheres” and makes a suggestion of Pollock’s gestural skeins.

Hesse electing to use this material eschews Judd’s notion of the obdurate object and suggests the gesture can be found within the parameters of the repetition and seriality. A merging of the gesture and the minimalist structure of repetition typifies Hesse’s production of this period. During the following years of 1968-70 Hesse made a series of box-like sequences that overtly referenced Judd’s stacks and progressions. The series of sculptural works, Sans I, II & III, 1968-1970, appeared to be “soft” reinterpretations of Judd’s stacks. In the works, a gridded series of almost identical fiberglass boxes are mounted to the gallery wall in either vertical or horizontal formation. Fiberglass has low structural integrity, and in places, the work succumbs to the gravitational pull and falters in its ability to maintain its box shape, rendering the grid imprecise. In one of the sculptures, San I, 1968, the work exceeds the wall space and continues onto the floor. This is an exaggerated gesture, by Hesse, to intentionally highlight the pliability of the fiberglass.

Figure 23  
Eva Hesse, Sans II 1968  
Section 3.3: Vertical Span v.1-3

Surfaces under tension are anthropomorphic: they are under the stresses of work as much as the body is in standing. Objects that do not project tensions state most clearly their separateness from the human. Robert Morris, 1967\textsuperscript{73}

A methodology of stacking standardized units and enlisting gravity and friction to form gesture are outcomes first realized in the work *Arc (floor to wall)* and are further explored in my series of sculptural works exhibited under the title *Vertical Span, 2016/17.*

*Vertical Span* is a vertical assemblage of scissor car jacks. Each standardize unit is extended to pressure against the one immediately above and below it, and the complete sculpture forms an extension between floor and ceiling. Installed at, or near to the center of the gallery the sculpture expands in all directions and implicates the space immediately around it, activating it.

The work responds to the notions of causality and constraint; wedged securely between the resistant structures of the floor and the ceiling (or roofing structure; rafters, girders, etc.) the sculpture is restricted in its upward movement. This restriction invariably instigates a lateral movement and the more the jacks are extended (wound-out), the greater the column wavers or plumes from its center; a causal action that disrupts the trajectory of the tower and, in turn, introduces an "incident" at which time it forms the gesture.

\textsuperscript{73} Morris. 38
The successive winding of the jacks can bring about various outcomes; it follows then that there is a notion of chance with each install. A "systems of chance" that is relatable to Morris’ incisions into the felt and Hesse’s loosely hanging cords and sagging fiberglass.74 In both cases, and I extend this to Vertical Span, there is an “incident” that is the crux of the completion of the work. This incidence is relatable to the incidence of the gestural stroke of paint on the canvas. In Morris’ felt the moment of incidence is in the reorientation; with Hesse, it is implicated in the initial install and then continues with the ongoing change in the materials for the life of the work.

In works that employ repetition, the incident means a break in the continuity, a rupture of perpetual sameness. Systems are made with an inherent opportunity to falter; in Vertical Span it is the wavering or pluming of the column. The work appears unstable, though it is settled into its particular location and is quite secure. The appearance of fallibility is a property of the sculpture’s construction: a method that takes place in the studio before the exhibition. The tower is assembled through a system of joins; the jacks are organized in a "top-to-toe" configuration and fastened through a number of discretely concealed bolts. This simple mechanism determines to what extent the sculpture can flex and swivel without collapsing.

74 I borrow the phrase "systems of chance" from Matthew Ritchie from his lecture "Chance and Skills" presented at the University of Michigan, 2010 see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vo_vQsRgSGE
Section 3.4: Gesture/Painting

Late in this research, I developed a body of paintings that responded to the notion of repetition and seriality, and a reveal of the gesture, through an applied minimalist aesthetic. The inquiry generated three paintings to be exhibited alongside the sculptures in my Masters Graduation exhibition. The three paintings are black monochromes, each contains two fields of black: a lower field of matte black and an upper field of high gloss. The fields are delineated by a crisp edge, formed by the build-up of paint over multiple layering and repetitive masking. An almost identical process is applied to each painting that can be succinctly divided into two stages: an under-painting stage — completed in acrylic and oils; and the stage of the upper layers, where the use of aforementioned matte and gloss epoxy enamel are applied. The objective with each stage is to create an all-over flat, almost uniform, surface — the use of a brush, paint roller, and hand sanding, between each layer assists in this effort.

On occasion, small hints of colour appear close to, and on the edges of the canvas; these are under-painting residuals, and as such, alongside the matte and gloss, deftly avoid the works from becoming “true monochromes”. The “nearly” monochromes are made on reused canvases, and at times there are indications of previous paintings perceptible in the opaque surfaces. In one of the paintings, for example, Twofold One, 2017, the contour of a circle and an ovoid are discernible in the surface. In the gloss portions, the protuberances complicate the surface; they subtly divide and redirect the light across it, and as such, distort the reflection of the viewer and other forms of the room, presenting an imperfect mirroring of the space.
The suite of nearly monochromes is consistent with the Minimalists’ call for “one thing after another” (seriality), in that there is sufficient modifications from one work to the next to define them as a series of progressions. Large and small modifications distinguish the works apart, such as a proportional variation between the matte and gloss fields; that are adjusted, or readjusted, in accordance with the canvas’ dimensions. The dimensions likewise are adjusted so that each painting is ascribed its own distinct size. Uniquely in this series the dimensions of the works are never repeated.

A relationship between the viewer’s body and painting is considered in this suite of paintings. Earlier in this dissertation I addressed the phenomenological experience of Minimalist sculpture (see — ch.1.2, Morris’ Green Gallery show) and expanded on the importance of the viewer’s participation to my sculpture pieces (see — ch. 2.4 Corner Proposition and Open Span); this suite of paintings provides an occasion to tease apart the relationship between the body and the two-dimensional canvas plane. The matte and gloss surfaces offer such an opportunity; as the viewer moves around the gallery space, their reflection is captured in the upper gloss field, while in contrast the lower matte portion, with its dense hue, negates any possibility of a reflection. The visual phenomena instigates a division in the reflected image; when the viewer stands in front of the work, the gestalt of the body is comprised, and only a disembodied head and shoulders are reflected in the work, with the body’s lower half absorbed into the matte black void.
Notions of the body are also found in the surface of the work. The performative activity of brush, paint roller, and hand-sanding are recorded, albeit minimally, in the surface of the work. These minimal traces, as with most minimalist painting, are coded with details that allude to: how the work was made; how the paint was applied; and at what speed and intensity, etc. These attributes imbue each work with its own narrative and distinctness.

In the work *Small Lateral Shift, 2017*, a studio accident led to a serendipitous outcome that altered the trajectory of this painting and, in doing so, expanded the language of this body of work. *Small Lateral Shift* was at the time of making accidentally torn. The tear was close to the upper left-hand edge, so that, by releasing the canvas from its support and shifting it marginally the tear was discreetly concealed at the edge of the painting. Following the shift, however, the painting was distinctly different. The shift, that reconciled the edge with the face of the work, brought with it evidence of the painted layers: an expressive fringe that sat in contrast to the treatment of the black fields. Understanding that the success of the work lay in the juxtaposition of these two separate paint treatments, I adopted this into my process with an expectation to employ this method in future works. Interestingly, despite being entirely unintentional, the technique is relatable to Pollock’s dyadic method (see – ch. 2.1 Krauss on Pollock): where the activity of moving the canvas during its making, governs to a degree the outcome of the work.
Figure 24  Aaron Martin, *Vertical Span*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed
Source: Artist’s image
Conclusion

This research has proposed that the gesture persisted within Minimalism. To test the contention I returned to the criticism and art objects of that period. I drew on the Formalist doctrinaire of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried and exploited apparent contradiction within its formalist structure. I highlighted that their method of opticality was implicated in a denial of the gesture within abstract painting. I supported this contention with examples of criticism of the period and reinforced it with more recent commentary.

I established an association with Pollock’s gesture and many of the Minimalist’s methodologies and contended that some arrived at the Pollockian gesture through Hans Namuth’s photography. I determined a link between pliable material of Morris’s felt/thread-waste works and the Pollockian gesture and ascertained the gesture was transported to performative and sculptural works of Richard Serra. The axiomatic prop pieces of Serra became the motivation for a series work where I applied obdurate materials, (wood, aluminum and metal) and explored how the gesture manifested through the nature of the materials. These studio investigations were publicly tested in a series of exhibitions that I expanded on in Chapters 2 & 3.

In Chapter 3, I inquired into the minimalist proclivity for seriality and repetition and the effects this method had on the gesture in Judd and Hesse’s work, where it is denied and pronounced respectively. The unpredictable nature of Hesse’s materials meant the gesture was formed by continual shifts in the pull of gravity.
When applied to her grids, Hesse demonstrated that the gesture could be formed within the parameters of minimalist’s method of repetition. The concepts of change, chance and indeterminacy and their position within of Minimalists’ repetition and seriality I tested in my sculptural work and paintings. In *Vertical Span* I discovered a method to form gesture by utilizing a basic mechanical object. The matte and gloss monochrome paintings further offered an exploration of the gesture; and an incidental canvas shift provided a contrasting expressive element to the composition and the discovery of a performative gesture within the painting method.
Figure 25  
Aaron Martin, *Vertical Span*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed  
Source: Artist’s image
Bibliography


Bois, Yve-Alain. "Specific Objections: Yve-Alain Bois on Donald Judd in London and Minimalism


New Haven, Conn. ; London: Art Institute of Chicago ; Yale University Press distributor, 2007.


Schoen, Kim. "The Serial Attitude Redux." *X-tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 12, no. 2


Appendix

Masters Presentation.

Figure 26 Aaron Martin *Twofold*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1500mm x 1200mm
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 27  
Aaron Martin *Twofold Two*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1676 mm x 1981 mm  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 28  
Aaron Martin *Small Lateral Shift*, 2017, oil and epoxy enamel on canvas, 1500mm x 1200mm  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 29  
Aaron Martin *Vertical Span V.3*, 2017, car jacks, bolts, automotive paint, dimensions variable, 4150mm x 420mm x 50mm (approx.) installed  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 30  

Aaron Martin *Open Span*, 2017, aluminum, 6500mm x 25mm x 10mm  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 31  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 32  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 33  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 34  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer

Figure 35  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image.  
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Figure 36  Aaron Martin, Masters Presentation installation image. 
Source: Tim Gresham photographer
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Martin, Aaron

Title:
The persistence of the gesture in Minimalism

Date:
2017

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/212338

File Description:
The Persistence of the Gesture in Minimalism

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.