A Theory of Minimalism

Marc Botha

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For my parents, Neville and Annette

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Preface

As the title suggests, this work offers a theory of aesthetic minimalism. It is a general theory inasmuch as it addresses minimalist works as they manifest across a range of expressive media in the visual arts, music, literature, architecture and performance. It does not seek to fix a definitive canon of minimalist works, nor to prescribe a formula for approaching minimalism. Rather, it offers a theory in the sense of the Greek term *theoria*: a way of seeing or viewing. Since its object – minimalism – is comprised of works that vary considerably in conception, medium, execution and commitment, a theory of minimalism worthy of its name must necessarily be dynamic and capable of drawing out connections between often disparate works. In short, a theory of minimalism must offer not a single view of minimalism, but multiple views.

Studies of minimalism have tended to fall into two broad categories: historical accounts that focus on minimalism as a chronologically delimited movement, usually drawing attention to a central canon of works and occasionally its precursors and successors; and formalist accounts that concentrate on the properties or qualities of minimalist works and how these differ from or conform to other aesthetic categories. In some studies these two paradigms intersect, while in others they are kept largely apart. In other studies, greater attention is given to the economic, social and political complexities that frame the emergence of minimalist aesthetic works. Without sacrificing the many gains from these different approaches, the present work aims to broaden and deepen the study of minimalism by developing a conceptual vocabulary that is able to reground minimalism, and in so doing also to clarify connections between these often competing accounts.

My principal claim is that minimalism cannot be reduced to a set of works or stylistic markers no matter how inclusive or exhaustive. Instead, I suggest that minimalism is best grasped as an *existential modality*: a way of existing in the world. What connects different types of minimalism – aesthetic, linguistic, legal, computational, or lifestyle – is that their existence is entangled with and comported towards *minimum*. Minimum finds two principle expressions: the infinitesimal, or the *least possible*; and the parsimonious, or the *least necessary*. In this light, it becomes possible to define aesthetic minimalism, in

appropriately minimalist terms, as the investigation of the least possible and the least necessary across a range of media and works. Yet, as soon as minimalism is grasped in such broadly existential terms, it becomes evident that it is a transhistorical phenomenon that seems to emerge in some form or another in every historical epoch.

Thus, drawing on a range of examples, I argue that minimalism is far more diverse than is often admitted. In this light, my wager is that a general theory, as distinct from a complete theory, requires an eclectic conceptual approach, since it must be equally responsive to often very different types of minimalism with distinct historical trajectories. The radical concerns that pervade minimalism span numerous conceptual paradigms, often placing these different paradigms in conversation. Although I examine the variety of these conversations, the overall commitment of my argument is to a type of realism. In particular, I am concerned with a minimalist species of realism that aims to delineate that which is most radical to every real situation without proposing any sort of dogmatic theory of reality. It is these minimal conditions of the real that I believe aesthetic minimalism exemplifies with particular force. In simple terms, what I try to offer is a realist theory of minimalism that is able to feed into a minimalist theory of realism. In essence, I am concerned with the type of realism that the phenomenologist, Roman Ingarden, conceives in terms of the convergence, rather than the incommensurability, of reality as it is arrived at through perception, and reality as it exists independently of perception. I argue that minimalism, understood broadly as an aesthetic modality, intensifies and clarifies access to the real.

This theory is advanced by developing seven distinct concepts – historical intermittency, the encounter, objecthood, the real, radical quantity, lessness and minimum – which together frame a dynamic approach to minimalist aesthetics as a transhistorical existential modality. Each chapter is further divided into sub-sections which together constitute a constellation of concepts, each tied to a specific example, or series of examples, of minimalist works – often canonical, but including more peripheral and unacknowledged expressions of minimalism.

The opening chapter, 'Intermittency: On the Transhistoricism of Minimalism', introduces the concepts of minimum and minimalism, making a case for the latter as an existential modality as outlined above, rather than simply as a chronologically delimited movement or a closed set of attributes. What I develop instead is a transhistorical theory of minimalist aesthetics. Minimalism, as with many other radical aesthetic modalities, is governed by the correlative logics of *return* and *intermittency*, adapted from Hal Foster and Andrew

Gibson respectively. The radical force of minimalist aesthetics lies not in a single, historical event, but rather in its capacity to return, and in returning to turn aesthetics towards its most radical possibilities. Minimalism constitutes an event which in the singularity of its eruption conserves the potential for its intermittent return. Far from diluting the historical singularity of the minimalist moment of the mid-twentieth century, poised as it was between the modern and the postmodern, this dynamic conception intensifies our understanding of what it in fact means for minimalism to occupy a threshold position, and the immense potentiality invested in many of its works as a result.

Having made a case for the transhistorical study of minimalism, the second chapter, 'Encounters: On the Politics of Minimalism', turns to the specificity of minimalist works themselves. Drawing on Althusser's concept of the *encounter* and Merleau-Ponty's insights regarding the constructive role of *perception*, it focuses on the ways in which minimalist works are encountered. It is precisely the contingency of the encounter – which is distributed between the work, the perceiver, and the context of the encounter – that invests a certain immanent force in the work, even as it opens the work to multiple interpretations. An encounter is at once the most banal and the most profound occurrence: it is simply what happens when subjects and objects interact, yet it effects a modulation of the intensity of reality that harbours a genuinely transfigurative potential. By careful exemplification, I show how the encounter is at the very heart of minimalist aesthetics. It describes the event of connection between subject and object, but also the forces that underpin this event. In this sense, the encounter exposes both the micro- and macro-political aspects of minimalism. Minimalism possesses a remarkable, and to many unexpected, capacity for reflecting and reflecting on complex political questions. Its prominence exposes important issues regarding the rapid commodification of art and the role of the artwork in public space; while on the level of structure, its transparency and emphasis on process clarify a great deal regarding the aesthetic coding of power and control, and the ethico-political aspects of aesthetic experience.

The third chapter, 'Objecthood: On the Materialism of Minimalism', turns to the material manifestation of minimalism. In fact, close attention to the range of minimalist works, reveals that objecthood manifests in diverse and at times paradoxical ways, necessitating the distinction between material, temporal, and conceptual objects, as well as the many ways in which these different aspects interact. Minimalist objects problematize their own objecthood, but also objecthood more generally, and as such I suggest that they be interpreted in terms of what Damisch and Bal term *theoretical objects* – objects that prompt

theoretical speculation while also providing a means of *doing* theory. Minimalist objects habitually clarify questions of form, scale, and process, constituting works that evade the usual mimetic economy of art – the imperative to reflect or represent reality – focusing instead on immanence itself. Defining themselves in terms of the immanence of their own objecthood, minimalist works become icons of the real: they clarify the ways in which objects are able to enter, persist, and produce effects in the world in a sustained relation to minimum.

The fourth chapter, 'The Real: On the Persistence of Minimalism', develops the iconicity of minimalism with respect to the real, beginning with an overview of the disputed ground of realism that continues to divide contemporary thought. Minimalism, I argue, testifies to a radical shift in the conception of realism from the *alethic* and *mimetic* paradigms, focused respectively on truth and verisimilitude, to a *poietic* paradigm focused on the production of the real itself. Examined through the lens of Danto's and Lukács's thought, it becomes evident that even the frequent minimalist focus on representational precision is concerned less with the reproduction of reality, than it is with the clarification and intensification of the real. Following Meillassoux's recuperation of the absolute as the basis for a contemporary realism, I examine, through exemplary works of minimalist aesthetics, the conditions under which a realist account of minimalism and a minimalist account of realism prove confluent. At this point of confluence, minimalism instantiates a sort of *transfiguration*: although there is no material shift in the constitution of the work, it comes to exist at an increased intensity, marking a minimal shift between the mere thing and the artwork. Such transfiguration is not dramatic, but is rather marked by the persistence of the minimalist work in the face of contingency.

The fifth chapter, 'Quantity: On the Radicality of Minimalism', presses towards the radical ontological ground of the real. It argues that although minimalism is first encountered in terms of its particular qualities, it is radical quantity that lies at the heart of the minimalist enterprise. In particular it draws on the thought of Badiou – and principally on his assertion that multiplicity, as pure quantity, is the stuff of being itself – to investigate the ontological moorings of minimalism. As with its remarkable capacity for clarifying the real, minimalism proves adept at intensifying the aesthetic apprehension of radical quantity itself. I identify two principal quantitative expressions of minimalism: *continuity*, which manifests principally in terms of sustained sound and silence, monochromatic works and unvaried repetition, and self-referential condensation; and *calculation*, which manifests principally in terms of seriality, incremental repetition and self-referential expansion. Existence, for the most part, is constituted by contingent

entities that have no particular valences; entities that are counted, but which may not count for anything specific. Here minimalism proves particularly apposite to the task of presenting and representing, reflecting and reflecting on, the subtractive and cumulative processes that underpin the quantitative being of the everyday. Minimalism generates an aesthetic field in which the quantitative dimension of the work emerges as its most persistent quality.

The sixth chapter, 'Austerity: On the Lessness of Minimalism', turns to the minimalist pursuit of clarity through processes of reduction and simplification. This search proves closely allied to the transhistorical and transcultural manifestation of ascetic practice, marked by various processes of discipline, abstinence, renunciation, privation, and denegation. Much as the path of the religious ascetic leads towards minimum, so minimalist aesthetics often lead towards an ascetic path. This synergy is as much evident in the austere architecture of the monastic cell as it is in the austere processes that underpin the work of numerous prominent minimalist composers, painters and poets. Such *holy minimalism*, as it is often called, is sometimes expressed in iconic terms, as a contemplative lessness, while at other times it instantiates a theurgical or ritual urgency, repetitive and insistent. In both cases, what lies at the heart of this aesthetic is the recognition that transcendence is not external as such, but emerges from within the transfigurative immanence of the work itself. Yet, in holy minimalism, the transfigurative aesthetic is generally marked by an inward turn that is also a return to the universal. In this process, its works often appeal to an aesthetic of the sublime, attempting to uncover something primal at the heart of every expressive medium, pointing towards the archaic nothingness often intuited by the most austere minimalism.

In the final chapter, 'Minimum: On the Extremes of Minimalism', the focus falls precisely only this nothingness. Coming full circle, I return to the opening question of this work – *what is minimum?* – but now with a fuller understanding of minimalism's conceptual moorings and consequences in order to press towards a region only cursorily touched on by the majority of critics: the questions of negation, nothingness and disappearance. Yet, even in probing the void, minimalism retains a curious and radical positivity. To take account of this phenomenon, the discussion progresses through Hegel's conception of *sublation* or determinate negation, and the various modulations of *nihilation* that emerge in the thinking of Heidegger, Sartre and Nancy. A great deal of minimalism takes place at this sublime limit, probing the minimal distance between form and formlessness, appearance and disappearance, something and nothing. At the limit of existence, as the minimalist work seems to pull irreversibly towards

inexistence, it is useful to recall Levinas's formulation of the *il y a* – the irremissible presence that is discovered at the heart of every negation – together with Agamben's conception of *taking-place*, which recognizes that there is a radical part of every entity that is immanent, prior to any external relation; it is *just as it is*. These concepts provide the tools with which to reconceptualize liminal minimalisms in terms of a persistence in the face of overwhelming odds to the contrary, and it is in this sense that the considerable existential significance of minimalism begins to come to light, also pointing towards the importance of future minimalisms.

In general, this study aims to open new vistas onto the field of minimalism while also reopening doors which, in some cases, were prematurely closed, very often on account of the narrowness which disciplinary formations of knowledge sometimes involve. My hope is that this work will be as useful to students and enthusiasts of minimalism across all media who are aiming to come to grips with the often under-articulated conceptual and theoretical aspects of minimalism, as it will be to critical theorists and aestheticians who are looking to come to grips with the significance of minimalism to their various fields and approaches. It makes no claim to be a complete work, or to offer the last word on minimalism. On the contrary, it is only a first word in a new register, aiming to consolidate existing approaches to minimalism and to hold them to intensified conceptual scrutiny and new constellations of thought. My hope, in this light, is to inaugurate new ways of thinking about minimalism, whether they are in agreement or disagreement, and to deepen our collective regard for a remarkable and still developing set of works.

1

Intermittency: On the Transhistoricism of Minimalism

1.1 Minimum

Minimalism as existential modality: Frans Vanderlinde's *Elimination/Incarnation* (1967)

Minimum names the absolute: it is the *least possible*, but also the *least necessary*. It is both an ending and a beginning, the terminus of patient processes of simplification, reduction, exposition, intensification and clarification, but also the site of sudden, transfigurative events and explosions of novelty. Minimum establishes a limit beyond which things lose coherence, disappearing into nothingness, returning to undifferentiated multiplicity. But minimum also marks a radix from which things acquire coherence, subtracting form out of nothingness, proceeding from pure multiplicity. Minimum constitutes an ontological threshold: on one side, being is expressed in terms of existence – the multiple configurations of real entities; on the other side, minimum gives way to pure being – multiplicity without configuration. In this sense, minimum clarifies the real by naming the point at which every given reality comes into or departs from existence, marking the passage between undifferentiated *being* and differentiated *existence* by revealing the least that is possible and the least that is necessary in a given reality.[1] In terms of human experience, we encounter minimum most forcefully at the two instants that frame our existence: birth and death. Perhaps because of its existential significance, minimum captivates us, marking a point of emergence and withdrawal, a moment of appearance and disappearance, an event of creation and destruction.

Minimalism, defined in minimal terms, describes all those objects and processes which provide access, however fleeting or intermittent, to minimum. Minimalism is best understood as an *existential modality*, or a way of existing in the world. Since minimum resists direct representation, minimalism often takes the form of a speculative search for the least possible and the least necessary.

Nowhere has this search found more hospitable ground than in the broad field of aesthetic practice – in the works of visual art, music, literature and performance in which the existential paradoxes of minimum, its simultaneous entanglement with foundation and finitude, have been the subject of sustained experimentation. A fine example of this sort of experimentation is found in Frans Vanderlinde's concrete poem, 'Elimination/Incarnation', a work that fuses word, image and concept to generate the conditions under which form and meaning are able closely to reflect one another in a poetic approximation of minimum.

The first and last lines of the poem consist of single capitalized words, 'ELIMINATION' and 'INCARNATION' respectively. In the sixteen lines which separate these, the poem takes shape first through a process of incremental subtraction – eight successive lines progressively eliminate the very marks from which the letters of the word 'ELIMINATION' are constituted, leaving the minimal unit, 'I', at the poem's centre – and then through a process of incremental addition – lines are progressively added to this minimal unit, 'I', giving rise to the word 'INCARNATION'. Thus the poem not only concretely reflects the meaning of its constituent words, manifesting first as elimination and then as incarnation, but does so by the pivotal relation each of these processes has to a minimal point. At minimum – the unstable centre of a restless dialectic of positive and negative – elimination and incarnation become generatively indistinguishable from one another: elimination, an approach to minimum, is generative of the work itself.

The material form of the poem reiterates the radical dialectic at its heart: its hourglass shape contracts and expands, executing the injunction of the two words which frame it at top and bottom, 'ELIMINATION' and 'INCARNATION'; it pivots on a narrow centre which acts as a minimal point of synthesis at which radix and terminus, beginning and end, are confluent, mediating between what might ordinarily be regarded as the apparently incommensurable processes of disintegration and reintegration. Indeed, this logic is concretely reinforced in lines four to fourteen at the poem's centre, which, although they lack any clear verbal content, are clearly made up of the remnants of a disappearing word and the elementary units for a new one. Here the *poietic* processes of subtraction and addition, unmaking and making, are shown to be both symmetrical and in an important sense equivalent, exposing the force of the poem at its most minimal. Simultaneously, the act of reading the poem, tracing the disappearance and reappearance of letters and words as material signifiers, is productive of a type of subjectivity. The 'I' at the poem's centre is not only the minimal mark of

inscription, but also a cipher for the poetic subject: the finite, human subject, which ordinarily exists in the interval between birth and death, is suspended here between death and birth, elimination and incarnation, making room for the emergence of an infinite, generative subject – the container of a radical productive potential which moves through the poem, so that even in the process of elimination, the overall drift of the work is generative, a process of 'INCARNATION'.

In 'Elimination/Incarnation', we encounter an emblem of the broader aesthetic programme of minimalism in its existential register, the poem granting several points of access to minimum. Minimum understood as the *least possible*, is expressed as a principle of the *infinitesimal*, which habitually manifests in terms of minimal means deployed to maximal effect, and is conveyed in the maxim *multum in parvo*, or much in little, which is often translated by the familiar phrase, *less is more*.[2] Minimum understood as the *least necessary*, recalls the principle of *parsimony*, memorably conveyed in a maxim traditionally attributed to William of Ockham, and known colloquially as Ockham's Razor: *entia non sunt multiplicanda praetor necessitate*, or, entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.[3] Where the infinitesimal indicates intensity, parsimony provides clarity, and yet, in practice, minimalism habitually reveals that these two poles are in fact confluent; and at this crossing of intensity and clarity – the 'I' at the heart of Vanderlinde's poem – a universal poetic force emerges from the singularity of the minimalist artwork. Such works intensify and clarify minimum, rendering it more accessible, even as minimum points to what is most radical and most real in every minimalist work – the threshold at which the potentiality of pure being passes into the actuality of existence. In this sense, minimalism also intensifies and clarifies the real, since the real simply describes those things which exist, or, more precisely, which *persist* in existence.

1.2 Intermittency

The transhistorical register of minimalism: Dan Flavin's *monument 1 to V. Tatlin* (1964)

Yet the real always manifests in a specific reality, and every reality is expressed in terms of particular historical conditions. For this reason, it is necessary to supplement the existential register of minimalism with a consideration

of its historical register. In its historical register, the term minimalism is most often used to describe an aesthetic style or movement prominent in the mid-twentieth century – first in the visual arts and music, and later in literature, architecture, design and fashion – characterized by a sustained exposition of the media and processes of aesthetic expression in their most transparent, uncomplicated forms. Although relatively short-lived in this narrow historical or canonical sense, the initial eruption and codification of minimalism as a movement significantly influenced the course of subsequent aesthetic endeavour, exporting techniques and insights into a range of aesthetic contexts. The logic of minimalism manifests well beyond the artworld, in fields as diverse as computer programming, systems design, linguistics, sociology, theology, law and philosophy.

While these vastly different discourses appear only obliquely related to aesthetic minimalism, and indeed to each other, it is nonetheless true that they all express a certain relation to minimum conceived either in terms of the infinitesimal or least possible, or in terms of parsimony or the least necessary. It is also evident that the term minimalism was available to these discourses, although it is unclear whether this availability resulted from the rapid adoption of the term into the lexicon of an art criticism which had itself acquired a new cultural capital through the rapid commodification of art in the mid-twentieth century,[4] or whether it emerged from a shared desire for an alternative to the 'spectacular culture of advanced capitalism'[5] which, from very different perspectives, converged on the term minimalism as an appropriate point of resistance. In either case, the prominence of the term minimalism is at least indicative of a situation maximally receptive to various practices of minimalism.

Understood as a chronologically delimited set of works and events – exhibitions, installations, performances and publications – minimalism remains a heavily disputed region of aesthetic history. While prominent critics such as Barbara Rose[6] and John Perreault[7] recognize in minimalism both continuity and progression, notable defenders of high modernist aesthetics, including Clement Greenberg[8] and Michael Fried,[9] contend the opposite, framing minimalism as an anti-art that poses a radical threat to the entire programme of modernity – a sentiment famously echoed in the context of music by Pierre Boulez,[10] and less famously, but with no less vitriol, by writer and literary critic, Joe David Bellamy.[11] Less partisan are the divergent accounts which centre on the ideological and broader cultural significance of minimalism – those of Arthur C. Danto,[12] Rosalind Krauss,[13] James Meyer and Wim Mertens[14] among them – and which regard minimalism as a polemical field upon which to articulate the

historical specificity of the work in relation to, rather than in isolation from, the discourses which frame its production and reception.

Yet even these judgments remain coupled to a historicist scheme which, as Hal Foster notes, centres on 'the conflation of *before* and *after* with *cause* and *effect*'.[15] A more dynamic understanding of minimalism emerges only when its historical register is brought more fully into conversation with its existential one: minimalism occupies a position at once *ahistorical* – its works are icons of a persistent potential relation to the radical, minimal ground which is universal to existence[16] – and *transhistorical* – its works appear intermittently, 'sporadically but repeatedly',[17] distributed across the times and locations of different cultural histories. Suspended between the ahistorical logic of *persistence* and the transhistorical logic of *intermittency*, minimalism is invested with a dynamism which lends it a substantial and sometimes unexpected momentum, allowing it to move both within and across the increasingly prevalent, but also potentially restrictive, critical codification of aesthetic history in terms of period and movement.

In this light, while the most recognizably minimalist works are those produced at a particular historical moment that appears to have been maximally receptive to the minimalist aesthetic – Judd's serial sculpture, Glass's modular composition, or Carver's austere short stories are all products of aesthetic experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s – this fact owes at least as much to the critical context which frames these works as to the works themselves. A more expansive view of aesthetic history might suggest that numerous and intermittent expressions of minimalism have emerged and receded in the more distant past, and are likely to do so again in the future. There are, for example, distinctly minimalist literary forms that manifest transhistorically: the aphorism, the parable and the proverb are as old as literature itself, yet remain prevalent;[18] and the desire to make the material form of poetry mirror its content is evident not only in the amuletic inscriptions of antiquity, but also in the popularity of visual poetry in the seventeenth century and the flowering of concrete poetry in the twentieth century.[19] Similarly, the sparse abstraction of much Neolithic rock art resonates with a certain contemporary approach to minimum;[20] while repeated melodic or rhythmic fragments, or ostinatos, provide a distinctly minimal means of structuring music, from its earliest folk origins, through subsequent polyphonic developments, to the present, where ostinatos find a new prominence in contemporary minimalist composition.[21]

The radical force of minimalist aesthetics lies not in a single, historical event – a revolutionary rupture which severs present from past – but rather in its

capacity to *return*, and in returning to turn aesthetic pursuit once more towards its most radical parts and processes, methods and media. Minimalism constitutes an event which in the singularity of its eruption conserves the potential for its intermittent return. The event proves incomplete, inexhaustible: '[o]ne event is only registered through another that recodes it',[22] as Foster notes, and herein resides the source of minimalism's intermittency and the inner logic of its return. Minimum constitutes a radical existential ground – persistent, and to this extent, ahistorical – yet manifests in terms of a radical practice of minimalism only intermittently because the discourse of aesthetic novelty is itself subject to a 'continuous process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts'.[23]

A transhistorical theory of minimalism aims to unsettle rather than overturn historicist accounts, adding nuance and context to situations which are often artificially bound by epistemic constraints regarding chronology and location, formalist constraints regarding style and structure, and journalistic constraints which tend to take artists and critics alike at their word, without thoroughly testing their claims. What made minimalism so radical an aesthetic turn, or perhaps return, in the 1950s was not, as Fried feared, its accession to the theatricality of an anti-art,[24] but its capacity to draw out its radical consequences in relation to other artworks, movements and epochs; to radicalize both the past and the future. Once minimalism is recognized in terms of its aesthetic radicalism, aspects of minimum, anticipations and reverberations of minimalism, become widely evident.

How then might a transhistorical study of minimalism affect the canonical list of artists, composers and writers sanctioned in terms of a chronologically delimited movement? While the familiar canon of minimalist painters and sculptors – Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Agnes Martin, David Novros, Paul Mogensen, James Tuttle, Jo Baer, Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, John McCracken, Dan Flavin, James Turrell, Sol LeWitt, Anne Truitt, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Ronald Bladen, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson – provides an excellent inventory of minimalist techniques, processes and effects, the work produced a few decades in either direction reveals that a minimalist aesthetic underpins a great deal of abstract, environmental and conceptual art.

Certain works, and often series of works, by prominent artists not always associated with minimalism benefit from a close analysis grounded in the aesthetic concerns that run through the work of canonical minimalists, and reciprocally

make a significant contribution to the transhistorical analysis of an expanded minimalist field. Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Josef Albers, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, Hélio Oiticica, Yves Klein, Walter Darby Bannard, Mark Rothko, John McLaughlin, Cy Twombly, Jules Olitski, Morris Louis, Neil Williams, Gene Davis, Howard Mehring, Thomas Downing, Mary Corse, Robert Grosvenor, Joel Shapiro, Richard Long, Michael Heizer, Bruce Nauman, Rachel Whiteread, Jene Highstein, Ólafur Elíasson, Daniel Buren, Félix Gonzáles-Torres, Fred Sandback, Binky Palermo, Hanne Darboven, Dan Walsh, Irma Boom, Paulo Monteiro, Martin Creed, Gedi Sibony, Ai Weiwei, Andy Goldsworthy, Tauba Auerbach, Ron Gilad, Bernardo Ortiz Campo, Wade Guyton, Edith Dekyndt, Iran do Espirito Santo, Eva Rothschild and James Lee Byars are merely representative of a potentially much longer list.

Similarly, an understanding of musical minimalism which centres on canonical works by La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, John Adams, Meredith Monk, Michael Nyman, Arvo Pärt, John Tavener and Louis Andriessen is greatly enriched by considering the ways in which a minimalist logic intermittently expresses itself distinctively and meaningfully in the compositions of, among others, Eric Satie, Jakob van Domselaer, Anton Webern, György Kurtág, Alan Hovanhess, John Cage, Yves Klein, György Ligeti, Lou Harrison, Colin McPhee, Morton Feldman, Pauline Oliveros, Jon Gibson, John Luther Adams, Charlemagne Palestine, Harold Budd, Yoshi Wada, Alvin Lucier, Brian Eno, Phil Niblock, Francisco Lopez, Toru Takemitsu, Simeon ten Holt, Howard Skempton, Graham Fitkin, Gavin Bryars, Michael Torke, Kevin Volans, Aaron Jay Kernis, Steve Martland, Julius Eastman, Terry Jennings, Angus MacLise, Rhys Chatham, David Borden, Ann Southam, Wim Mertens, Yann Tiersen, Hanne Darboven, Tom Johnson, David Lang, Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, Nico Muhly, Richard Reed Parry and Colin Stetson. Minimalist aesthetic concerns move through the rock music of the Velvet Underground, John Cale, Tony Conrad and Popol Vuh, the minimalist electronica of Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, Robert Hood, Jeff Mills, Larry Bell, Richie Hawtin (Plastikman), Surgeon, Ricardo Villalobos, Fennesz, Microtrauma, Marcel Dettmann and Ellen Allien, and the minimalist jazz of Mal Waldron, John Surman, Marilyn Crispell, Keith Jarrett, Terje Rypdal, Jan Garbarek, Giovanni Di Domenico, Trygve Seim, Arve Henriksen, Eberhard Weber, Richie Beirach, Susanne Abbuehl and Nik Bärtsch, among many others.

The case is no different for minimalist literature, where critical accounts are dominated by a canonical core of North American prose writers – Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie

Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips and Richard Ford – with the occasional addition, in various combinations, of Lydia Davis, Alice Adams, Andre Dubus, James Robison, Gordon Lish, Joy Williams, Alice Munro, Jack Matthews, Robert Olen Butler, John Cheever, Joan Didion, Alice Paley, John Updike, Charles Bukowski, David Leavitt, Jerzy Kosiński, Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz. Yet some of the most audacious experiments in minimalist writing are missed in a chronologically limited and geographically bounded canon. Most notable among these are works of Samuel Beckett, Ernest Hemingway, Anton Chekhov and Alain Robbe-Grillet, but also of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Maurice Blanchot, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Josipovici, Paul Auster, J. M. Coetzee, Richard Brautigan, Cormac McCarthy, Dave Eggers, A. M. Homes and Tao Lin, all of which reveal very different aspects of a broadened minimalist aesthetic.

Minimalism in theatre and film, although arguably dominated by the work of Beckett, is in fact diverse, as exemplified in the approaches of Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Michel Vinaver, Robert Wilson, Harold Pinter, Sam Shepard, Roy Hart, Alain Resnais, Andrei Tarkovsky, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Derek Jarman and Jonathan Glazer among many others. Likewise, in addition to poetry documented as minimalist by Aram Saroyan, Robert Lax, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Robert Creeley, Tom Raworth, Richard Kostelanetz, Geof Huth, Jonathan Brannen, Karl Kempton, Adam Gamble, LeRoy Gorman, Crag Hill, Michael Basinski, Karl Young and Betty Radin,[25] there are a range of poets and intermedia practitioners who express very different minimalist-inflected approaches to the poetic medium, including by Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, H. D., William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Guillaume Apollinaire, Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexey Kruchenykh, Vladimir Majakovskij, Louis Aragon, Isidore Isou, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, David Ignatow, Gary Snyder, James Loughlin, Clark Coolidge, Bob Cobbing, Edwin Morgan, Ernst Jandl, Eugen Gomringer, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Ronaldo Azeredo, Emmett Williams, Dom Sylvester Houédard, John Furnival, Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Seeichi Nīkuni, Dick Higgins, John Cage, Jackson MacLow, Alison Knowles, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, Robert Grenier, bpNicol, Kenneth Goldsmith, Christian Bök, Liliane Lijn, Kenelm Cox, Paul Lansky, Trevor Wishart, Vito Acconci, Jenny Holzer, Willem Boshoff, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Stuart Moulthrop, Ingrid Ankerson, Mitchell Kimbrough and Andy Campbell.

It is necessary in this light to continue challenging, disrupting and expanding existing canonical formations of minimalism, diversifying the ways in which

minimalism reflects and reflects on both the historical and contemporary situations. Indeed, even the most canonical of minimalists objected to being constricted by a label, and many situated their work within a genealogy of responses to what they regarded as transhistorical problems. Light artist, Dan Flavin, for example, was never absorbed solely with questions of form, medium, facture or space – the aspects of his work habitually highlighted at the expense of others – but also with the socio-political force of art[26] and with metaphysical problems of transcendence and immanence.[27]

Between 1964 and 1990, for example, Flavin produced a large number of *monuments* dedicated to the Russian Constructivist, Vladimir Tatlin. These works, constructed from various symmetrical permutations and rotations of the same basic elements – one 8-foot white fluorescent lamp, and then two 6-foot, 4-foot and 2-foot white fluorescent lamps – continue 'the quest to express revolutionary social and political attitudes in an equally revolutionary language of pure abstraction'[28] which drove Tatlin, even as they ironically sought to draw attention to the failed monumentality of the *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20), which was never built save as a model. The first of Flavin's series, *monument 1 to V. Tatlin*,[29] also makes clear visual allusion to the structures which Tatlin's *Monument* had sought to surpass, the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building in particular.[30] Within the historically charged space between Tatlin's *Monument* and Flavin's *monument* we might recall any number of monumental structures, from the step pyramids of antiquity, to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, yet all draw attention back to a single point: that the full significance of Flavin's work emerges as much from its intuition of historical intermittency – its conscious return to an unfinished project[31] – as it does from the aesthetic immanence of its form and medium. Here the transhistorical logic of intermittency is not merely thematic, but arguably the most singular mark of the work itself. The peculiar immanence of much minimalism emerges precisely from the manner in which the ahistorical persistence of minimum as existential radix, and the transhistorical intermittency of minimalism as aesthetic practice, are brought together in the singularity of the work. To ignore this co-emergence threatens not only to oversimplify the works currently accepted as part of the minimalist canon, but to force to the margins some of the most significant expressions of minimalism.

1.3. Margins

At the periphery of minimalism: Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1655) John Lee Byars's *The Book of the Hundred Questions* (1969)

A curious but powerful example of a distinctly minimalist practice which has remained virtually invisible to historicist accounts of minimalism, is the venerable and varied tradition of *micrographia* – miniature books and tiny writing – which, since ancient times, has probed the sublime extremes of minimal scale by habitually seeking to press the greatest amount of writing into the smallest space possible. Micrographic practice assumes numerous forms: remarkable examples of miniature tablets, parchments and books, together with more unconventional methods of condensed inscription and, more recently, digital encoding of text, are exemplary of works distributed across the full ambit of literary history. This ancient and abiding fascination with minimal material scale is closely tied to the philosophical and scientific intuition that it is both possible and desirable to penetrate beyond the world given to us by our senses. The impulse, shared by aesthetic and scientific inquiry, is to discover a world within the world. As Stewart recognizes, '[w]hile the miniature book reduces the world to the microcosm within its covers, the microscope opens up significance to the point at which all the material world shelters a microcosm'.[32]

The microscope proves a fitting symbol for the confluence of scientific and aesthetic discourse on the microcosm, nowhere more pertinently than in Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, a collection of thirty years of microscopic observation published in 1665, and a work which enabled wide access to an understanding of the invisible composition of the world which had until then been inaccessible to all except specialists. *Micrographia* significantly influenced public perception of science and its relation to the everyday, intensifying the deep human fascination with the minimal, miniature and microcosmic. Not insignificantly, micrographic writing – and in particular a minuscule fragment onto which several prayers and religious verses have been painstakingly inscribed – is an object of Hooke's scrutiny, and although he not surprisingly finds it lacking in finesse, he certainly recognizes the considerable effort and energy which have driven its execution.[33] In this sense, the process of symbolically exposing the hermetically sealed world of the micrographic text does not evacuate it of significance, but rather clarifies the considerable force invested in a practice of writing which is comported towards minimum, or the least possible.