CARL ANDRE'S MINIMALIST SCULPTURE, STEEL Σ 16, (PRONOUNCED STEEL SUM 16) 136 HOT-ROLLED STEEL PLATES, EACH 30CM X 30CM X 1CM, WAS FIRST EXHIBITED AT NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY IN 1978. FEW PEOPLE SEEM TO KNOW, AND FEWER STILL REMEMBER, THAT THE NEW YORK-BASED PIONEER OF MINIMALIST ART CAME TO NEWCASTLE TO WORK ON THE EXHIBITION WITH AUSTRALIAN PAINTER, ROBERT HUNTER. AND, ACCORDING TO JOANNA MENDELSOHN'S REVIEW IN ART & AUSTRALIA AT THE TIME, FEW NOVOCASTRIANS CARED.

SURE ENOUGH, TO THE UNINITIATED, MINIMALIST ART SEEMS DIFFICULT. UNLIKE MOST OTHER 'ISMS' IN VISUAL ART, IT DOESN'T SEEM TO WANT TO GIVE ITS AUDIENCE MUCH TO WORK WITH, IF ANYTHING. IT DOESN'T RESPOND WELL TO THE QUESTION, 'WHAT IS IT MEANT TO BE?'

So, what then is Minimalist art? Where does it fit into the recent past in modern art, and how did it come about? And how can an arrangement of 136 steel plates be one of the most significant works of modern art in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection? To understand Minimalism, we need to understand what exactly it was responding to when it emerged in the United States in the late 1950s.

LIFE

In November 1959, Life, America’s leading lifestyle magazine, ran a two-part feature by Dorothy Seiberling on the ‘giants’ of American art. The first part, titled Baffling US Art: What It Is About attempted to explain what the crazy, uncontrolled drips and spatters of American Abstract Expressionism meant. Seiberling explained, ‘Instead of a picture of a man suffering, the abstract expressionist tries to evoke the actual sensation of suffering through the use of foreboding colors, clashing shapes or lines and hurtle restlessly across the canvas.

When the Life article ran – two months before the end of the 1950s – the broader public were beginning to understand that Jackson Pollock’s crazed splats or Willem de Kooning’s heavy brushstrokes were meant to convey the raw emotion and psychic turmoil of the human condition. By the time of Life’s feature, Abstract Expressionism had dominated American art for two decades.

Twenty years earlier, the critic Clement Greenberg had lauded Abstract Expressionism as the new avant garde. Because they were not making paintings of recognisable things – landscapes, people, vases of flowers – Greenberg argued they were creating something unique, never before seen. In fact, Greenberg went as far as to say, they were trying 'in effect to imitate God.' The claims made for Abstract Expressionism were often grandiose and bloated with spiritual importance.

SIXTEEN AMERICANS

One month after Life magazine’s feature, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York opened Sixteen Americans. The exhibition was intended to capture the zeitgeist of the turning-of-the-decade from the ’50s into
60s – and it included none of the ‘celebrated pioneers’ of Abstract Expressionism. Instead, curator Dorothy Miller assembled a group of much younger emerging artists.

Some of the works in Sixteen Americans were clearly a critical response to the grandiosity of Abstract Expressionism. Frank Stella presented large striped canvases. They may have looked like abstract paintings, but something very different was happening – a new idea was emerging. As Carl Andre succinctly explained in the Sixteen Americans catalogue text on Stella: ‘Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his paintings.’

Nothing else? What about the profound quasi-religious claims made for Abstract Expressionism? What about evoking man’s suffering through crusty stabs of foreboding colour, visceral and clotted, on the surface of a canvas? The Minimalist artists rejected the idea that there could be something weighty and insightful found in a work of art, beyond our direct aesthetic experience of the material right in front of us.

**WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SEE**

Similar to Abstract Expressionism, Stella’s striped paintings don’t represent anything; but quite unlike Abstract Expressionism, his paintings were not about anything either, other than themselves. Stella puts it concisely: ‘I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting – the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up by asserting that there is something there besides the paint on canvas. My painting is based on the fact that what can be seen there is there. It really is an object…what you see is what you see.’

As a young sculptor, Carl Andre understood this idea at the core of Stella’s paintings when he wrote that ‘art excludes the unnecessary’ because his own work made the same proposition, which is at the very heart of Minimalist art: what you see is what you see.

Minimalist art works are not metaphors, they are not models, they are not allegories, they never refer to something that is present elsewhere, whether physical or spiritual, material or conceptual. A square plate of steel in a Carl Andre work is a square plate of steel; but, importantly, it is a square plate of steel that has been placed into the context of ‘art’. When it enters the art context, all its functional possibilities are shut down. It is no longer a material for something – for building, for becoming part of something else. Minimalist art sought to free objects from their useful significance, to strip away purpose, so that we see the aesthetics of the object without the interference of function. A brick is no longer waiting to become part of a wall or building; instead, with its useful function stripped away, it is a rectangular ceramic block, with weight, texture and colour.

**STEEL Σ 16**

In 1978, Andre made two works from square plates of steel specifically for the exhibition at Newcastle Art Gallery: Steel Σ 4 and Steel Σ 16.

In one important respect, the materiality of Andre’s Steel Σ 16 is unique across the artist’s fifty-year career, and this is particularly important for Newcastle: the material that Andre is drawing our attention to – the steel – was made at the BHP factory in Newcastle, now closed for over a decade.
Art critic Joanna Mendelssohn noted in her review of Andre’s 1978 Newcastle show, ‘Some plates are more rusted than others, some are scratched, there is none of the sameness of specifically manufactured goods.’

This is the same in 2014 as it was back then, because the 136 steel plates that make up Steel Σ16 are the same material – the very same steel plates, in the same building, in the same configuration.

Mendelssohn’s review ends with the critic pondering what the artist’s work might mean into the future: ‘He does not mind that Minimalism is no longer the avant garde,’ she says; ‘he accepts as inevitable that his art, which enjoyed a brief moment of glory in the 1960s and 1970s, will for some decades be regarded as passé.’

Seven years after his Newcastle show, Andre became one of the most contentious figures in American art, but not for his work. In 1985, his wife, Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, fell to her death from their thirty-fourth floor apartment in Mercer Street, New York. Andre stood trial for her murder. He was acquitted in 1988. Nevertheless, Andre was publicly attacked for Mendieta’s death. It led to decades of ‘institutional silence’ in America, which only recently ended with a major retrospective at the Dia Art Foundation in New York last year.

Now in his late seventies, ill health has drawn a line forever under Carl Andre’s career. There is no doubt that his place in twentieth century art history is secure. The audiences’ response to his work can still be non-comprehending and occasionally hostile, which is perhaps proof enough that his work has never become passé.

FOOTNOTES
11. Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Tomkins, Calvin. “Profiles: The Materialist.” The New Yorker, 5 December 2011, 64.
Above:
Carl Andre
Steel C. 16 1978
136 hot-rolled steel plates
480 x 480 x 1cm
Gift of the artist 2011
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Cover image and inside cover image:
Carl Andre
Steel C. 16 1978 (detail)
136 hot-rolled steel plates
480 x 480 x 1cm
Gift of the artist 2011
Newcastle Art Gallery collection