

Questions of Context: The Display of Minimal Art in the Museum and the Viewer Experience

by
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Abstract

Minimal artists of the 1960s produced works that were large in scale and confronted the viewer. This artistic movement is characterized, and in many ways validated, by the critical literature produced by artists, art critics and historians. The field of art history continues to heavily influence museum display; however, a growing concern for the viewer's experience is evident in museum practice. This master's project, through data collected from a literature review and comparative case study, explores the ways museum exhibition practice influences the relationship between the art object and the viewer in relation to minimal art, informed by relevant art historical methodologies.

Keywords

Museum Exhibition, Minimal Art, Art History, Viewer Experience, Constructivist Learning

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.01 Introduction

Art produced in the last century has made answering the question “what is art?” more difficult than ever. As works of art stray from the conventions of the easel and the pedestal, art museums are faced with the challenge of exhibition. Compounding this problem is the mandate placed upon museums by the public to fulfill their obligations as educational institutions. Many influencing factors exist within museological practice, including art history, learning theories, and artistic intention. This paper will investigate museum exhibition practice, specifically looking at the display of art objects from the minimalist movement. Informing this study are a literature review and comparative case study, leading to a conclusion delineating discoveries made about art museum exhibition practice.

1.02 Statement of the Problem

Minimal art produced in the 1960s followed the trend started by one of their predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists, in producing works of art on a large scale. Artists, art critics and historians wrote extensively about minimal art. Robert Morris (2000), a prominent minimal artist, writes:

Minimalism’s programmatic rejection of European art traditions, which it shared with the more ambitious abstract expressionist efforts, wanted to repress memory and emphasize the American obsession with the new and the now as a progress over a past that was to be forgotten. (p. 478).

With minimal art, where the context of the work has become equally important as, if not more important than, the content of the work, written explanation is critical to understanding and interpreting these objects. The exhibition techniques of the modern-day art museum are strongly connected to art scholarship. For example, the ubiquitous practice of displaying art according to

time period and school is owed to the field of art history. Museological scholars also examine issues surrounding viewer experience in a museum setting. These academic inquiries range from issues in education to interpretation to perception. Many art historians look to more philosophical pursuits, such as phenomenology and semiotics, to understand how the viewer experiences an artwork.

Pertaining to the triad of artist, museum, and viewer, the literature has failed to fully examine the relationships among these three players. Art museums, as seen by the public, are the most common intermediaries between the art object and the viewer. Specifically, it is important to further explore issues around the context and display of minimal art in the museum setting. As art continues to push the limits of the museum walls, research in this area can help develop frameworks and strategies for dealing with the challenges of exhibiting contemporary art objects.

1.03 Conceptual Framework

As institutions serving the public, museums provide the most accessible forum for the display of art. In other words, an art museum, as an exhibiter of art objects, acts as a bridge between the artist and the viewer. The development of art over the last century and a half has profoundly changed this relationship of art object and viewer, and museums have also changed. In exploring this research gap, three large topical areas are addressed. This investigation looks closely at the development and philosophies of minimal art, the evolution of museum practice in response to evolving artistic conventions, and the resulting impact to the viewer's experience. For each of these three areas, the influence of art history will be taken into consideration. Please refer to Figure 1 for the Conceptual Framework Schematic.

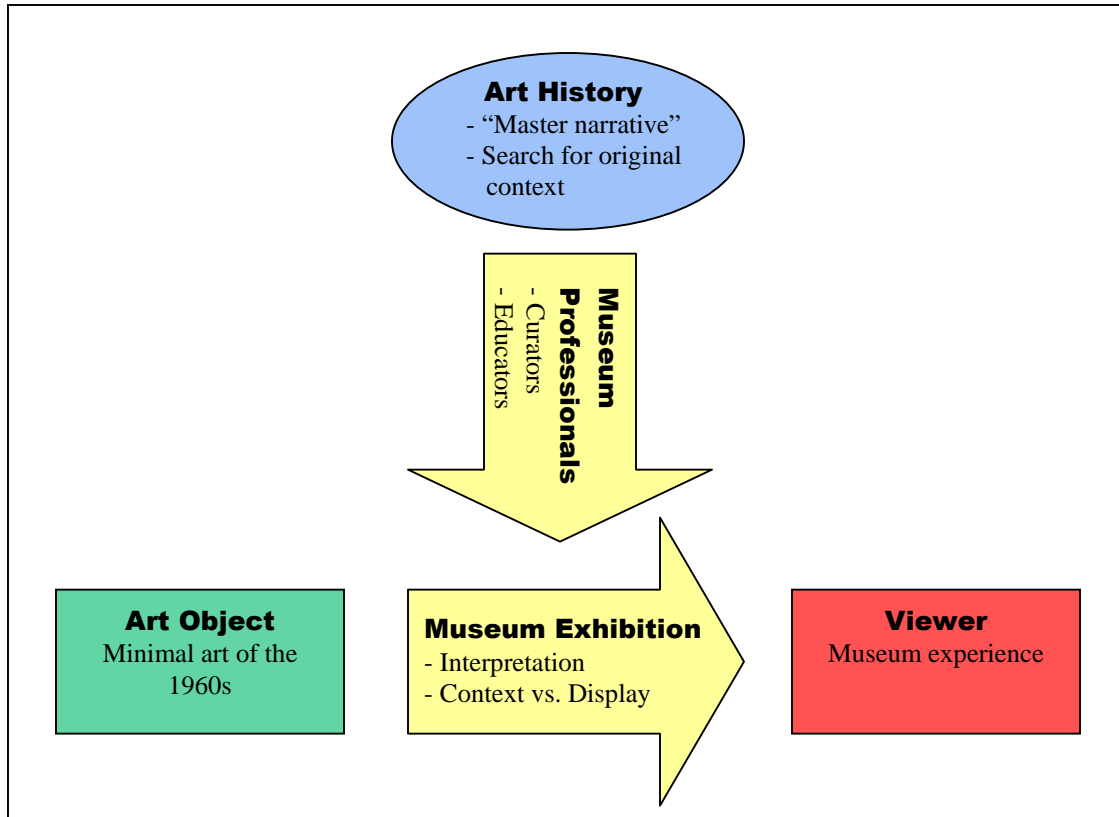


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Schematic

The first area is minimal art and the artists producing these works during the 1960s. One common characteristic of minimalism is the large scale of these art objects. Morris (2000) states, “In American abstract art, big is not only always better but also the only hope against its nemesis, the decorative” (p. 477). He further states, “its ambition was to transpose and redeem utilitarian industrial processes and gestalt forms into an aesthetic space of the phenomenological” (p. 480). However, unlike many of their successors, minimal artists sought to maintain a scale relational to the size of the human body. “It should establish a ‘comparison’ between its size and the body size of the viewer so as to reveal its shape or gestalt” (Meyer, 2004, p. 224). These relationships minimal artists sought to create between the art object and the viewer led to Michael Fried’s denouncement of minimal art as theatrical and literalist. Fried (1998) states,

“the things that are literalist works of art must somehow confront the beholder – they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way” (p. 154). Issues brought about by minimal art objects challenge viewers and museum professionals alike.

With the museum acting as intermediary, the museum visitor is at the receiving end of an artwork. The viewer experience in the art museum is the second topical area that is pursued in this research. Explorations of learning and aesthetic theories are used to deconstruct how the viewer interprets, perceives, and understands the art he or she views. Art objects of the late 20th century, according to Morris (2000), promote a “churchlike atmosphere” with “the sanctity of the museum as site for worship” (p. 480). However, much museological discussion revolves around designing museum exhibits with viewer-targeted, rather than curatorial, goals in mind. Lankford (2002) states:

Constructivist theories of learning and recent research into aesthetic experience suggest that most people actually benefit by instruction in various means of engagements with art, and that engagement is most fulfilling when it actively challenges, builds on, and extends the knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities of the museum visitor. (p. 141).

Negrin (1993) elaborates on this idea that “dialogue between viewer and artwork to occur is the perception of something which both share in common” (p. 117). This research study, in part, seeks ways to make a connection between artwork and viewer. In addition to addressing theoretical issues of visitor experience, practical studies examining visitor behavior will also be looked at.

Lying in between the artist and the viewer is the museum, which is the last topical area. This research specifically looks at curatorial and educational decisions related to exhibit design. Changing art historical theory continually impacts museum practice. Traditionally, museums

have exhibited works of art chronologically. The question arising from this conventional form of display is whether it presents the most optimal experience for the museum visitor. Levi (1985) contends that the art museum is an “indispensable instrument in the great task of aesthetic education” (p. 29). However, “Most of those responsible for the direction of art museum aesthetic policy have been trained as art historians” (p. 37). The educational role of art museums has been given greater attention over the last few years as they have “moved away from its role as an institution merely open to the public to one actively servicing the public” (Morris, 2000, p. 485).

As shown through this brief overview, scholarship touches on the issues of minimal art, viewer experience, and museum responsibility; however, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the relationships among these three constructs. A formidable starting point for this study was to review pertinent art historical research related to minimal art and museum practice. Whether the subject matter is the artist, the viewer, or the museum, written discussions often delve into philosophical discourse. Once a foundational understanding of relevant art historical theories and methodologies was gained, study then ensued in the three topical areas. The comprehensive literature review of these areas is presented in Chapter 3.

1.04 Purpose statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between the minimal art object and the viewer created by museum exhibition practice, informed by art historical methodologies, gathering data from a literature review and comparative case study conducted in two art museums exhibiting minimal works of art.

1.05 Methodological Paradigm

In conducting this research, I utilized an interpretive methodological paradigm. In accordance with the interpretivist approach, I disagree with the positivist belief that there is a single reality (Neuman, 2003). I believe that the way a viewer experiences a work of art is based on his or her social construction. Falk and Dierking (1992) assert that personal and social context significantly shape a museum visitor's experience. With this assumption, "the interpretive approach holds that social life is based on social interactions and socially constructed meaning systems" (Neuman, 2003, p. 77). In order to suggest ways for museums to approach their responsibilities to both artist and viewer, it is critical to understand both the artist's orientation to how his or her art is perceived and the viewer's orientation to how he or she perceives art.

1.06 Role of the researcher

My undergraduate studies in art history influenced my research. The selection of minimal art as the focus of my investigation was a deliberate decision based on my personal tastes of visual art. Also, as an avid museumgoer, I have preconceived notions as to how to best view art. However, as someone who may be considered a "connoisseur", I am aware that my preference in exhibition design may not necessarily produce a successful experience for a "novice" museum visitor. A thorough review of the literature surrounding this topic helped combat these biases.

1.07 Research questions

Exploring the relationships between minimal art and the viewer in a museum environment provides fresh scholarship in an area yet to be methodically considered. Research in all topical areas was informed by art historical methodology. Taking on an interpretivist

methodological paradigm, exploratory research was conducted using qualitative research methods. Methods of inquiry included an extensive literature review and a comparative case study of two art museums exhibiting modern art. The main and sub-research questions follow.

Main research question:

Focusing on minimal art from the 1960s, in what ways does museum exhibition practice influence the relationship between the art object and the viewer?

Sub-research questions:

What art historical methodologies are most applicable to analyzing minimal art?

What impact does the field of art history currently have on museum exhibition practice?

How do art museums exhibit minimal art objects with respect to the rest of their collections?

What is the role of context in displaying minimal art objects in the museum setting?

How do education and curatorial staff work together to decide how to display the museum's collection?

1.08 Definitions

This study looks only at *minimal works of art* from the 1960s and will focus on the works of two prominent artists of this time – Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. These works of art are characterized by their simple forms and are often constructed from industrial or synthetic materials. While the minimal artist creates the idea of the artwork, he or she may or may not be the one to physically construct the artwork. Furthermore, many minimal art objects are sculptural in form and have a size relative to the human body (Kleiner, Mamiya, & Tansey, 2003). A comprehensive discussion of the history and critical nature of minimal art is tackled in the third chapter of this paper through the literature review.

Art history, as referred to in this study, is the academic discipline of studying artworks, with a primary concern being the determination of original context. Art historians “seek to achieve a full understanding not only of why these ‘persisting events’ of human history look the way they do but also why the artistic ‘events’ happened at all” (Kleiner et al., 2003, p. xxxiv). It is also important to note that art historians are unable to be completely objective.

They can try to construct the original cultural contexts of artworks, but they are bound to be limited by their distance from the thought patterns of the cultures they study and by the obstructions to understanding their own thought patterns raise – the assumptions, presuppositions, and prejudices peculiar to their own culture. (Kleiner et al., 2003, p. xlvii).

Modernism, in an art historical sense, refers to a period of art, roughly dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Modernist art sought to create in new and innovative ways, via technique, structure, and subject matter. Also, modern art has the ability to make the viewer self-conscious of his or her role as spectator (Harrison, 2003). *Postmodernism* is said to have begun around the 1970s and is often discussed as diametrically different from modernism. Minimalism, as an artistic movement, is routinely placed between the larger movements of modernism and postmodernism.

1.09 *Delimitations and limitations*

Since this research study explored only one specific movement of art, the results of the study are not generalizable to other art movements or schools. For example, minimal works of art are often sculptural and thereby initiate a very different dialogue with the viewer than would a painting. It is this unique relationship of art object and viewer that moved me to focus on

minimal art. Furthermore, in light of my biases, the conclusions of the research project may not find practical application among the wider audience of museum patrons.

Also, this study was framed as a comparative case study. The case study examined two art museums, located in close geographic proximity to one another, in a major U.S. city. Within each of these museums, interviews were conducted with education and curatorial staff. It was necessary to narrowly focus this study in order to successfully complete a master's project within the desired timeframe. As a result, although valuable lessons were learned that might be of interest to organizations similar to those studied, the findings from this data collection are only applicable to the purpose of this study.

1.10 Benefits of the study

Minimal artworks can be described as elemental in nature; these art objects comprise basic geometric shapes and are non-representational. “In doing so, they reduced experience to its most fundamental level, preventing viewers from drawing on assumptions or preconceptions when dealing with the art before them” (Kleiner et al., 2003, p. 865). In addition, most minimal artists, such as Donald Judd, have strong opinions regarding museum practice. Judd (as cited in McShine, 1999) states, “Permanent installations and careful maintenance are crucial to the autonomy and integrity of art to its defense, especially now when so many people want to use it for something else” (p. 231). Museum professionals are faced with the challenge of making these esoteric works relevant to the viewer, while taking into account the original context intended by the artist.

By exploring the issues surrounding these specific topics, this study aspired to open a dialogue between the very related, yet often disparate, fields of museology and art history. Museums are public institutions and must think of how to best serve its patrons and its

collections, without compromising the integrity of either party. Also, museums often have trouble exhibiting contemporary art objects, in terms of both physical and interpretive considerations. This study's exploration of minimal art display provides a potential model for facing the challenges of exhibiting difficult art. Data collected from both the literature review and comparative case study helped formulate suggested recommendations for museum praxis. The resulting recommendations were, in part, derived from best practices at both art museums studied.

CHAPTER 2: Research Design

2.01 *Introduction*

Minimal art in itself is a challenging topic. A shared critical perspective, rather than a common physical appearance, characterizes the art of this period. Furthermore, museums have faced difficulties in displaying these works of art due to their large sizes and esoteric personae. In order to approach this complex topic, the researcher carefully devised an appropriate research strategy based on desired goals and outcomes.

2.02 *Research approach*

The interpretivist methodological paradigm lends itself most easily to qualitative research. This research is basic in that “the driving goal is to contribute to basic, theoretical knowledge” (Neuman, 2003, p. 23); however, this study did not have the scientific constraints of basic research and was thus somewhat applied in nature. Furthermore, the purpose of this study was exploratory in that the relationships among the art object, the viewer, and the museum were examined. Current review of the literature does not show prior investigation into this topic. This study sought to gain a preliminary understanding of the display of minimal art in the museum setting and the impact upon the viewer experience. Also, this research study aspired to “generate new ideas, conjectures, or hypotheses” (Neuman, 2003, p. 29) concerning the proposed topic.

2.03 *Strategy of inquiry*

The starting point for this research was an extensive review of published documents of scholarly literature pertinent to the study of minimal art, the viewer experience, and museum practice. Visual art creation since the latter half of the 20th century has become synonymous with the writings of art critics and historians. In pursuing research related to the museum’s role in displaying minimal art from the 1960s and examining the museum’s responsibility to both the artist and viewer, it was necessary to develop an understanding of the field of art history. Art

criticism and history relies heavily upon aesthetic and philosophical theory. References to these theories is evident as artist Robert Morris (2000) writes that he “inserted the gestalt of unitary forms and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty into the game, stepping over the discreet, Deweyan distance of vision into a bodily engagement with the self-reflexive” (p. 478).

An important feature of these philosophical inquiries that influenced both the investigative and writing processes of this study is the inclusion of a personal stance or opinion. These authors assert that the philosophical analysis of art requires more than a scientific, impersonal approach. Moxey (1995) advocates that his writing “is not a descriptive account of the transformations currently being experienced by art history. Far from an empirical report, it is an appeal for a broader recognition of the role played by subjectivity in the articulation of historical interpretations” (p. 400).

After gaining a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the related fields through a literature review, a comparative case study addressed the practical question of this research – how do art museums display minimal art objects with respect to the rest of their collections? Interviews conducted to obtain first hand accounts from museum professionals concerning the main and sub-research questions were a significant aspect of the comparative case study. The combination of these methods of inquiry, under an interpretive methodological paradigm, not only helped answer the research questions, but also provided guidance for further areas of research.

2.04 Overview of research design

In exploring the issues of context related to the display of minimal art in museums and the impact and responsibility to the viewer experience, research design parameters were constructed. The first phase of the study, philosophical inquiry of the topical areas informed by

art historical research, began winter 2005. This comprehensive review of the literature continued into early spring 2005, addressing the main conceptual areas of minimal, the viewer, and the museum.

This research study employed purposive sampling to select case study sites. A comparative case study looked at two art museums exhibiting minimal art objects – The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon Riggio Galleries. Both art museums are collecting institutions located in or near a major city in the United States, within close geographic proximity to one another. Also both sites are considered large art museums in terms of gallery square footage. The Museum of Modern Art has one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of modern and contemporary art in the world. Dia: Beacon is dedicated to permanent or quasi-permanent display of works by a select group of artists with whom the museum has a relationship. While these two institutions are unique, they were chosen for the opportunities they offered in generating interesting discussions in exploring the display of minimal art. In addition to detailed observations of exhibition design related to the display of minimal art objects, interviews with representatives from curatorial and education departments at each institution were conducted. Onsite research for the comparative case study was conducted February 2005. The focus of spring 2005 was drafting this document.

There were several areas in terms of skills and knowledge that needed to be developed in order to successfully complete this research project. Preliminary literature reviews were challenging due to a lack of knowledge of art historical methodology. This was the motivation for selecting this area to be studied first. Building a solid theoretical framework of art history proved invaluable in the continuation of this study.

The Human Subjects requirements were met in order to properly handle case study research in a manner compliant with university standards and policies. Following Human Subjects approval, case study sites were recruited and logistical arrangements for conducting onsite research were arranged.

2.05 Anticipated ethical issues

Anticipated risks associated with this research study were minimal. All interviewees were properly recruited per Human Subjects guidelines and formal, written consent was obtained. Only participants who were willing to be identified in any written documents associated with this study were recruited. Since this study was exploratory in nature, the researcher's primary goal was not to answer or challenge existing questions and practices, but to bring forth and provoke new questions and research in yet to be investigated areas.

2.06 Overview of data collection

Data collection for this proposed research study consisted of two main areas, a comprehensive literature review and a comparative case study. The literature review was completed in order to acquire a foundation of knowledge in art historical and museological practice. Once a basis in theory was attained, a comparative case study was utilized to address the pragmatic research questions concerning current museum practice.

The comparative case study took place in February 2005. In order to draw comparisons, sites were selected purposively using certain qualifying characteristics. Both sites are relatively large art museums, in terms of gallery square footage, and have minimal works of art in their collections and on display. Both sites are located in or near a major United States city. Due to this restriction, travel was necessary to conduct onsite research. As a result, sites were selected that are in close geographic proximity to one another.

The geographic center of minimal art in the 1960s was New York, so it is logical that both institutions are located in this city. Furthermore, because both sites are prominent in the museum field, coupled with their proximity to one another, the museums are familiar with one another in terms of staff and exhibition practice. Most importantly, in selecting these highly respected, world-renowned institutions, it was anticipated that both museums employed best practices for the researcher to observe.

For each case study site the following methods of data collection were used. Interviews were pursued with one member of the curatorial staff and one member of the education staff.¹ Staff members who work most closely with minimal works of art were targeted. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The second method of data collection was researcher observation. Through visual observation, thick description of minimal art objects on display at the case study sites was recorded. Observation also looked at the larger context of exhibition practice at each selected museum.

2.07 Data collection instruments

Several research instruments were created to assist in data collection. They are listed below with the appendix locations. Each of these instruments allowed for summative coding.

- Interview Protocol for Curatorial Staff Member (Appendix A)
- Interview Protocol for Education Staff Member (Appendix B)
- Data Collection Sheet for Observing Minimal Art Object Display (Appendix C)

2.08 Recruitment instruments

Recruitment letters were sent to each of the potential interviewees. Please see Appendix D for a Sample Recruitment Letter.

¹ An interview was not conducted with a Dia: Beacon curator.

2.09 *Consent forms*

Formal, written consent was acquired from each interviewee. Please see Appendix E for a Sample Consent Form.

2.10 *Data collection and disposition procedures*

During interviews, the researcher took handwritten notes and made audio recordings. The resulting audiotapes were selectively transcribed and referred to for exact quotes during the writing process. The process for collecting data related to the display of minimal art objects entailed thorough handwritten notes. Also, photographs were taken by the researcher or obtained from the museum for supporting visual reference.

While permission was obtained to refer to interviewees by name in any resulting written documents, access to the collected interview data will be securely maintained. Collected data will not be shared with other researchers without written consent of participants. Photographs taken in conjunction with case study visual observation will not be used in any published materials. Any notes, audiotapes, or photographs are being kept indefinitely for possible future studies.

2.11 *Coding and analysis procedures*

With the amassing of large amounts of data, it was necessary to develop a system for mining and analyzing the data. Coding schemes corresponding to the thematic areas of the conceptual framework were devised. Below are the four main topical areas, with related sub-topical areas.

- Art history – methodology and theory
- Minimal art – history, artist's statements, art historian/critic statements
- Viewer experience – learning theory, visitor studies

- Museums – exhibition practice, curatorial practice, education practice

Data from both the literature review and comparative case study were coded according to these categories. Data collected from the literature review was managed through a researcher-created Access database.

2.12 *Strategies for validating findings*

A key component of conducting research is to validate the findings. Creswell (2003) states that validity helps in “determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 195-196). Particularly with qualitative research, validity techniques help to establish trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first validation technique employed was triangulation. Conducting philosophical inquiry via literature review and conducting a comparative case study triangulated strategies of inquiry. Triangulation of data sources and research methods was accomplished by using both interviews and visual observation of two case study sites. Findings were also validated through member checks. Peer debriefing was achieved by working closely with a research advisor and sharing periodically with Arts and Administration colleagues. All three of these methods – triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing – are tools for increasing credibility of qualitative research.

In order to establish transferability, thick description was used when collecting case study data. This included meticulous and comprehensive observation notes of minimal art object display and careful transcription of audiotapes. Photographs supplement notes describing visual observations. Lastly, the researcher kept a reflexive journal during the entire research study.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

3.01 *Introduction*

In order to explore the display of minimal art in the museum and its relationship to the viewer experience, it was necessary to complete a thorough literature review. Minimal artists embraced art writing as a mechanism for communicating their philosophies and theories about the creation and display of their works. It was also through critical literature that the popularity of minimalism spread. However, with any scholarly discussion of art museum practice, it is important to first address art history and its impact on exhibition and display. After addressing the salient points of art historical theory and practice, the focus of this chapter will shift to the specific movement of minimal art. The history of minimalism will be described, covering the polemical debates by art critics, historians, and artists alike. The discussion will then proceed to the viewer experience, attending to relevant learning theories and visitor studies. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with museum practice, opening up the discussion of the comparative case study for the following chapter.

3.02 *What is art history?*

The field of art history has a profound effect on museum practice, but what is the definition of “art history”? As stated earlier, the field of art history is an academic discipline studying artworks, particularly seeking to identify original context. Art history is similar to history in that the goal is to “identify, describe, and explain noteworthy events” (Carrier, 2003, p. 175). Also important in art history is to explore the periods between noteworthy events, that is, to understand changes. It is in explaining change (or development) that the story of original context surrounding a work of art is formed. Preziosi (1992) states, “Art historical practice has been principally devoted to the restoration of the circumstances that surrounded (and therefore are presumed to have led in some extended and indirect sense to) the work’s production” (p.

373). However, it is key to remember that a single art object is only a small part of a very large art historical narrative.

3.03 *Role of the art historian*

In 1895 the Fogg Art Museum was founded at Harvard University as an institution for the study of art history. Many successive art history programs followed the example set by the Fogg.

The Fogg Museum was in fact conceived of as a laboratory for study, demonstration, teaching, and for training in the material circumstances of artistic production. It was intended to be a scientific establishment devoted to the comparison and analysis of works of art (potentially) all periods and places, to the estimation of their relative worth, and to an understanding of their evidential value with respect to the history and progressive evolution of different nations and ethnic groups. (Preziosi, 1992, p. 365).

The art historical approach associated with Harvard is formalism. “Formal analysis operates on a body of objects synchronically to find commonalities that can be characterized as style” (Prown, 1997, p. 8). Connoisseurship is the application of formal analysis to a set of objects. Another art historical approach is iconography, which focuses on subject matter analysis. By examining formal qualities of art objects, formalism is more aptly suited and, as a result, more commonly used by art historians to analyze Minimal art.

Early art history programs, such as Harvard’s, set the precedent for training those people who would become museum professionals. It was their didactic approach that named art historians “connoisseurs” of art. As the anointed experts, art historians have historically been given the task of decoding the significance of art to the general public (Worts, 2003). An art historian has been instructed to seek the original intent of the artist. However, with research of a

qualitative nature, it is impossible to be completely objective. Subjectivity is intrinsic to art historical practice and should not be overlooked. Moxey (1995) states, “The subjective attitudes and cultural aspirations of the art historian become just as important an aspect of the narrative as the works that are its object” (p. 399).

3.04 *Theoretical concerns*

The unavoidable subjectivity of art history has notable implications to affiliated institutions, such as art museums. Preziosi (1992) states that an art object is “a *vehicle* by means of which the intentions, values, attitudes, messages, emotions, or agendas of a maker (or, by extension, of his or her time and place) are conveyed (by design or chance) to (targeted or circumstantial) beholders or observers” (p. 375). Prown (1997) has identified a shift in the study of art towards “contextualization”, where the focus is not so much on the art object or the artist, but rather on the social and cultural context surrounding the object. “Art has become less the object of study than a means of study” (p. 2).

Another important theoretical concern is the discussion of the “end of art history.” Danto, who is commonly credited with this allegation, believes that art has reached the end of innovation and so the story has reached its end. Danto thinks “the history of art ends when art becomes philosophically self-conscious” (Carrier, 2003, p. 181). György (1999) elaborates on this theory:

The end of art history, the end of the narrative, meant the obligatory abandonment of this wax-museum sensibility, the recognition that the various groups of phenomena in contemporary art are not longer explainable by slotting them into the order of the history of visibility. (p. 424).

Gombrich (1951), though writing many years ago, would most likely disagree with the notion that art history has reached its end. He states, “One never finishes learning about art. There are always new things to discover” (p. 17). While these statements exemplify an aesthetic view of art, Nelson (1997) notes that art history is a multidisciplinary field that “engages not one but many spaces – aesthetic, architectural, urban, social, religious, political, and so on – and thus bears within itself diverse examples of spatial narratives” (p. 40). So it seems that art history, as an academic field, not only has room for sustainability, but also continued growth and evolution.

3.05 The dangers of art history

Just as styles of art change, so will the styles of art historical interpretation. Consequently, it is important to not become too attached to any singular view of art. Gilmore (1995) asserts that multiple, differing viewpoints of one art object do not imply that some of the viewpoints are wrong. Any work of art features numerous details, and varying attention will produce varying interpretations. As argued earlier, artworks can be viewed through different lenses. Carrier (2003), in discussing issues with aesthetics, states that “seeing an artwork aesthetically by no means excludes looking at it in other ways” (p. 185).

3.06 Modernism and postmodernism

From here, the discussion moves from art history, the academic field, to art history, the timeline. For this research study, the entry point into the master narrative of art history begins with modernism. Although the term crosses many disciplines, all modern art forms share in “the intentional rejection of classical precedent and classical style” (Harrison, 2003, p. 188).

Modernism, for the purposes of this study, is an art historical term referring to works produced beginning in the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. This period of history is marked by industrialization and urbanization, both of which are thought to have pushed people to seek

individuality. This search for uniqueness carried over into art creation. Also, with the burgeoning use of photography, artists no longer felt the need to strive for illusionism. As a result, modern art is typified by the artist's interest in conception over perception. Artistic interest retreated to the formal qualities of art, such as color, space, and texture. The use of simplified forms is apparent in many modern artworks.

One of the most influential modern artists was Marcel Duchamp. A leader of the Dada movement in the early twentieth century, Duchamp exemplified the modernist interest in conceptual issues, rather than trying to be a window to the world. He sought an "art that engaged the mind rather than simply gratified the senses" (Rothschild, 2000, p. 291). Duchamp is arguably most remembered for his use of the "readymade", a found object that he qualified as art by assigning it a new context. The readymade exemplified Duchamp's stance that art need not simply be aesthetically pleasing; this was "the major conceptual discovery in twentieth-century art" (Danto, as cited in Rothschild, 2000, p. 291). About 50 years later, Minimal artists would be charged with re-employing Duchamp's idea of the readymade in their own works.

Postmodernism is most often described in contrasting terms to modernism. Modernism is associated with "scientific objectivity, rationality, and universality"; on the other hand, postmodernism is characterized by "skepticism, cynicism, fatalism, and narcissism" (Haynes, 1995, p. 45). Furthermore, while modernism sought to reject past traditions in favor of creating something new, postmodernism utilized past traditions for new intentions. While there is no distinct line where modernism ends and postmodernism begins, minimal art is often placed between the two eras.

3.07 *What is minimal art?*

In his essay titled “Minimal Art”, Wollheim (1974) introduced the term to the world and used “minimal” as a descriptor for the dearth of content in these artworks. The “work” in “work of art” subconsciously implies that a certain amount of effort is placed into the creation of an art object. Minimal art, with its simple forms often fabricated by a third party, seemingly lacked sufficient effort on the part of the artist. Wollheim (1974) does, however, credit the artist with making the decision to create the object, “that without which work would be meaningless” (p. 108).

In his comprehensive text *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Meyer (2001) continually revisits the notion that the common feature in minimal art was not style. He echoes Wollheim’s argument of “minimal” in terms of simplicity and production methods, but Meyer contends that the true bond among minimal artists was the shared critical approach towards their work. Meyer believes that minimalism “is best understood not as a coherent movement but as a practical field” (Meyer, 2001, p. 6).

To paint the picture of what characterizes a minimal art object, let us look at two works by two of minimalism’s most important figures, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. *Untitled (Stack)* by Donald Judd dates from 1967 and is currently on display at The Museum of Modern Art (see Figure 2). The work consists of nine rectangular boxes constructed of galvanized iron. Each box is identical with an emerald green lacquer on the sides and a length, width, height ratio of approximately 4:3:1. The boxes are mounted to the gallery wall in a vertical line, evenly spaced from the ceiling to the floor. On display at Dia: Beacon are 20 of a series of works titled *‘Monuments’ for V. Tatlin* by Dan Flavin, created between 1964 and 1981. Most of the *Monuments* comprise illuminated fluorescent light tubes in varying quantities of two-, four-, six-,

and eight-foot tubes. For example, one *Monument* uses seven white fluorescent tubes, mounted to a wall vertically, in the following sequence of lengths – two, four, six, eight, six, four, two (see Figure 3). The fluorescent lights in this sequence form a skinny, pentagonal shape with the apex at the top.



Figure 2. Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, 1967



Figure 3. Dan Flavin, *'Monument' for V. Tatlin*, 1964

Judd's *Untitled (Stack)* and Flavin's *Monument* do not look similar in a formal sense, as one would compare two cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque. However, there are many similarities. Each work is an abstract, three-dimensional, geometric sculpture. While both *Untitled (Stack)* and *Monument* are relatively large, they are not monumental in size. Both works use industrial materials in a repetitious manner. Finally, both were arranged in a very deliberate, specific manner according to the artists' intentions. What these two works convey, as do other minimalist works, is a literalist aesthetic, the proverbial "what you see is what you get". "The literalist aesthetic associated with minimalism held that a work should reveal nothing other than its constitutive materials and manner of construction" (Meyer, 2001, p. 7).

Before discussing literalism and the construction of meaning in minimalist works, the occurrence of seriality will be introduced. Seriality is distinct from working in series. A series of works simply means variations on a theme. However, the serial techniques employed by minimalists can be thought of as the mathematical approach employed before the execution of the art object (Meyer, 2001). Seriality can be simple repetition, as in Judd's *Untitled (Stack)* or it can refer to a more complex construction. For example, the other works in Flavin's *Monument* series use the same two-, four-, six-, and eight-foot fluorescent light tubes in a number of permutations, each time creating a new composition. For the minimal artists, seriality offered the opportunity to be anti-compositional. Krauss (1977) states, "the minimalists were attracted to sheer repetition as a way of avoiding the inferences of relational composition" (p. 250). With repetitious parts creating an artistic whole, an "interiority" of a sculpture was negated.

The lack of "interiority" of minimal art promotes what Krauss (1977) described as an "externality of meaning"(p. 266). This is a tangential interpretation of minimalism's literalist

approach. Minimal artists avoided illusionism and placed the responsibility of interpretation on the viewer. Krauss (1977) explains,

... In refusing to give the work of art an illusionistic center or interior, minimal artists are simply re-evaluating the logic of a particular *source* of meaning rather than denying meaning to the aesthetic object altogether. They are asking that meaning be seen as arising from – to continue the analogy with language – a public, rather than a private space (p. 262).

The context in which a viewer experiences the art helps construct the meaning of a work. Krauss (1977) terms the public arena in which meaning is built the “cultural space” (p. 270). This complex issue spurred the pursuance of this research study. The viewer experience will be explored theoretically later in this chapter, and then practically in the next chapter.

As discussed previously, art historians and critics often cited a relationship between Duchamp’s readymade and minimal art. The start of minimalism in the 1960s came just after pop art in the 1950s. Although the movements are very different aesthetically, both pop art and minimal art utilize objects that are known to the viewer. Krauss (1977) states, “Given its tendency to employ elements drawn from commercial sources, minimal art thus shares with pop art a common source: a newly awakened interest in the Duchampian readymade” (p. 249).

However, keeping with their polemicist reputation, minimalists often resented comparisons to pop. The minimalists viewed pop artist’s use of mass culture images as formally inferior. Judd believed that “to integrate mass culture into fine art was to concede the defeat of the high by the low” (Meyer, 2001, p. 46).

As minimal artists seemed to fight comparison to any other artistic movement, the question of the moment is where does minimalism fit into the larger construct of art history?

Minimalism is employing a “readymade” technique but does not use iconic images like pop art. And minimalism has a strong concern with the concept of the artwork, but unlike one of its predecessors, abstract expressionism, minimalism did not place importance in the artist’s “manual execution” or the object’s “emotive content” (Meyer, 2001, p. 81). Meyer (2001) elaborates, “Several writers have suggested that during the fifties and sixties, the so-called two ‘traditions’ of twentieth-century art – the modernist and conceptual legacies – were on a collision course, whose sites of conflict were neo-dada, minimalism, and pop” (p. 81). As it were, minimalism is somewhat of an enigma, accepting and rejecting modernist tendencies at the same time.

3.08 *The artists*

Minimal artists went beyond simply creating works of art. Meyer (2001) states that “we may also conceive ‘minimalism’ as a critical debate in which the artists were leading participants: as each developed their work, the minimalists became their own best advocates” (p. 6). They actively wrote, discussed, and debated art criticism in support of or in opposition to their own work and that of other artists. Again, this shared critical ideology was a tying theme in minimal art. This study focused on two of the most famous minimal artists – Donald Judd and Dan Flavin – both throughout this literature review and also in the following comparative case study discussion.

Of the minimal artists, Donald Judd was the most vocal supporter of minimalism’s literalist aesthetic. Judd was born in Missouri in 1928 and grew up in several towns due to his father’s work. After graduating high school, Judd joined the US Army in Korea. After returning, Judd studied art at the Art Students League in New York and also attended the College of William and Mary. He later took classes at Columbia University where he graduated in 1953

with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and a master's degree in art history in 1962. Judd was painting during this time, but he also discovered his abilities as an art critic. Starting first at *Artnews*, Judd eventually became a contributing editor at *Arts Magazine* until the mid-1960s (Meyer, 2001, p. 35).

December 1963, Judd had his first one-person show at the Green Gallery in New York. With this show Judd exhibited his goal of creating “an art devoid of perceptual ambiguity and subjective arrangement” (Meyer, 2001, p. 56). Despite previous training as a painter, the show comprised nine three-dimensional objects, indicating the artist's opinion that the illusionistic medium of painting could not achieve his literalist goals. In the mid-1960s, Judd began to fabricate his art objects in factories. Factory production allowed for the preciseness the artist desired in his works, or as he called them “specific objects”. However, Judd was quick to argue that his works were constructed using “‘old-fashioned,’ artisanal techniques rather than the serial production methods of the assembly line” (Meyer, 2001, p. 186). Judd also believed that the careful construction of his art objects allowed the viewer an opportunity for visual exploration (Bois, 2004). Judd wanted “to repudiate an art that bases its meanings on illusionism as a metaphor for that privileged (because private) psychological moment” (Krauss, 1977, p. 258).

Dan Flavin was born in 1933 in Jamaica, Queens. Flavin began seminary but then decided to join the army to go to Korea where he began drawing. Flavin took classes at the Hans Hoffman School and the New School for Social Research upon his return to New York in 1956. Like Judd, Flavin took art history and studio courses at Columbia from 1958 to 1959. During this time, Flavin worked as a security guard at The Museum of Modern Art, alongside other soon-to-be famous artists including Sol LeWitt and Robert Ryman. Flavin's early works were

literary-influenced paintings, with which he later grew tired. His earliest pieces using light were a series of *icons* using masonite, formica, and light bulbs (Meyer, 2001, p. 35-37).

March 1964, Flavin had his first show using electric lamps at the Kaymar Gallery. The *icons*, which used various bulb attachments, were the predecessors to the repetitive use of fluorescent tubes for which he would become famous. Flavin also created *shrines*, which had deliberate references to people and employed text and images with the light bulb. For example, one piece was titled *East New York Shrine (to Bruce Glaser)*. This use of titling artworks in reference to a particular person is a practice Flavin utilized throughout his oeuvre. As shown in these early works, “Flavin was straddling the fence between an art of metaphorical association and a purely formal investigation. The latter tendency eventually won (his friendship with Judd no doubt encouraged this)” (Meyer, 2001, p. 98). Later on, Judd and Flavin would also share an interest in creating site-specific projects.

3.09 *Critical writings*

The primary source writings of minimal art played a significant role in establishing and legitimizing this critical art movement. Meyer (2001) asserts that “‘minimalism’ cannot be understood apart from the extraordinary debates that surrounded the new art” (p. 6). Robert Morris, another leading minimal artist, wrote one of the most significant primary sources about the movement; “Notes on sculpture” was published in *Artforum* in 1967. One issue Morris discussed was how the simplified forms of minimalism were optimal in achieving a gestalt. The artist writes, “Characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established all the information about it, *qua* gestalt, is exhausted. (One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt)” (Morris, 1967, p. 228). Morris’s comment corroborates Judd’s position on minimalism’s search for literalism. Morris also discusses the issue of scale in minimal works of art. Morris (1967) states,

“A larger object includes more of the space around itself than does a smaller one” (p. 231).

Morris advocates for sculpture to avoid monumentality by being too large, but at the same time should avoid the decorative by being too small.

Michael Fried’s 1967 article titled “Art and Objecthood”, which openly derided minimal works of art, had a significant impact on minimalism. Meyer (2001) goes as far as saying that “Art and Objecthood” was “the movement’s canonization” (p. 243). Fried addresses both issues of literalist aesthetics and scale and accordingly accuses Minimal art of being “theatrical”. Whereas modernist painting sought to suspend objecthood by being pictorial, minimalism asserted its objecthood. The implication of this was, according to Fried (1998), the perpetuation of theater, or “a negation of art” (p. 153). The scale of minimal works furthered this theatrical quality. Since minimal art objects are anthropomorphic in size, the object asserts a presence that demands the attention of the viewer. Without the viewer, literalist art, such as minimal objects, are incomplete. Fried (1998) goes on to write that the more effective the setting, “the more superfluous the work themselves become” (p. 160). Fried (1998) wrote the following about modernist works (which he favored): “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest” (p. 167). Following Fried’s line of argumentation, it can then be interpolated that minimal art is not modernist since it requires contemplation.

In 1968, Gregory Battcock published a collection of writings in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. This book brought together the Fried and Morris articles discussed above, along with several other seminal writings about minimalism. This book presented the critical debate over minimalism in a nicely packaged form. The danger with this text, as pointed out by critic Barbara Reise (as cited in Meyer, 2001), is that “somewhere the direct experience of art works got lost in a plethora of words” (p. 249). Reise believed that too much interference between the

art object and the viewer experience could prove problematic. The impact of critical writing is still an issue today as shown by the following excerpt from a contemporary article: “The notes that accompany conceptually inclined art continue to grow in size and density, and written attempts at validating art can easily overshadow the work itself” (Thompson, 2004, p. 2).

3.10 Exhibition of minimal art objects

Due to the scale and simplicity of forms, minimal art objects have historically been difficult to exhibit. The large size of most minimal sculptures made them unpalatable to collectors of the time. It seemed the only suitable places to house these works were galleries and museums. Artist Robert Smithson (as cited in Meyer, 2001) recalls that art from the mid-1960s “were making greater demands on interior spaces. The small galleries of the late fifties were giving way to large white rooms” (p. 18). The idea of the “white cube” gallery space will be discussed later in this chapter. The neutral exhibition space was thought to be complementary to minimalist works that required an active spectator.

While there were several significant shows displaying minimal art in the 1960s, one in particular will be discussed here. The Museum of Modern Art’s “The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1968” was a benchmark show that contributed to minimal art’s canonization. The exhibition catalogue read:

... To propose that some art is more “real” than other art may be foolhardy. Yet many American artists over the last few years have made this proposal by the nature of their works. They have taken a stance that leaves little doubt about their desire to confront the experiences and objects we encounter every day with an exact equivalence in art. (The Museum of Modern Art, as cited in Meyer, 2001, p. 253).

While this statement proves that the curator, E.C. Goossen, was dealing with literalist issues, the show included non-minimalist works, including stereotypical modernist paintings by Pollock and Johns. “The Art of the Real” was significant because it academicized minimalism and set a place for it in art history’s master narrative. The show was not well received and was accused of ignoring the critical debate to which minimalism owed so much. Philip Leider, a former editor of *Artforum*, argued, “minimalism could not be understood apart from the extraordinary polemics it had inspired” (Meyer, 2001, p. 255). Despite negative reviews in New York, MoMA decided to tour the exhibit to Paris, Zürich, and London.

A recent show of minimal art received similar reviews by the critics. The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004 exhibited a show curated by Ann Goldstein titled “A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968”. The show was a retrospective of minimalist works, and a comprehensive one at that. However, Yve-Alain Bois criticizes the curator for not including sufficient interpretive materials. Bois (2004) states, “No chronology, no typology, no label explanations whatsoever, resulting in an exasperating feeling of pure randomness for anyone not already in the loop” (p. 201). Forty years after minimalism’s beginnings, the importance of critical discourse retains its necessity to understanding these works. Bois (2004) further elaborates, “a minimum of guidance is usually required for museumgoers to feel welcome rather than excluded – especially for a subject as utterly complex, in its apparent simplicity, as Minimal art” (p. 201).

3.11 *The viewer experience*

Now that the topical areas of art history and minimal art have been covered, it is time to shift gears to another area of this study’s conceptual framework, the viewer experience. As stated in the first chapter, the viewer is at the receiving end of an art object displayed in a

museum. Regardless of what a museum's intent is with an exhibition, it is the visitor who decides what the actual experience will be (Falk & Dierking, 1992). For example, museums are perceived to be elitist institutions. O'Doherty (1999) specifically discusses the gallery space:

For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is exclusive. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible – art is *difficult*. (p. 76).

Negrin (1993) cites Benjamin's argument on this phenomenon. Benjamin argued in his 1979 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that museum viewing is perceived to be a solitary experience and that artworks demand reverence. For many visitors, this created "aura" makes art in a museum seem unapproachable. "Instead of the viewer absorbing the artwork and making it a part of her/his life, the artwork absorbed the viewer, overwhelming her/him by its authority" (Negrin, 1993, p. 110-111).

A museum visitor experience is an active exchange. "Experience is not simply had, it is taken; experience is a product of the transaction between a viewer and a work" (Eisner & Dobbs, 1988, p. 8). Much of the literature confirms that the visitor is an active participant. Dufresne-Tasse and Lefebvre (1994) write that the visitor "constructs for himself the meaning of the objects he looks at and has pleasure doing it, as long as this endeavour is supported" (p. 479).

Lankford (2002) applies the idea of active participation by the viewer specifically to aesthetic experience. There are five main points Lankford makes in support of the museum fostering aesthetic experience. First, promoting aesthetic experience in the art museum provides many benefits to the visitor. Second, visitors are not inherently equipped to aesthetically

experience art; rather, visitors must be educated and given the proper tools. The third point echoes the earlier discussion of the viewer's active participation in achieving an aesthetic experience. Fourth, Lankford associates an art museum's provision for aesthetic experiences as implicitly tied to the institution's mission in fostering meaningful experiences. Lastly, museum education should be developed at different levels to target different types of museum visitors. All five of these points support the argument for museums to take a proactive approach in creating opportunities for successful viewer experiences.

3.12 Constructivist learning

Falk and Dierking (1992) carry the theme of personal context shaping a museum visitor experience throughout their writings. "Each visitor learns in a different way, and interprets information through the lens of previous knowledge, experience and beliefs" (p. 136). A museum visitor's personal context will determine what he or she pays attention to in a museum exhibit. The authors cite Rogers: "a person learns well only those things perceived to be conducive to the maintenance or enhancement of self" (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 104). For example, most visitors only read object labels when they are trying to satisfy a question already in mind. Goulding (2000) cites Langer and Newman who distinguish between a "mindful" experience, where the visitor exerts effort, versus a "mindless" experience, where the visitor does not achieve personal relevance (p. 263).

The concept of the museum visitor as an active participant fits well into the constructivist theory of learning. "Constructivism argues that both knowledge and the way it is obtained are dependent on the mind of the learner" (Hein, 1995, p. 3). With this theory, it is believed that as new bits of knowledge are acquired the learner rearranges his or her construct of knowledge to assimilate, not merely add on, the new information to the existing information. Hooper-

Greenhill (2000) uses the example of viewing a painting to explain constructivist learning. A viewer is involved in a circular dialog when understanding a painting before him or her, whereby meaning is constructed. Personal context shapes how a viewer experiences art: “the trajectory, or route, of the conversation, is in large part determined by what is already known, by prior knowledge” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 23).

Knowing that personal context is perhaps the most influential factor to the outcome of a visitor’s experience at a museum, constructivism appears to be a practical approach to art museum exhibition practice. Lankford (2002) states:

Constructivist theories of learning and recent research into aesthetic experience suggest that most people actually benefit by instruction in various means of engagement with art, and that engagement is most fulfilling when it actively challenges, builds on, and extends the knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities of the museum visitor. (p. 141).

An example of museum practice utilizing a constructivist approach would be an exhibit designed with multiple paths. This gives the viewer an opportunity to draw his or her own conclusions about an exhibit’s meaning (Hein, 1995). In a constructivist museum, the viewer is encouraged to utilize his or her personal context to shape his or her museum experience.

The challenge in using a constructivist approach is that the focus is inherently on the learner, and the onus is therefore on the educator to accommodate the many types of students. This presents the classic problem in school learning of teaching the pupil, not the subject. Furthermore, the museum must relinquish some of its authority to allow the museum visitor to construct his or her own experiences. This is in direct conflict with the transmission model of education typically employed by museums (Lankford, 2002). In a constructivist museum, “The museum is no longer a dictator, but instead a *collaborator* in the meaning-making process”

(Lankford, 2002, p. 146). It is important to note that constructivism does not compel the museum to take a “hands-off” approach to education; rather the museum fosters an environment where multiple interpretations are allowed by training visitors to contemplate the art. To reiterate an earlier quote by O’Doherty, Lankford (2002) states, “Most museum visitors do not know what they are supposed to do in front of a work of art. Indeed the perplexity can make visitors feel self-conscious and embarrassed, exacerbating an already unfulfilling experience” (p. 147).

3.13 *Museum visitor studies*

There have been several research studies investigating motivations of museum attendance. Korn (1992) correlates Graburn’s three human needs to museum offerings. These needs are reverential, social, and educational. Korn believes that museums do provide experiences satisfying these needs. Falk and Dierking (1992) agree that people visit museums to fulfill reverential, social, and educational needs. However, many museum visitors see simply going into a museum as achievement enough (Goulding, 2000). Dufresne-Tasse and Lefebvre (1994) list several psychological pleasures gained from a museum visit:

- Aesthetic pleasure, resulting from the observation of beautiful and important objects.
- Pleasure of self discovery and identifying oneself with what is beautiful, precious, rare.
- Pleasure of using one’s intellectual abilities to imagine, remember, acquire knowledge, extend it, reflect, modify one’s ideas.
- Pleasure of easily overcoming a major difficulty.
- Pleasure of coming into contact with something new, internalizing it or having new ideas.

(p. 478).

Museum professionals should be aware of these potential positive outcomes and seek ways to ensure these results for visitors.

In a research study conducted with students visiting an art museum, Henry (2000) concluded that there were two primary factors determining the museum experience: “(1) exhibition environment and (2) the student’s own preparation for the museum visit” (p. 102). On a related note, the museum educator plays a significant role in the viewer’s experience. The educator should spend time coming up with answers to potential questions a viewer may have about an exhibit (Dufresne-Tasse & Lefebvre, 1994). Unanswered questions can lead a viewer to anxiety and, consequently, a dissatisfying museum experience. Chambers (1989) states that satisfying museum experiences promote return attendance and continued learning. There is, however, a danger of providing too much information; this can hinder the viewer from creating his or her own perception of a museum exhibit. To revisit an earlier point, “visitors are not passive, and they can’t be manipulated to do what we want them to do” (Korn, 1992, p. 19).

Worts (2003) points out that the art museum experience can feel oppressive due to the authoritarian overtone inherent in many institutions. Since academicians have selected the objects, many visitors cannot help but feel that they are left no choice but to passively receive information. Lankford (2002) writes:

Visitors who are best equipped to find significant meaning in works of art and to attain flow experiences are those who have acquired enough historical and cultural knowledge to recognize and read traditions and symbols across societies and epochs; who are accomplished at critically analyzing and interpreting works of art; and who possess emotional responsiveness, perceptual acuity, and an ability to empathetically connect with human experiences expressed by artists through artistic products. (p. 148).

While this is not the current profile for the average museum visitor, museum professionals can do their part by creating an environment that encourages return visits and continued learning.

There are several practical observations of museum visitor behavior to note. First, the average time spent reading a label is 10 seconds. However, 90% of visitors do not read a label at all (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 70-71). Most visitors “deal with exhibits on a concrete level, rather than on an abstract level” (p. 77). This observation can be associated with the above argument that many visitors are intimidated by the reverent, academic setting of most museums. In their research, Falk and Dierking (1992) identify that the two most time-consuming components of first-time and occasional visitors (most visitors fall into this category) are “intensive looking” and “exhibit cruising”. During intensive looking, which is estimated to last between 15 to 40 minutes, visitors will read labels, discuss with other members in their party, and observe items on display. Throughout this period, museum visitors are systematic about how they move through an exhibit because that is perceived to be the right thing to do in a museum. Once the visitor moves into “cruising” mode, which lasts 20 to 45 minutes, the visitor begins to “skim” through the museum. It is likely that the visitor has reached “object satiation” and therefore begins to suffer “museum fatigue” (p. 59-61). It is unrealistic to think that museum professionals can completely eliminate these negative occurrences; however, the museum professional does have a responsibility to build exhibits with these visitor behaviors in mind. Falk and Dierking’s (1992) research showed that museum professional values were more in line with frequent visitors, not occasional visitors.

3.14 Art museum practice and the field of art history

In the book *How to Visit a Museum*, author David Finn (1985) makes the bold accusation that looking at labels teaches more about art history than art (p. 44). However bold, art museums

are institutions heavily influenced by the field of art history. As the main overseers of an art museum's aesthetic approach, it cannot be forgotten that curators are trained art historians. Levi (1985) states that the art museum is "the special protégé of the academic field of art history" (p. 37). Traditionally, art museums translate the narrative of art history using the gallery walls as the medium (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). If art history influences curatorship, and curatorship influences aesthetic policy in an art museum, and aesthetic policy in an art museum influences the viewer experience, it becomes clear why this is an appropriate topic for consideration in this research study.

As art history presupposes a narrative of art, chronological display has become common practice in museum exhibition. This manner of display is assumed to illuminate a historical development in style. Negrin (1993) points out that, "Underlying such a form of organization was the assumption that the history of art consisted of a unilinear and progressive process of evolution from one style to another" (p. 104). It is this approach to museum exhibition that constrains visitors to feel burdened by the academic nature of the art museum. In a commentary on this practice, Tucker (1999) says, "'We know what is good for you' could have been engraved on the facades of most of our buildings" (p. 46). Preziosi (1992) also addresses this issue by saying that art museums and art history consort to display art in a particular manner to tell a particular story. The author uses the example of how a museum's gallery layout often correlates to an art history text.

There is, however, an obvious push for a revisionist approach to the art museum. This likewise echoes a revisionist shift in art historical practice. Lankford (2002) states:

Today's art museums are much more likely to place artworks in broader contexts of social change, offer reinterpretations and alternative interpretations of history and works

of art that are more inclusive of multiple perspectives, and provide situational interpretations reflecting the values and convictions of the artworks' originating cultural contexts. (p. 143).

Munson (1997) describes this phenomenon as an attempt to “subvert the master narrative” (p. 7). Without the strict limitations of a chronological display, an open-ended museum exhibition gives the viewer greater access to creating his or her own meanings and interpretations. Munson cautions, “though revisionists claim that their goal is to create a museums that is more inclusive and audience-centered than the traditional museum, they show a remarkable lack of interest in actual public opinion” (p. 11).

Museum professionals are thereby left with the task of determining how to balance their responsibilities to the art museum as art history laboratory and the art museum as educational institution. Walsh-Piper (1994) advises museums: “There is a delicate balance between giving enough information to make art more accessible and allowing learners their own response” (p. 109). The museum is in a power position as the assumed “arbiter of beauty and aesthetic value”, and therefore should make its visitors aware that a museum’s exhibition approach is not a universal truth. One museum’s collection only represents one of many possibilities.

3.15 The modern gallery and museum

The modern museum was designed to be an encyclopedia of art (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). As discussed in the previous section, the art museum, in most situations, is designed to reflect the field of art history. Jeffers (2003) derisively recounts museum practice: “Museums of the Western industrialized world consist wholly of displaced, decontextualized objects that have been recontextualized as commodities” (p. 113). Jeffers is critical of the museum for perpetuating the traditional Western approach to epistemology and aesthetics. Negrin (1993)

affirms that the museum's purpose has been to establish "a set of guiding principles which have determined the nature of the collection and display of art for the last two centuries in the Western world" (p. 99).

At the root of the art museum's philosophical approach is the belief that there is an inherent benefit in the direct interaction with art objects. This belief is often taken to its extreme by going so far as to say that interpretation is not necessary, because the artwork will elucidate its truths simply through viewer observation. Based on the argument developed earlier in the viewer experience discussion, it is safe to conclude that this is not the case. Worts (2003) acutely points out, "the rationale for an exhibition of a group of artworks is usually based not on the depth experience of individual objects, but rather on an art historical thesis that is argued only in a catalogue" (p. 7).

Physical context, like personal context, influences the viewer's experience in a museum. O'Doherty (1999) discusses the phenomenon of the 'white cube' gallery at length in a series of published articles. The 'white cube' was thought to be the ideal setting for the display of modern works of art. The Museum of Modern Art, even in its new facility, is still the prototype for the 'white cube' gallery. O'Doherty (1999) states, "The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'" (p. 14). He claims that the wall provides context for the art object, and later on, he also identifies the gallery as providing context for the art object. O'Doherty also discusses how each work of art requires adequate breathing room before another work of art is encountered.

Philosophical issues aside, what are the practical problems that commonly arise with current museum exhibition practice? As touched on earlier, museum professionals typically design exhibits to be encountered in a predetermined sequence. Since many visitors do not

follow this predetermined path, the visitor may ultimately find the exhibit confusing and unsatisfying (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Related to visitor pathways, crowding can be a real impediment to a successful museum experience. While crowding of people cannot necessarily be avoided, crowding of exhibits can and should be avoided. Sufficient breathing space between art objects and ample seating will allow the visitor the opportunity to adequately contemplate the objects in the exhibit before museum fatigue sets in. The main idea here is for the museum staff to focus on those areas that clearly lie within their realm of responsibility (Henry, 2000).

3.16 Successful museum exhibition practice

Negrin (1993) states, “while museums sought to preserve culture, they actually succeeded in hastening its demise insofar as they amassed a bewildering array of objects whose diversity and quantity only served to confuse and overwhelm the viewer” (p. 114). Knowing this, how does the art museum reverse this gravitational pull on the viewer to confusion? Museum education has been identified time and time again in the literature as a possible solution to these problems. Jeffers (2003) declares that museums are still unclear on how to carry out their educational missions.

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) offers a type of action research as a solution to this problem. She encourages museum educators and curators to self-reflect on their own practices. There are four main points she identifies to initiate a much needed change in museum practice. First, Hooper-Greenhill promotes a furthering of new professional roles in the museum profession. Second, museums must recognize that patrons comprise different audiences. Third, in recognition of having different audiences, Hooper-Greenhill calls for the hearing of those different voices by museums. Lastly, she challenges the art historical master narrative and calls

for new narratives (p. 28-30). These lessons tie into the previously mentioned visitor-derived pleasures of a museum experience.

Focusing in on practical issues of museum exhibition, there are several generalizations about display that Eisner and Dobbs (1988) discovered.

- 1) The layout of exhibitions are typically concerned more with their overall look, than with their pedagogical effects.
- 2) Opportunities to display works that invite visual comparisons are frequently neglected.
- 3) Opportunities to relate works to the culture in which they were produced are exploited by few museums; works are visually presented in isolation without a frame of reference or context in which they can be situated and understood. (p. 10).

These three generalizations provide a framework from which museum professionals can begin to improve their museological practice. Falk and Dierking (1992) would agree that content, while important, should not be the only factor in designing a museum exhibit. As stated throughout this chapter, it is crucial that context is considered by museum professionals. The key to a successful museum experience is to make a connection between what the visitor already knows and what the museum wants the visitor to know.

One tool that Eisner and Dobbs (1988) suggest towards this end is to display objects in such a way that allows for compare and contrast. Furthermore, counter to O'Doherty's argument, Eisner and Dobbs assert that signage "does not appear to compromise the aesthetic quality of the exhibition, and remains an option for visitors to ignore should they choose to do so" (p. 13). When informational text is not available and the viewer is left perplexed, it subliminally tells the viewer that he or she is not cultured enough to understand. Eisner and Dobbs (1988) make a strong argument for their case: "We find it puzzling that those who have

devoted years to learn how to perceive art, should assume that those who have had so little background in the arts will somehow ‘rise up’ to the level of great art simply by moving into its presence” (p. 8). Falk and Dierking (1992) strongly advocate for museum educators to be involved in exhibition planning from the start. They state, “museum professionals should begin the exhibit design process by thinking about how the visitor might use the knowledge presented in the exhibits rather than thinking about what objects to exhibit or what ideas to present” (p. 142).

3.17 *Conclusion – at the intersection of theory*

While artists claim to want to break down boundaries between art and life too often they alienate those they seek to engage. The majority of viewers, even more than a hundred years after the birth of modernism, still prefer work that contains subject matter they can recognize and that displays talent and skill they can appreciate. On the other hand, once schooled in the evolution of vanguard art, it is difficult for the initiated to look back. (Rothschild, 2000, p. 287).

In the above excerpt, Rothschild eloquently states the heart of the issue being tackled in this research study. Minimal art is difficult, and it presents challenges to both museum professionals and museum visitors. For museum staff, minimal art is difficult to display and to interpret. For viewers, minimal art is difficult to look at, since it demands multiple viewpoints, and difficult to understand. However, the rewards are apparent. In addition to satisfaction that can be achieved on an aesthetic level, a sense of accomplishment can be achieved by “getting it”, or understanding the work on an intellectual level.

Implicit in their educational function and as public institutions, museums should do their best to help viewers have the best experience possible. This literature review has developed a

framework with which museum professionals can look more closely at how they exhibit minimal works of art. The impact of personal context on the viewer experience is undeniable.

Furthermore, constructivist learning is a desirable approach to museum education. Now informed by the art historical and museological scholarship, we now turn our investigation to the actual practices of two art museums in a comparative case study.

CHAPTER 4: Comparative Case Study

4.01 *Introduction*

In seeking to answer the main research question – focusing on minimal art from the 1960s, in what ways does museum exhibition practice influence the relationship between the art object and the viewer – this research utilized a comparative case study. The two sites investigated were The Museum of Modern Art, New York and Dia:Beacon Riggio Galleries, two museums exhibiting minimal works of art. Both of these institutions will be introduced to provide a background for their chosen exhibition practices. This chapter will then look at how each museum exhibits minimal works of art by Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. In addition to art object observation, interviews were conducted with educators and curators at both MoMA and Dia: Beacon to seek the perspective of museum professionals. The results of this comparative case study elucidated best practices at each institution that support the theoretical issues brought up in the literature review.

4.02 *About The Museum of Modern Art*

The Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929 by three women, Lillie P. Bliss, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mary Quinn Sullivan as an educational institution. The founders were avid collectors who were interested in establishing a museum devoted to modern art. The first director of MoMA was Alfred H. Barr, Jr.; he devised the multi-departmental structure delineated by artistic media that is still in existence, today totaling six areas – painting and sculpture, prints and illustrated books, drawings, architecture and design, film and media, and photography. MoMA was originally conceived as a non-collecting institution that would pass on its works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art once an object was no longer considered contemporary. This practice would help ensure that MoMA's collection was representative of "art in our time." However, the museum did eventually decide to maintain a collection which

today numbers more than 150,000 art objects and 22,000 films (*The Museum of Modern Art*, n.d.).

In 1939 MoMA moved into its first permanent building, designed by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, on the site of a former Rockefeller residence in midtown Manhattan, 11 West 53 Street, the museum's current address. The Goodwin-Stone Building exemplified the "International Style" of architecture, a perfect complement to the modern art to be housed inside. In 1951 MoMA made a small addition to the west side of the original structure with the Grace Rainey Rogers Memorial Building designed by architect Philip Johnson. Two years later Johnson designed the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. In 1964 MoMA again expanded with an East Wing, also designed by Philip Johnson. Cesar Pelli designed the 1984 expansion of the west wing, along with the garden hall and the Museum Tower.

After deciding to undertake the largest expansion project in the museum's history, the MoMA building in midtown Manhattan closed its doors May 2002 to begin construction. In June 2002, MoMA QNS, a space originally purchased solely for storage, opened as a temporary exhibition gallery in Long Island City in Queens. November 20, 2004 the new building, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi opened its doors to the public. The new building nearly doubled the exhibition space to 125,000 square feet. An adjacent building for education and research is slated to open sometime in 2005 (Bee & Elligott, 2004).

According to the mission statement, The Museum of Modern Art seeks "to build a collection which is more than an assemblage of masterworks, which provides a uniquely comprehensive survey of the unfolding modern movement in all visual media" (*The Museum of Modern Art*, n.d.). MoMA's earliest works date from the late 19th century and the museum continues to make efforts to collect very recent works of art. Also stated in the mission is

MoMA's recognition of art in many different media. This is evidenced by MoMA being only one of two art museums housing a film collection.²

4.03 *About Dia: Beacon*

Although the Dia:Beacon Riggio Galleries only opened May 2003, the Dia Art Foundation was founded in 1974. A German art dealer, Heiner Friedrich, and his wife, Philippa de Menil, created Dia as an organization to support contemporary artists that were commonly neglected or rejected by a typical museum due to the nature of these works. Dia Art Foundation “continues to commission, support, and present site-specific installations and long-term exhibitions by these artists” (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.). The Foundation maintains several long-term site-specific projects throughout the United States, including Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*. Dia has also played a significant role in the opening of galleries and museums, including the Cy Twombly Gallery and the Chinati Foundation. The first museum space Dia created for its own collection is in New York's Chelsea neighborhood.

Dia:Beacon was constructed as additional gallery space for the exhibition of the permanent collection. The art exhibited at Beacon, which has long been in storage, dates primarily from the 1960s and 1970s. Dia is “dedicated to supporting individual artists and to providing long-term, in-depth presentations of their art” (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.). The new museum is located in Beacon, New York along the Hudson River, 60 miles north of New York City. The building was originally constructed in 1929 as a Nabisco box factory. In designing the Beacon museum, Dia director, Michael Govan, wanted to ensure that the art was not overwhelmed by the architecture. Artist Robert Irwin teamed with OpenOffice, a New York architectural firm, to convert the existing building to accommodate art. Galleries are devoted and specific to a single artist's work or series of works. “The Beacon museum's expansive galleries

² The other art museum with a film collection is UC Berkeley.

have been specifically designed for the display of the artworks to which Dia is committed, many of which, because of their character or scale, could not be easily accommodated by more conventional museums” (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.).

4.04 *Exhibition at MoMA*

Both MoMA and Dia: Beacon collect minimal works of art; however, the manner in which those works are displayed are very different. Exhibition decisions are shaped by the museums’ goals, as well as their collections. As stated earlier, this research will look specifically at how the works of two minimal artists, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, are exhibited at each of these institutions. But before looking at specific works of art, each of the museums’ general layout and exhibition practices will be described.

The Museum of Modern Art’s new gallery building consists of six floors, with a lower level for two theaters (see Figure 4 for a floor plan). The sculpture garden resides on the lobby level of the museum. The atrium of the museum soars from the lobby to the sixth floor. Galleries are on the second through sixth floors. Contemporary works of art from the 1970s to the present are exhibited on the second floor; also on this floor are prints and illustrated books, and the media gallery. The third floor exhibits architecture and design, drawings, photography, and special exhibitions. The fourth and fifth floors are for use by the department of painting and sculpture. The sixth floor is devoted to special exhibitions.

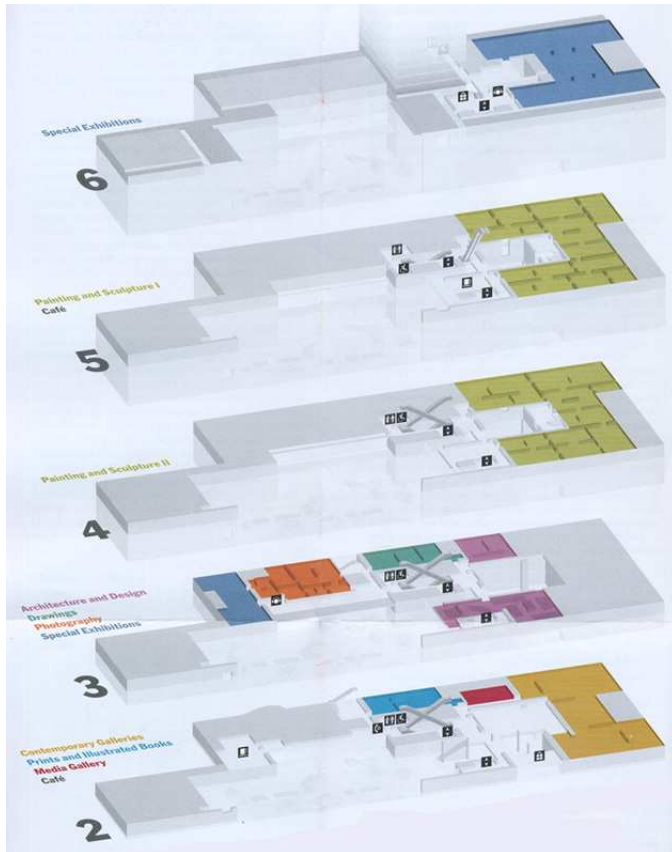


Figure 4. The Museum of Modern Art floor plan

A press release about the installation of the painting and sculpture galleries sheds light on The Museum of Modern Art's approach to exhibition:

Though works from the collection are exhibited in an essentially chronological sequence, the galleries' distinctive design allows that progression to be non-linear, thus emphasizing how artists, movements, and styles coincided, competed with each other, and broke new ground in the evolution of modern art. Each gallery is a cohesive presentation relating to an episode in the history of modern art; while each individual gallery constitutes an integral part of the larger narrative, it can also stand alone as a self-contained chapter within that story. (The Museum of Modern Art, November 15, 2004, p. 1).

Minimal works of art are displayed on the fourth floor of the museum in Painting and Sculpture II, containing works from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Chronologically, the galleries housing minimalist and post-minimalist works are considered the “final” gallery, or the end of the history portrayed on the fourth floor. The painting and sculpture galleries typify O’Doherty’s ‘white cube’ discussed in Chapter 3. An informational brochure for the fourth floor states that “the installation will frequently be refreshed, so that the larger history set forth will remain vital and open-ended, in affirmation of the spirit of ceaseless innovation for which modern art is celebrated” (The Museum of Modern Art, 2004). Walls and ceilings are painted white and floors are a light-colored oak. The new building incorporates more natural light into the galleries than did the old building.

For supplemental information materials, simple text labels are placed next to every object on display. These labels typically include the artist’s name, nationality, years of birth and death, title and date of work, description of materials used, information on the work’s acquisition, and date accessioned. Occasionally, a label will have a narrative paragraph providing additional information about the artist and/or work. Each of the galleries (i.e. Prints and Illustrated Books, Painting and Sculpture) has an informational brochure. Also available to the visitor, at a \$5 charge, is an Acoustiguide program titled MoMA Audio. These are personal use audio programs with commentary from curators, artists, and others about specific works of art. If an artwork has a MoMA Audio program, it will be indicated on the object label.

4.05 Exhibition at Dia: Beacon

Dia: Beacon takes on a very different approach to exhibition, guided by their collection of artworks. Dia’s collection has evolved from relationships established with particular artists. It is the largest museum displaying contemporary art with 240,000 square feet of exhibition

space, which is nearly double that of MoMA (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.). The majority of the art on display is on the ground level, with two smaller gallery spaces on the upstairs and downstairs levels. There is no chronological arrangement of galleries. Each gallery is devoted to one artist (see Figure 5 for a floor plan). There are no text labels placed by individual art objects; however, at the entrance of each gallery is a wall-mounted label that gives the name of the artist along with a map of the gallery with object titles. Next to the wall-mounted labels are laminated information cards with biographical information about the artist and specific details about the works, which are available for the viewer to take with him or her through the galleries. Natural light illuminates the galleries, emanating from 34,000 square feet of north-facing skylights. As a result, the visitor hours are seasonal, with shorter hours in the winter months and longer hours in the summer months. To help orient the viewer, exterior walls are brick, while interior walls are white. The gallery floors are either concrete or wood.

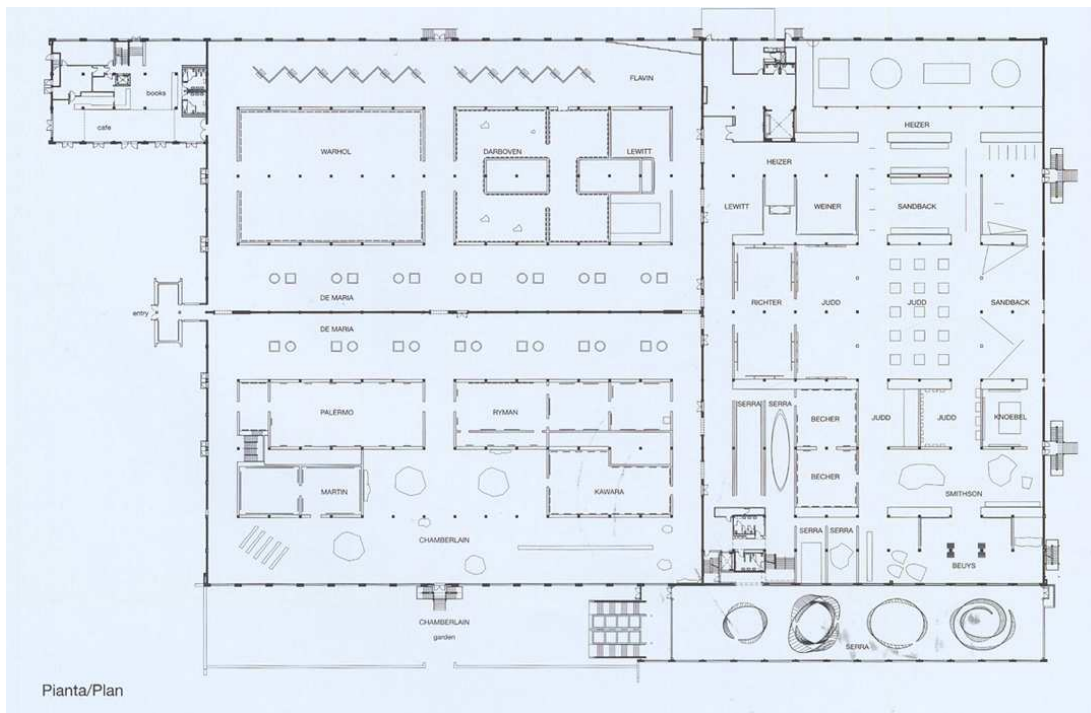


Figure 5. Dia: Beacon floor plan

Most of the art on display at Dia: Beacon is from the 1960s and 1970s. Twenty-three artists are currently exhibited, several of which are associated with minimalism. Many of the artists were asked for input when designing the installation of his or her gallery. If the artist was unavailable, investigative research was conducted to appropriately accommodate the artist's intentions. Dia: Beacon is considered a permanent display of art works. To present a coherent installation for each artist in the new museum, many works were obtained on quasi-permanent loan. Now that the reader has a general sense of the layout and exhibition style at each institution, the discussion will turn to the data collected onsite.

4.06 *Exhibiting Donald Judd*

First, we will look at the works by Donald Judd exhibited at each museum. At the time this case study was undertaken in February 2005, The Museum of Modern Art had three works by Donald Judd on display in the painting and sculpture galleries on the fourth floor. There was also a temporary exhibition, *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection*, on the sixth floor that exhibited one Judd object. Since the object shown in this temporary exhibition is not part of the permanent collection, it will not be discussed in this paper.³ Of the works on display from the permanent collection, two were located in what was described earlier as the “final” gallery of the fourth floor permanent exhibit. The third object on the fourth floor is *Untitled*, 1989, a very large work placed outside the entrance of the “first” gallery in front of the windows overlooking the sculpture garden. Since this piece was created well after the minimalist movement described in the last chapter, it will also not be discussed in this paper.

³ The works from *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection* have been promised to The Museum of Modern Art but have not yet been accessioned.

The “final” gallery exhibiting minimalist and post-minimalist works of art is partitioned into four sections (see Figure 6 for a diagram of the gallery). The earliest work on display was Judd’s 1961 *Relief* in the northwest corner. The object is approximately 2 ½ by 3 ½ feet in size, and according to the label mounted left of the object, the materials used are “oil on composition board mounted on wood, with inset tinned steel baking pan” (see Figure 7). The other artworks in the section containing *Relief* date from 1961 to 1964. To the left of *Relief* is a doorway leading to another gallery exhibiting paintings dating around 1960. Following the wall to the right of *Relief* are three paintings by Bridget Riley, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin. On the other side of the doorway, to the left of *Relief* is a floor sculpture by Sol LeWitt. Formally, *Relief*, which is not quite freestanding sculpture but not quite painting, appears to act as a bridge between the works of art on either side.

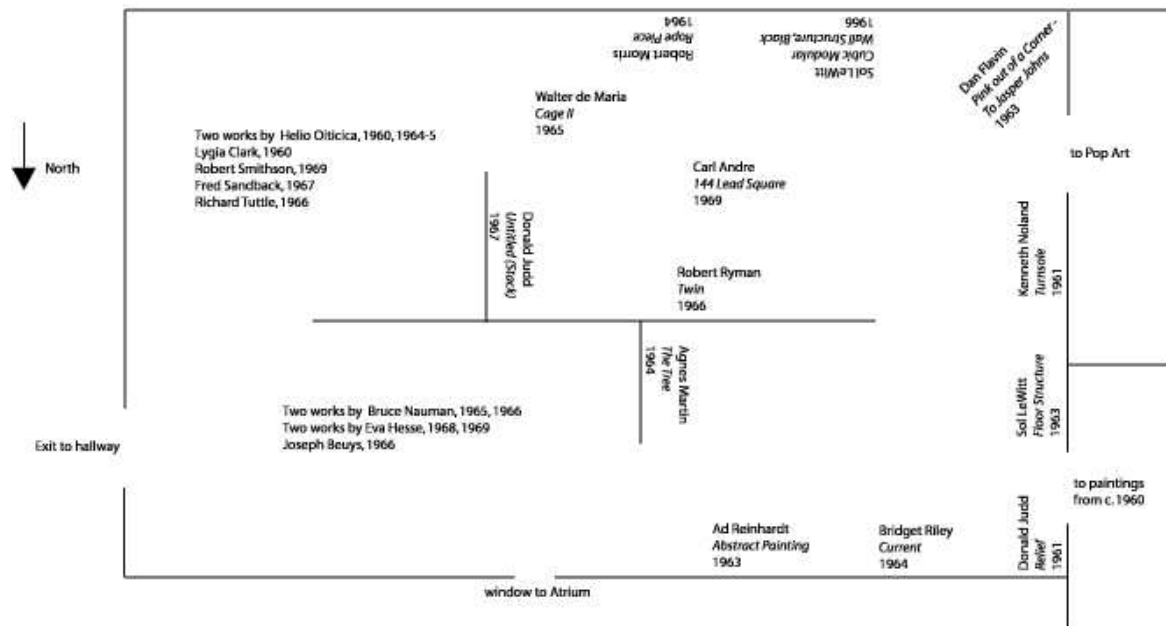


Figure 6. MoMA Fourth Floor, Painting and Sculpture II, Minimalist/Post-minimalist gallery



Figure 7. Donald Judd, *Relief*, 1961

The second Judd work exhibited in the Painting and Sculpture II galleries at MoMA is *Untitled (Stack)*, 1967, described in Chapter 3 (see Figure 2). In this section of the minimalist/post-minimalist gallery, there are seven other works on display, both paintings and sculptures, dating from 1961 to 1969. These works exemplify the stereotypical minimal art object as described in Chapter 3. This gallery feels a bit crowded with objects, particularly since Carl Andre's *144 Lead Square*, 1969, occupies the middle of the floor and blocks visitor pathways (see Figure 8)⁴. The label for *Untitled (Stack)* indicates there is a MoMA Audio program available. With MoMA's goal of trying to tell the story of modern art and the breadth of their collection, the museum is limited as to how many pieces can be shown by any one artist in one presentation. While focused on a narrower section of the "master narrative" than other encyclopedic museums, MoMA shares the practice of showing a few representative works from each artistic movement.

⁴ The artist originally intended the piece to be walked on by viewers, however, due to the lead material used, the text label cautions the viewer from contact.



Figure 8. Carl Andre, *144 Lead Square*, 1969

Dia: Beacon has several of Judd's works on display. Exhibited are a series of 15 plywood boxes on the floor, four progression reliefs, a series of six painted wooden boxes mounted on the wall, a series of 12 steel boxes mounted on the wall, and one large plywood piece (see Appendix F for a more detailed list of Judd works exhibited at Dia: Beacon). Except for *Untitled (slant piece)*, 1976, all of Judd's works exhibited are serial works. Because of its large exhibition space, Dia: Beacon is able to not only exhibit several works by one artist but is able to exhibit one single work comprising several pieces. Before discussing any of these works in detail, it is helpful to introduce the Chinati Foundation to understand the exhibition aesthetic embedded in the display of Judd's work at Dia: Beacon.

Having worked in New York for several years, Donald Judd did not feel that his work was given the appropriate setting in which to be exhibited. Judd states, "It takes a great deal of time and thought to install work carefully. This should not always be thrown away. Most art is fragile and some should be placed and never moved again" (*The Chinati Foundation, n.d.*). So in 1972 he moved to Marfa, a small ranching town in West Texas. In 1979, with the help of the

Dia Art Foundation, Judd purchased the 340 acres of land comprising Fort D.A. Russell, a former military base (Beal, 2000). Judd had originally intended the site to exhibit his work alongside Dan Flavin and John Chamberlain's works, but the current permanent collection includes works by several other artists. There are also, typically, one or two temporary exhibitions each year.

While the collection of the Chinati Foundation has expanded beyond Judd's original conception, Judd's philosophy is omnipresent. Each work has its own specific site within the desert landscape, and each artist can be appreciated independently. There is, however, the sense of a unified program of art without being anthological (Beal, 2000). Exhibition of artworks is deliberate and in accordance with the artist's intentions, something that is often lost when modern and contemporary works are exhibited in a conventional museum. For example, with Judd's *100 Mill Aluminum Boxes*, the artist used two near identical, existing concrete and brick buildings (see Figure 9). Judd changed the roofs and replaced the exterior garage door walls with glass. The buildings were designed specifically for the artwork, and the artist-defined museum space becomes the only appropriate context for the piece (Beal, 2000). Since the display of the objects at Chinati is permanent, the viewer is invited to return and experience the art under different weather conditions or under different personal perspectives (Serota, 1997). It is easy to see the influence that Judd's philosophy at Chinati has had on the exhibition practices at Dia: Beacon.



Figure 9. Donald Judd, *100 Mill Aluminum Boxes*, 1982-86

Now that Judd's philosophy on exhibition is clear, let us look at Dia: Beacon's display of Judd's *Untitled*, 1976. This work comprises 15 boxes made of Douglas fir, having identical exterior dimensions; however, each box is unique. They are each approximately 4 x 4 x 3 feet in size, arranged in three rows of five, spaced approximately 8 to 10 feet apart. For example, while one is a simple box open at top, another is a box with a top that is recessed a few inches (see Figures 10 and 11). As can be seen in the photographs, this work requires a large amount of space not usually available in a museum. Opposite the 15 plywood boxes are four progression reliefs by Judd. Each work is made of polished aluminum with two levels of a rectangular tube, each level being a different color. A mathematically derived scheme determines the spacing used in each of the pieces. Seeing four of these pieces in one gallery area helps the viewer better understand the artist's intentions. In the larger context, the viewer more fully appreciates what Judd is trying to accomplish by seeing several of his works in one museum. Although each work is formally different, they all share Judd's unique aesthetic.



Figure 10. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1976



Figure 11. Detail of Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1976

Because of the size of its galleries and its intention of displaying one or two works by several artists, MoMA is unable to display, in the permanent galleries, a work by Judd that is made up of several large pieces. Even the exhibition of a single floor, box object (which MoMA has exhibited before) requires a good amount of space for the viewer to walk around it. However, what MoMA is able to do is tell a particular narrative by representing several artists in its story of modern art. In contrast, Dia: Beacon has the luxury of space and only displays works from a few artists. At Dia, the viewer is able to develop a fuller understanding of one artist, in this case Donald Judd, by seeing multiple works created over a broader period of time.

4.07 *Exhibiting Dan Flavin*

Next, we will look at how MoMA and Dia: Beacon display works by Dan Flavin. MoMA had two works by Dan Flavin on display at the time of this case study. One work was in the painting and sculpture galleries and the other was in the *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection* exhibition. As with the Judd object, the Flavin piece in the temporary exhibition will not be reviewed in this study. The one work exhibited as part of the permanent collection was *Pink Out of a Corner – To Jasper Johns, 1967* (see Figure 12). As indicated by the title, this work consists of an 8-foot pink fluorescent light tube mounted in the corner of the gallery. It is located in the same section of the minimalist/post-minimalist gallery as Judd's *Untitled (Stack)*. The label reads, "Dan Flavin, American, 1933-1996, *Pink out of a Corner – To Jasper Johns 1963*, Fluorescent light in metal fixture, Gift of Philip Johnson, 1979". When standing in the adjacent pop art gallery, the viewer can see that Flavin's piece gives the minimalist gallery a pink glow.⁵

⁵ Figure 8 shows the reflection of Flavin's *Pink Out of a Corner* on Andre's *144 Lead Square*.

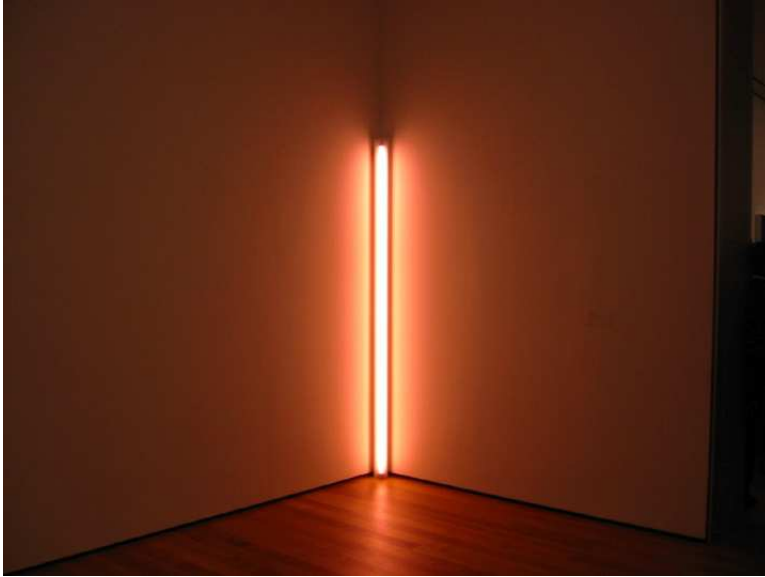


Figure 12. Dan Flavin, *Pink Out of a Corner – to Jasper Johns*, 1963

In sharp contrast is the Flavin hall at Dia: Beacon. Here there are 20 from Flavin's 'Monuments' for V. Tatlin series on display. Dia has constructed two freestanding walls with a zigzag shape, allowing for the display of two *Monuments* on each segment, one on each side. Two of the *Monuments* are displayed on a gallery wall, not on the freestanding zigzag wall. As described in Chapter 3, the *Monuments* are primarily white fluorescent tubes arranged to create different abstract shapes (see Figure 13). At other museums, these works are often seen singularly on display.⁶ The experience of seeing 20 of these *Monuments* together provides the viewer with a much fuller understanding of Flavin's oeuvre than seeing just one *Monument*. Also being exhibited at Dia: Beacon is Flavin's *Untitled*, 1970 barrier piece (see Figure 14). This work uses 8-foot fluorescent tubes in blue and red, forming overlapping squares. Blue tubes form the horizontal sides, and red tubes form the vertical sides. The scale of this work is prohibitive to exhibition at most museums.

⁶ One of Flavin's *Monuments* was on display in MoMA's special exhibition, *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection*.

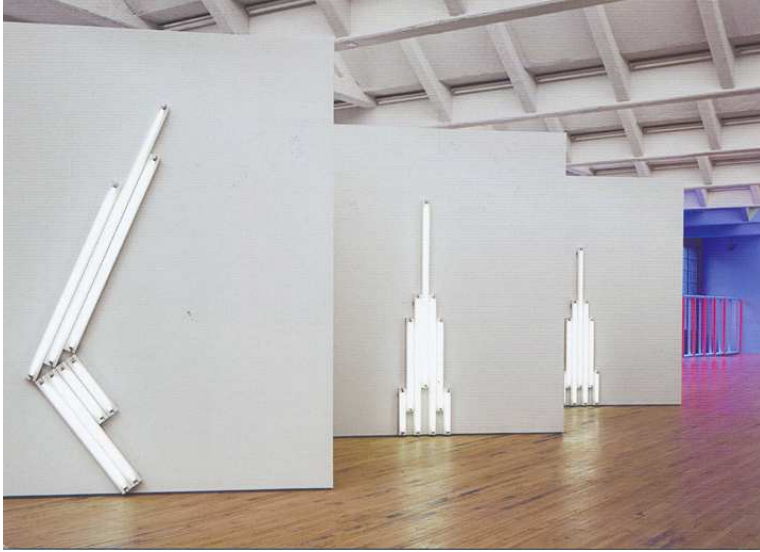


Figure 13. Dan Flavin, *'Monuments' for V. Tatlin*, 1964-81



Figure 14. Dan Flavin, *Untitled*, 1970

A summary of the display of Flavin's objects at MoMA versus Dia: Beacon arrives at many of the same issues identified with display of Judd's objects. The most obvious difference between the two museums is again related to the capability of exhibiting large-scale works of art. Wishing to provide the viewer with a survey of modern art, only one work by Flavin is exhibited at MoMA. In contrast, Dia chooses to represent Flavin more fully by exhibiting several works from his *Monuments* series. Another problematic display issue, unique to Flavin, comes about

from the artist's choice in materials. Flavin's one 8-foot pink fluorescent tube imposed itself on the neighboring works of art by giving the minimalist gallery a pink glow. One can imagine the effect if multiple Flavin works were displayed among other artists' works.

4.08 *Introduction to participant interviews*

In addition to careful observation of how minimal objects were displayed, interviews were conducted with museum professionals at both museums. As the practitioners of museum exhibition, interviews with curators and educators were considered essential in exploring this research topic. Museum staff is the conduit by which theories, such as art history and constructivist learning, become museum praxis. However, interviews were not intended to provide answers to the research questions; rather, they are an important aspect of illustrating each of the case study site's exhibition practices. Furthermore, the interviews complement the findings of the literature review.

At The Museum of Modern Art, Ann Temkin, Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and David Little, Director of Adult and Academic Education Programs, were interviewed. At Dia: Beacon, José Blondet, Administrator of Education Programs was interviewed.⁷ (See Appendix G for a detailed list of participant interviews). Each of the participants were asked the same questions, derived from the main and sub-research questions of this study. (See Appendices A and B for the lists of interview questions.) There were common themes among the three participants' answers, but there were also differences that aligned them with the practices of their respective museums.

⁷ Due to scheduling problems, an interview with a curator at Dia: Beacon per the original research design was never conducted.

4.09 *The challenge of minimal art*

The first few questions asked the participants to define minimal art and its role within their museum's collection. Both Temkin and Little referred to the movement as being from the 1960s and emphasized the importance of the associated artists. Temkin described minimalism "as a swing of the pendulum away from what they saw perhaps as melodramatic expression and techniques and formats of the abstract expressionists". Little expressed his concern about defining "minimal art"; he felt that the act of defining could unintentionally shape the viewer's experience. Little further explained how "minimalism" is a construct created by art historians. Blondet, speaking for Dia, echoed Little's hesitation in defining minimal art. However, Blondet's reasons for caution were different; he referred to the common conception of Dia as the "Temple of Minimal Art". Blondet emphasized that Dia's collection is focused on specific artists and not specific movements.

Participants were also asked to describe the relationship of minimal art objects to other objects in their museum's collection. Representing a museum that presents a "master narrative" of art, the MoMA professionals were able to discuss this question fully. Little explains, "I see the minimalist period of time as art that is related and tells a certain story with modern art". He further describes how minimalism not only makes sense to the viewer after seeing earlier movements, but minimalism also helps the viewer anticipate later movements. Temkin responded to the question with a more art historical approach. She states, "I see it fit perfectly in context with other 'isms' that came before." In discussing minimalism specifically, Temkin says, "they were, and some would argue the last, avant-garde movement in which there was a close group of people working together who really had in many ways the same goals and the same concerns, even though they expressed in individual ways that were very different from one

another”. This statement is in line with the assertions made in the literature review that minimalism represents very visually different works, but minimal artists have a shared critical approach.

All three of the participants were asked to give their opinions on the role of context in a viewer’s experience of minimal art. Each person answered the question distinctly. Blondet focused on Dia’s practice of not imposing a specific curatorial discourse. He gave the example that at Dia: Beacon, each gallery has two doors allowing for visitors to choose their own paths and create their own experience. Blondet does not deny that certain relationships can be made between artists, however, the viewer has the choice of “taking it” or “leaving it”. In answering this question about context, Blondet also speaks specifically about Dia’s building. He identifies three elements in the museum that enhance the viewer’s experience – scale, materials, and light.

Little responded to the question of minimal art’s context by speaking specifically about an object’s formal qualities. Since many minimal art objects are made of reflective materials, such as Judd’s *Untitled (Stack)*, the object literally reflects the context of the gallery. Little states, “context is somewhat exaggerated in minimal art over other arts”. He also applies the idea of context more broadly to other objects in the museum. Placing artwork A next to artwork B will cause the viewer to have a different experience than if artwork A is placed next to artwork C. For example, in MoMA’s temporary exhibition *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection*, one of Flavin’s *Monuments* was on display placed across from a Judd progression work from 1967 and a Brice Marden painting from 1994 to 1996. This is a very different context, and therefore a very different experience for the viewer, than Dia: Beacon’s exhibition of 20 *Monuments* together in one large hall.

Temkin argued that the context of a minimal art object, or really any art object, changes once it leaves the artist's studio. She explains, "The museum context has the advantage since it's a place that everyone can go and look at art in relation to other art". Temkin acknowledges that institutionalization is inherent in the display of art in a museum setting. However, she concludes that it is a tradeoff for giving the public access.

4.10 Museum practice according to the practitioners

To discuss actual museum practice, the participants were asked what factors are considered when exhibiting minimal works of art and if attention is given to the artist's original intent. Blondet explained that artists were involved in the installation of their galleries. He also discussed at length the difficult time most visitors have in understanding the works on display at Dia: Beacon. Blondet stated the following, bringing in a comparison with MoMA:

Most of the artwork that stays here, demands you to waste some time, to walk around... That's part of the process, it's not given immediately. You have to interact, you have to spend some time alert. Or you have to spend some time open, active, trying to get acquainted with the artwork. So I think that's something particular, that's why you can't use methodologies that the MoMA uses, or other museums where they emphasize the narrative of the artwork.

Blondet's statement evidences his advocacy of a viewer's active participation in a gallery. Also, Blondet appears to be in line with constructivist learning as he illuminates that Dia: Beacon does not use a narrative, or what can be interpreted as a predetermined pathway, to guide the viewer.

When Temkin was asked about the factors considered when exhibiting minimal art, she, likewise, mentioned Dia: Beacon: "It's a problem for us because minimal works of art, and this is why you have Dia: Beacon, require a lot of space, and we don't have a lot of space, even with

the expansion". She believes that the minimalist gallery is "overstuffed" and should contain fewer objects. In conjunction with the claims made in Chapter 3, Temkin explains, "Minimal art is about the space around it as much as the object itself. And they like a lot of breathing room". The artist's intentions are considered in the display of minimal art at MoMA. Temkin states, "We need to know what those were and respect them. And even if we can't replicate them, ideally, do our best". She wishes they could display more than one work per artist at MoMA. It was inferred that this approach might be employed in a later presentation of the minimalist gallery.

Little reinforced his viewpoint of giving the viewer choices when asked about the minimal artist's original intent. He states, "If we listen to what Judd had to say about minimal art, I think all of the pleasurable aspects wouldn't have been appreciated as much". Little believes that effective works of art perpetually offer a satisfying experience to the viewer. Art can be revisited and the viewer's experience can be different every time.

When asked if he considers the viewer's experience when making educational decisions, Blondet responded with an answer very similar to Little's above. Blondet does not believe there is a formula to understanding a work of art; the viewer should not be expected to understand everything he or she sees in the galleries. The viewer is encouraged to come back and revisit the museum. According to Blondet, he prefers the term "mediator" to "educator", and he believes his role is to enhance the viewer's experience.

Concerning the viewer's experience with a minimal art object, Temkin admits that she cannot anticipate the experience of any single viewer. She believes that as a curator she has a responsibility "to present the art in such a way that seems to bring out the best in that work, to make that work be able to speak for itself and shine most brightly, so that it has the greatest

chance at connecting with the viewer, and having the viewer connect with it, in a way that brings itself out the strongest". Temkin also agreed that practical issues, such as crowding, are taken into consideration when designing an exhibit.

Lastly, each of the participants was asked to comment on the working relationship between the curatorial and educational departments at their institutions. At both MoMA and Dia: Beacon, the education department does not have much say in designing exhibitions. Temkin asserts, "In deciding what goes up and where it goes, that's all the curatorial department". She concedes that curators work closely with educators after the artworks are placed in the galleries. Little confirmed that educators and curators work together in creating informational items such as wall text, lecture series, and audio programs. Blondet's response to this question signifies a similar situation at Dia: Beacon; the curator makes decisions about display, but Blondet works with the curator in designing education programs. Hypothesizing about the curator's role, Blondet states, "I think the curator is trying to put together in a coherent way a series of questions and a series of artworks that are saying something. So I think the role of the curator should be to amplify that, so people with different levels of engagement in contemporary art can take something out of their visit to the museum".

4.11 Conclusion – at the intersection of practice

This research study sought to explore the ways museum exhibition practice influences the relationship or exchange between the minimal art object and the viewer. To investigate this topic, a comprehensive literature review was pursued, setting up a framework by which to conduct a comparative case study of two museums collecting and exhibiting minimal art objects. The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon are both located in New York and collect and exhibit minimal art. However, the manner in which these two institutions exhibit, not just

minimal works of art, but all works of art, is very different. These differences were examined by carefully looking at the display of art objects by Donald Judd and Dan Flavin and by interviewing educators and curators at both museums.

After conducting the comparative case study of MoMA and Dia: Beacon, it is clear that each museum approaches the exhibition of minimal art in a manner consistent with their missions. MoMA seeks to provide “a uniquely comprehensive survey of the unfolding modern movement in all visual media” (*The Museum of Modern Art*, n.d.). Dia is “dedicated to supporting individual artists and to providing long-term, in-depth presentations of their art” (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.). The display of art objects at each museum, as described in this chapter, is a successful execution of those missions. Consequently, a visitor to MoMA will see a few works by many artists, whereas a visitor to Dia: Beacon will see many works by a few artists. Also, with double the gallery square footage of MoMA, Dia: Beacon is able to display many works that MoMA simply does not have the space for.

Interesting comparisons are also apparent through the interviews of museum staff. Blondet and Little, both educators, presented their answers with a pervasive orientation to the visitor’s experience. Temkin, a curator, framed many of her answers with an art historical approach. However, all three participants do have an understanding of minimal art that is consistent with the discussion presented in Chapter 3. Another important difference between these institutions is that Dia: Beacon exhibits Dia Art Foundation’s permanent collection and is intended to be a permanent exhibition. In contrast, Temkin states it is important “to treat the MoMA situation as the beginning, not some sort of static, finished product that appeared on November 20th”. The objects on display at MoMA are only a small sampling of the museum’s permanent collection; therefore, galleries will be refreshed periodically.

The findings of this comparative case study are not generalizable, since sites, artists, and participants were purposively sampled; however, they do bolster many of the ideas and concepts brought up in the literature review. At both MoMA and Dia: Beacon, there is recognition of the importance of a visitor's personal context in shaping his or her museum experience.

Furthermore, the history of minimal art and intentions of minimal artists are acknowledged and given their due attention. Best practices from these two sites, supplemented with the findings of the literature review, elucidate suggested practices for art museums.

CHAPTER 5: Findings and Conclusions

5.01 *Revisiting the problem statement and purpose of the study*

In order to conclude this paper, it is first necessary to understand why the study was pursued in the first place. One of the most influential artistic movements coming out of the 1960s was minimalism. Speaking to their formal qualities, minimal works of art are typically three-dimensional, geometrically abstract objects, comprising simplified forms made of industrial materials. However, the real unifying element among minimalist works lies in the group of artists who shared a polemical approach to their creations. The artist's statements were bolstered by the abundance of critical writings by art critics and historians.

Due to their esoteric nature, viewers are often perplexed standing in front of minimal art. These objects require the viewer to engage with the artwork in a manner very different from the majority of paintings and sculptures displayed in the typical art museum. Art critic Michael Fried (1998) attributed this phenomenon to the "theatrical" nature of this "literalist" art. The art museum, likewise, is faced with many challenges when exhibiting minimalist works, attributable in large part to their large scale.

Art history has been identified as an imposing actor on museum praxis. Art museum curators are art historians, often considered "connoisseurs" of art. And, as stated earlier, art historians were very vocal through their writings in both supporting and critiquing minimalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking at the three constructs of minimal art, art museum, and viewer, informed through an art historical lens, a gap in the scholarship was found. This study was developed in order to explore the interactions among these topical areas.

Based on this identified problem, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between the minimal art object and the viewer created by museum exhibition

practice, informed by art historical methodologies, gathering data from a literature review and comparative case study conducted in two art museums exhibiting minimal works of art.

5.02 Research questions and the methods of inquiry

With this purpose in mind, research questions were designed to answer the problem statement identified in this study. The main research question asks in what ways does museum exhibition practice influence the relationship between the minimal art object and the viewer? From this main question, five sub-research questions were derived. The first question asks what art historical methodologies are most applicable to analyzing minimal art? Then, what is the impact of the art historical field on museum exhibition practice? The next three questions more specifically address museum practice. How do art museums exhibit minimal art objects with respect to the rest of their collections? What is the role of context in displaying minimal art objects in the museum setting? And, finally how do education and curatorial staff work together to decide how to display the museum's collection?

To answer these questions, a strategy was tailored to this study. Based on the assertion that art history influences museum practice, it was decided that this study would begin with a comprehensive literature review. The literature review began with an introduction to the field of art history and then focused on the artistic movement of minimal art. From there, the literature review turned to an investigation of viewer experience in the museum. Finally, museum exhibition practice was explored through the scholarship. The literature review provided a scholarly answer to the research questions.

The second method of inquiry used was a comparative case study that investigated two art museums. The two institutions explored were The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon, both in New York. Both of these museums collect and display minimal art objects. At both

MoMA and Dia: Beacon, careful observation of the display of minimal art was undertaken.

Also, interviews were pursued with educators and curators at both institutions. The comparative case study helped to answer the practical questions of how museums approach the exhibition of minimal art objects and how educators and curators work together in the museum.

5.03 Findings based on the conceptual framework

As alluded to in the previous sections, there are four main topical areas of this research study. The conceptual framework schematic is shown in Figure 1. Art history informs museum professionals who then execute museum exhibition practice. At the bottom-left of the conceptual framework is the minimal art object from the 1960s. At the bottom-right of the conceptual framework is the viewer. In between the minimal art object and the viewer is museum exhibition. Each of these four topical areas, art history, minimal art, the viewer, and museum praxis, will now be summarized across the data collected in this study.

Art history is an academic field in which scholars seek to find the original context of works of art. Formal analysis is a commonly used technique of art historians by which common characteristics are grouped into pervading styles. Connoisseurship is the use of formal analysis to examine a group of objects. Art historians, as “connoisseurs”, are often trusted with the task of deciphering art for the general public. Significant in this task is the inherent subjective nature of an art historian’s work. The importance or significance of an artwork cannot be quantitatively measured. Interviews with museum professionals, many of who are trained art historians, agree that subjectivity exists in their work.

However, art history is not a field frozen in time. There has been a shift in the field toward “contextualization”, whereby the focus of research is more on the surrounding social and cultural context of an object, rather than the artist or object itself. This move towards

contextualization can be helpful to viewers who encounter works of art displayed in settings differing greatly from the artist's original intent. The findings from the comparative case study strongly supported the importance of context. Both The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon, although handled in very different ways, display minimal art with careful consideration of context, both physically and art historically. For example, at Dia: Beacon, each gallery, which displays only the work of one artist, was installed with the artist's input or based on research of the artist's original intent.

With the beginning of modernism around the mid-nineteenth century, artists began to emphasize conception over perception of their artwork. As a result, modern art pushed the boundaries of convention and sought innovative modes of creation and display. A leading figure of modernism is Marcel Duchamp, whose "readymades", found objects re-appropriated as art, had an undeniable impact on the work of future artists. More simplified forms and a new attention to the formal qualities of art, rather than the content, typify modernist works. Before the art world shifted to postmodernism, the minimalist artists took center stage. According to Ann Temkin, curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, they were the last group of avant-garde artists working with common goals and concerns.

In the 1960s, this group of artists, operating mainly in New York, took a deliberately critical approach to their artistic creation. The minimal artists produced works in which the context of the work was deemed equally important as the content of the work. In addition to the formal qualities described earlier, minimal art is also characterized by seriality, or the repetitive nature of the artwork. In this research study, two of the most prominent artists of minimalism were investigated, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.

Judd was arguably the most vocal of all the minimal artists. He believed that his work should be displayed in a certain way, favoring a more permanent display that allowed the viewer to revisit the work. Judd's objects utilized materials known to the viewer, such as steel and wood, and he often had his works fabricated in factories. His art objects typically take on geometrically inspired forms, and their three-dimensionality requires the viewer to experience the object from multiple viewpoints. As for seriality, works by Judd may be a single work comprising several smaller pieces (see Figure 2) or one large series comprising several objects (see Figure 10).

Flavin, on the other hand, worked almost exclusively with one material, fluorescent light tubes. He used tubes of various lengths and colors to construct works that are three-dimensional but, most often, still fixed to a wall. Like Judd, Flavin's art objects embody the seriality of minimalism. Although Judd and Flavin's works differ greatly in formal terms, they both exemplify the aesthetic of minimal art. Also, these minimalist objects are relatively large in scale, therefore making their exhibition in an art museum a real challenge.

At The Museum of Modern Art, minimal art belonging to the permanent collection is exhibited in the "final" gallery of the painting and sculpture floors. In February 2005, there were two Judd objects and one Flavin object on display that were created during the height of minimalism in the 1960s. These objects were placed among other minimal art objects created by other artists. In contrast, at Dia: Beacon, several large artworks by Judd and Flavin were exhibited. Representing Judd were a series of 15 plywood boxes, four progression reliefs, a series of six painted wooden boxes, a series of 12 steel boxes, and one large plywood piece. Twenty of Flavin's *Monuments* and one large barrier piece were exhibited in a large hall of the museum. The mission statements of these institutions inform each of these contrasting

exhibition practices. MoMA strives to portray a comprehensive survey of modern art, whereas Dia: Beacon wishes to exhibit works by a select group of artists.

At the receiving end of a minimal artwork exhibited in a museum is the viewer. The nature of exhibition practices at MoMA and Dia: Beacon creates two completely different visitor experiences. MoMA succeeds at telling the modern art portion of the “master narrative” by exhibiting several artistic movements in an essentially chronological order. Galleries are filled with representative works by the most notable modern and contemporary artists, as validated by the field of art history. However, in the minimalist/post-minimalist galleries, the viewer may find himself or herself a bit overwhelmed due to the quantity of objects on display. According to Judd, minimal art objects should be viewed from multiple viewpoints and thus require a lot of space. However, with the goal of telling a cohesive narrative, several objects thought to be representative of minimalism were selected. Temkin agreed that MoMA’s minimalist gallery, at the time, was exhibiting too many works of art.

Dia: Beacon considers itself a permanent display of works. One gallery is devoted to one artist, and therefore, the viewer has a very different experience from that of MoMA. Instead of telling a story of an artistic movement or period, a gallery at Dia tells a story of one artist. There is not a linear arrangement of galleries. Plus, with 240,000 square feet of exhibition space, Dia: Beacon has the luxury of giving each art object plenty of breathing room. Dia encourages their visitors, in the words of educator José Blondet, “to waste some time” with the art.

Educators at both institutions appear to support an approach to museum practice congruent with constructivist theories of learning. Museum visitors are encouraged to formulate their own perceptions and are not inundated by wall text and labels at either institution. Due to the subtle imposition of a particular pathway, MoMA is more liable to influence the viewer along

a predetermined journey of knowledge. However, the intention is to change the exhibits periodically to allow for slight variations of the main narrative. Temkin mentioned how she hoped that perhaps in later presentations of the minimalist galleries, MoMA would exhibit multiple works by the same artist, rather than single works by multiple artists.

Museum exhibition practice is the process that allows these minimal art objects to be encountered by museum visitors. It was stated in the literature review that museum professionals are trained art historians. Both the educator and curator at MoMA come from an art historical background. The Dia: Beacon educator was trained in curatorial studies, a field with art historical roots. Practical issues related to exhibition are addressed at both institutions. At MoMA, seating was not available in the minimalist/post-minimalist galleries, but benches are provided outside of the gallery entrances. Also, there are several cafés placed throughout MoMA's new building. Since the reopening, attendance at MoMA has been especially high. To ensure that galleries do not become overcrowded, entrance is limited. Overcrowding is not a problem at Dia: Beacon, partly because of its location 60 miles north of Manhattan and partly because of the size of the museum. The architecture at each of the museums was designed to alleviate museum fatigue. Both institutions make use of natural light and windows, helping to maintain the visitor's orientation to the outside world.

5.04 Lessons learned about art museum practice

After carefully collecting and analyzing data via a literature review and comparative case study, several recurring themes have emerged from this study. Pulling from written scholarship and case study data, suggested practices for art museums will now be discussed, grouped into one of two categories. The first section recounts suggestions of a practical nature for art museums, and the second section will make suggestions of a theoretical nature for the field of

museology. Derived suggestions are not intended to be specifically for either MoMA or Dia: Beacon. Rather, best practices were pulled from both the literature review and the comparative case study that indicate a potential to foster successful viewer experiences of minimal art in a museum. These suggestions are not new ideas or concepts; however, due to their simplicity, they may be overlooked by museum professionals.

There are three propositions of a practical nature for museum exhibition practice. The first is to provide sufficient space for the viewing of art. This is both for the benefit of the art object and the viewer. According to constructivist learning, the museum visitor must feel that he or she is allowed to spend time with the artwork. The second recommendation promotes the use of effective and informative text labels. Visitor studies show that when intrigued by a particular art object, the viewer will seek more information, and a label placed next to an object will provide that desired information most quickly. Studies also show, however, that most visitors do not read labels; therefore, it is not necessary for objects labels to be verbose. It is inferred that more informative text be provided as an option for the inclined visitor; this could be in the form of expendable or non-expendable brochures and placards. Lastly, to combat museum fatigue, it is recommended that adequate resting areas be provided for museum visitors, and that they are readily available throughout the museum galleries. Since many museum galleries are labyrinthine, placing benches at the entrances and exits of galleries may be too little, too late for the fatigued visitor. Minimal art can be both physically and mentally exhausting to look at.

5.05 Addressing the museological field

After making suggestions for practical issues of museum exhibition of minimal art objects, I now propose a few items for consideration that are of a more theoretical, holistic nature. First, museum professionals are cautioned from letting art history dominate the dialog

between the museum's exhibitions and the viewer. David Finn claimed that reading object labels teaches the visitor more about art history than art. If a museum desires to foster a constructivist learning environment, museum professionals must be aware of the intrinsic subjectivity of art historical research. No one museum will ever be able to exhibit the authoritatively complete story of art history, because there is no one narrative. Along this line of thinking, much of the research advises museums to encourage visitors to derive their own story. While there are probably certain facts and pieces of information that a viewer should know about any one work of art, allowing the viewer to formulate his or her own series of relationships among those works might lead to a more positive museum experience. As discussed in Chapter 3, experiences are most rewarding to the visitor when he or she makes a personal connection with what he or she is viewing. Subsequently, the museological field might consider incorporating education earlier in the exhibition design process. This does not only mean for educators to be involved at the planning stages of exhibition design; rather, it is suggested that museums, as educational institutions, embrace education practice in order to cultivate a richer experience for the public.

5.06 Applications beyond minimal art

While this study looked specifically at minimal works of art from the 1960s, the lessons learned from this study might have applicability to works from other artistic movements. One of the biggest challenges faced by museum professionals in exhibiting minimal art results from their characteristic large size. Many contemporary works of art have continued this trend of large, or even monumental, scale. The Museum of Modern Art has shown their responsiveness to this new art by designing the second floor contemporary galleries with 22-foot ceilings.

Also, while minimal art objects are more overt in their requirement of a multiple viewpoint engagement of the viewer, this type of engagement might be conducive to viewing art

of almost any period. Active participation of the viewer is manifested through time spent walking around and really looking at an artwork from different angles, or even preferably at entirely different times. This type of viewing advocated by minimalism could provide an ideal model for looking at all types of art. It is suggested that employment of the findings gleaned from this study across all art exhibited in a museum might improve a visitor's overall museum experience.

5.07 The significance of this research

There are many reasons why this study has significance in the larger sphere of academic arts-related research. With this master's project, I was particularly interested in bringing together fields, such as art history and museology, which despite their undeniable relevance to one another are not often investigated in union. In addition to bridging related, but disparate fields, this study also sought to bridge theory and practice through the selected methods of inquiry. The comprehensive literature review provided the theoretical lens by which museum exhibition practice was investigated at two institutions. Also, the employment of a comparative case study generated the opportunity to look at two internationally important art museums that have diametrically opposed approaches to exhibition. Practices identified at both The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon underpin many of the main themes pulled from the literature review. Lastly, the outcomes of this study produced valuable lessons learned that might be applied to other art museums exhibiting minimal art, and perhaps as well as to other art museums exhibiting contemporary art.

These benefits are supported through a strategically designed study that was rooted in validity and reliability techniques. The use of two inquiry methods triangulated the collection of data. Also, keeping a reflexive journal was a helpful tool in drafting this document; by referring

to the journal, I was able to confirm, reassess, and reformulate my ideas and conclusions throughout the writing process. While this paper in and of itself is a significant contribution to the University of Oregon Arts and Administration community, I will attempt to disseminate my findings to a broader audience in the form of a journal article. Interview participants will be consulted for member checks before an article is submitted for publication.

It was the original intention of this master's project to be an exploratory study into the impact of museum exhibition practice on the relationship between the minimal art object and the viewer experience. Due to the exploratory, qualitative nature, there are no black and white answers to the questions of this study. The success of this study is that the door has been opened to further investigation of this intersection of academic fields. Museum work comprises many areas of expertise and requires its professionals to act responsibly as stewards of the public's aesthetic and educational interest. The suggestions brought forth in this paper encourage curators, educators, and all other staff to step out of their comfort zones and evaluate museum praxis through the eyes of their customer – the museum visitor.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Curatorial Staff Member

Case Study Site:

Date:

Interview Location:

Interviewee Details:

Consent: Oral Written (form) Audio recording OK to quote

Notes on interview context:

Key Points:

Coding	Information	Notes

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

- 1) What is your educational background?
- 2) Speaking as a representative of your institution, how do you define Minimal art?
- 3) How does the Minimal art in your institution's collection relate to other works of art in the collection?
- 4) What are the factors you consider when deciding how to exhibit a Minimal work of art?
- 5) What role does the field of art history play in exhibition design at your institution?
- 6) Do you consider the artist's original intent when making curatorial decisions about exhibiting Minimal works of art? If so, how? If not, why?
- 7) Do you consider the viewer's experience with the artwork when making curatorial decisions about exhibition?
- 8) How important is context in experiencing a Minimal art object?
- 9) How does curatorial staff work with education staff in deciding how to display works from the museum's collection?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Education Staff Member

Case Study Site:

Date:

Interview Location:

Interviewee Details:

Consent: Oral Written (form) Audio recording OK to quote

Notes on interview context:

Key Points:

Coding	Information	Notes

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

- 1) What is your educational background?
- 2) Speaking as a representative of your institution, how do you define Minimal art?
- 3) How does the Minimal art in your institution's collection relate to other works of art in the collection?
- 4) What are the factors you consider when deciding how to exhibit a Minimal work of art?
- 5) What role does the field of art history play in exhibition design at your institution?
- 6) Do you consider the artist's original intent when making educational decisions about exhibiting Minimal works of art? If so, how? If not, why?
- 7) Do you consider the viewer's experience with the artwork when making educational decisions about exhibition?
- 8) How important is context in experiencing a Minimal art object?
- 9) How does education staff work with curatorial staff in deciding how to display works from the museum's collection?

Appendix C: Data Collection Sheet for Observing Minimal Art Object Display

Case Study Site:

Date observed:

Art object details

Title:

Artist:

Date:

Dimensions:

Formal description:

Key Points:

Coding	Information	Notes

Attach photographs of art object from possible vantage points of viewer.

Number of total art objects (including this piece) in gallery:

Number of Minimal art objects (including this piece) in gallery:

Number of other art objects by this artist in gallery:

Is there a text label for this object?

If so, what is printed on label?

What is the location of the label to the object?

What are the objects adjacent to this Minimal art object? (title, artist, date, dimensions, formal description)

What is the location of this gallery in relation to the entire museum? (floor level, art movements displayed in adjacent galleries, etc.)

Appendix D: Sample Recruitment Letter to Museum Professional

Dear <<Participant Name>>,

I am a graduate student in the University of Oregon's Arts and Administration program. In conducting research, I hope to learn more about museum practice regarding the display of Minimal works of art, particularly the relationship with the viewer experience. The results of this research will contribute to a master's project and an occasional paper. You were selected as a possible participant in this study for two reasons. First, your institution collects and displays Minimal art objects, which I will closely examine through visual observation. Second, I wish to gain firsthand knowledge from museum professionals closely tied to exhibition practices.

Your participation in this study would involve an onsite interview lasting approximately one hour. Interview questions will be provided before hand for your consideration. In addition to taking handwritten notes, with your permission, I will use an audio tape recorder for transcription and validation purposes. I may contact you with follow-up questions or for clarification following the interview. If you consent to participate in this study, you grant me permission to use your name in any resulting documents, and therefore confidentiality cannot be protected. You will, however, have the opportunity to review and edit any of your comments before publication.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (541) 543-7111 or jwijangc@darkwing.uoregon.edu, or my faculty advisor, Patricia Dewey at (541) 346-2050 or pdewey@uoregon.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of Human Subjects Compliance, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, (541) 346-2510. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Wijangco

Appendix E: Sample Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Research study: *Questions of Context: The Display of Minimal Art in the Museum and the Viewer Experience*

Researcher: Jennifer Wijangco

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Wijangco from the University of Oregon Arts and Administration program. As the researcher, I hope to learn more about museum practice regarding the display of Minimal works of art, particularly the relationship with the viewer experience. The results of this research will contribute to a master's project and an occasional paper. You were selected as a possible participant in this study for two reasons. First, your institution collects and displays Minimal art objects, which I will closely examine through visual observation. Second, I wish to gain firsthand knowledge from museum professionals closely tied to exhibition practices.

Your consent to participate will involve an onsite interview lasting approximately one hour. Interview questions have been provided to you for your consideration. In addition to taking handwritten notes, with your permission, I will use an audio tape recorder for transcription and validation purposes. I may contact you with follow-up questions or for clarification following the interview. There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, particularly since my research is exploratory in nature.

By exploring the ways museum practice influences the relationship of Minimal art objects and the viewer experience, this study aspires to open a dialogue between the fields of museology and art history. I hope that my research benefits these two fields not by answering or challenging existing questions and practices, but by bringing forth and provoking new questions and research in yet to be investigated areas. However, I cannot guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will be carefully and securely maintained. Your consent to participate in this survey indicates your willingness to have your name used in any resulting documents and to relinquish confidentiality. It is suggested that you obtain permission to participate in this interview from your supervisor to avoid potential social or economic risks related to your acting as a representative of your institution. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the researcher, Jennifer Wijangco at (541) 543-7111 or jwijangc@darkwing.uoregon.edu, or the faculty advisor, Patricia Dewey at (541) 346-2050 or pdewey@uoregon.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of Human Subjects Compliance, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, (541) 346-2510.

Please read and initial each of the following statements to indicate your consent.

- _____ I consent to the use of audiotapes and note taking during my interview.
- _____ I consent to my identification as a participant in this study.
- _____ I consent to the potential use of quotations from the interview.
- _____ I consent to the use of information I provide regarding the organization with which I am associated.
- _____ I wish to have the opportunity to review and possibly revise my comments and the information that I provide prior to this data appearing in the final version of any publications that may result from this study.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you have received a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You have been given a copy of this letter to keep.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F: List of Donald Judd works displayed at Dia: Beacon

Untitled, 1976

Description: Series of 15 wooden boxes sitting on floor

Untitled, 1991

Description: Series of six wooden boxes mounted to wall, painted red and blue

Untitled, 1970

Description: Progression work mounted to wall, metal, polished aluminum and purple lacquer

Untitled, 1980

Description: Progression work mounted to wall, metal, red lacquer and polished gold

Untitled, 1980

Description: Progression work mounted to wall, metal, cobalt lacquer and aluminum

Untitled, 1970

Description: Progression work mounted to wall, metal, polished aluminum and chartreuse lacquer

Untitled (slant piece), 1976

Description: Large installation piece constructed of plywood slanting down towards back wall

Untitled, 1975

Description: Series of 12 identical metal open boxes, metal, outside is steel color, interior blue lacquer

Appendix G: Detailed list of participant interviews

José Blondet

Administrator of Education Programs

Dia: Beacon

Interview date: February 11, 2005

Interview location: Dia: Beacon conference room

Ann Temkin

Curator of Painting and Sculpture

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Interview date: February 14, 2005

Interview location: Ann Temkin's office

David Little

Director of Adult and Academic Education Programs

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Interview date: March 10, 2005

Interview location: Over the phone

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Cover Sheet for *Art Journal* manuscript submission

Questions of Context: The Display of Minimal Art in the Museum and the Viewer Experience

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Biographical statement

I have just completed a Master of Arts in Arts Management from the University of Oregon and also have a Bachelor of Business Administration, major in Finance, and a Bachelor of Arts in Art, major in Art History from The University of Texas at Austin.

Questions of Context: The Display of Minimal Art in the Museum and the Viewer Experience

Abstract

Minimal artists of the 1960s produced works that were large in scale and confronted the viewer. This artistic movement is characterized, and in many ways validated, by the critical literature produced by artists, art critics and historians. The field of art history continues to heavily influence museum display. However, a growing concern for the viewer's experience is evident in museum practice. This research study, through data collected from a literature review and comparative case study, explores the ways museum exhibition practice influences the relationship between the art object and the viewer in relation to minimal art, informed by relevant art historical methodologies.

Keywords

Museum Exhibition, Minimal Art, Art History, Viewer Experience, Constructivist Learning

Introduction

Art produced in the last century has made answering the question “what is art?” more difficult than ever. As works of art stray from the conventions of the easel and the pedestal, art museums are faced with the challenge of exhibition. Compounding this problem is the mandate placed upon museums by the public to fulfill their obligations as educational institutions. Many influencing factors exist within museological practice, including art history, learning theories, and artistic intention. This paper will investigate museum exhibition practice, specifically looking at the display of art objects from the minimalist movement. Informing this study are a literature review and comparative case study, leading to a conclusion delineating discoveries made about art museum exhibition practice.

One of the most influential artistic movements coming out of the 1960s was minimalism. Speaking to their formal qualities, minimal works of art are typically three-dimensional, geometrically abstract objects, comprising simplified forms made of industrial materials. However, the real unifying element among minimalist works lies in the group of artists who shared a polemical approach to their creations. The artist’s statements were bolstered by the abundance of critical writings by art critics and historians.

Due to their esoteric nature, viewers are often perplexed standing in front of minimal art. These objects require the viewer to engage with the artwork in a manner very different from the majority of paintings and sculptures displayed in the typical art museum. Art critic Michael Fried attributed this phenomenon to the “theatrical” nature of this “literalist” art. The art museum, likewise, is faced with many challenges when exhibiting minimalist works, attributable in large part to their large scale.

Art history has been identified as an imposing actor on museum praxis. Art museum curators are art historians, often considered “connoisseurs” of art. And, as stated earlier, art historians were very vocal through their writings in both supporting and critiquing minimalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking at the three constructs of minimal art, art museum, and viewer, informed through an art historical lens, a gap in the scholarship was found. This study was developed in order to explore the interactions among these topical areas.

Methods of inquiry

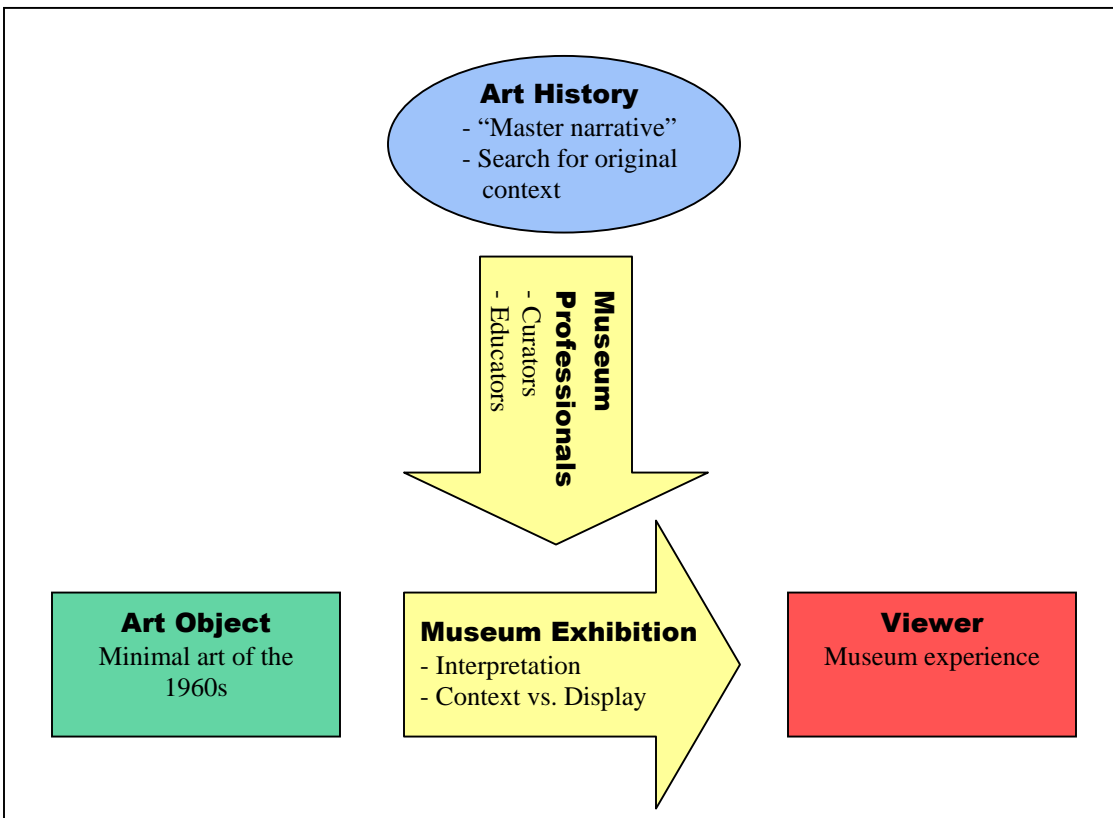
Based on the assertion that art history influences museum practice, it was decided that this study would begin with a comprehensive literature review. The literature review began with an introduction to the field of art history and then focused on the artistic movement of minimal art. From there, the literature review turned to an investigation of viewer experience in the museum. Finally, museum exhibition practice was explored through the scholarship. The literature review provided a scholarly answer to the main research question – focusing on minimal art from the 1960s, in what ways does museum exhibition practice influence the relationship between the art object and the viewer?

The second method of inquiry used was a comparative case study that investigated two art museums. The two institutions explored were The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon, both in New York. Both of these museums collect and display minimal art objects. At both MoMA and Dia: Beacon, careful observation of the display of minimal art was undertaken. Also, interviews were conducted with educators and curators at both institutions. The comparative case study helped to answer the practical questions of how museums approach the exhibition of minimal art objects and how educators and curators work together in the museum.

The conceptual framework

As alluded to earlier, there are four main topical areas of this research study. The conceptual framework that guided this study can be viewed in Figure 1. Art history informs museum professionals who then execute museum exhibition practice. At the bottom-left of the schematic is the minimal art object from the 1960s and 1970s. At the bottom-right of the conceptual framework is the viewer. In between the minimal art object and the viewer is museum exhibition. Each of these four topical areas, art history, minimal art, the viewer, and museum praxis, will now be discussed across the data collected in this study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Art History

The field of art history has a profound effect on museum practice, but what is the definition of “art history”? The field of art history is an academic discipline studying artworks, particularly seeking to identify original context. Preziosi (1992) states, “Art historical practice has been principally devoted to the restoration of the circumstances that surrounded (and therefore are presumed to have led in some extended and indirect sense to) the work’s production” (p. 373). However, it is key to remember that a single art object is only a small part of a very large art historical narrative.

Early art history programs such as Harvard’s set the precedent for training those people who would become museum professionals. It was their didactic approach that named art historians “connoisseurs” of art. As the anointed experts, art historians have historically been given the task of decoding the significance of art to the general public (Worts, 2003). However, with research of a qualitative nature, it is impossible to be completely objective. Subjectivity is intrinsic to art historical practice and should not be overlooked. Moxey (1995) states, “The subjective attitudes and cultural aspirations of the art historian become just as important an aspect of the narrative as the works that are its object” (p. 399). Interviews with museum professionals, many of who are trained art historians, agree that subjectivity exists in their work.

What is minimal art?

With the beginning of modernism around the mid-nineteenth century, artists began to emphasize conception over perception of their artwork. As a result, modern art pushed the boundaries of convention and sought innovative modes of creation and display. More simplified forms and a new attention to the formal qualities of art, rather than the content, typify modernist works. Before the art world shifted to postmodernism, the minimalist artists took center stage.

According to Ann Temkin, curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, the minimalists were, “the last, avant-garde movement in which there was a close group of people working together who really had in many ways the same goals and the same concerns, even though they expressed in individual ways that were very different from one another” (A. Temkin, personal communication, February 14, 2005).

In his essay titled “Minimal Art”, Wollheim (1965) introduced the term to the world and used “minimal” as a descriptor for the dearth of content in these artworks. The “work” in “work of art” subconsciously implies that a certain amount of effort is placed into the creation of an art object. Minimal art, with its simple forms often fabricated by a third party, seemingly lacked sufficient effort on the part of the artist. Wollheim (1965) does, however, credit the artist with making the decision to create the object, “that without which work would be meaningless” (p. 108).

Due to the scale and simplicity of forms, minimal art objects have historically been difficult to exhibit. The large size of most minimal sculptures made them unpalatable to collectors of the time. It seemed the only suitable places to house these works were galleries and museums. Artist Robert Smithson (as cited in Meyer, 2001) recalls that art from the mid-sixties “were making greater demands on interior spaces. The small galleries of the late fifties were giving way to large white rooms” (p. 18). The neutral exhibition space was thought to be complementary to minimalist works that required an active spectator.

Exhibiting minimal art

The difficulties encountered when exhibiting minimalist works are exemplified in a critique of a recent minimal art show. The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004 exhibited a show curated by Ann Goldstein titled “A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968”.

The show was a retrospective of minimalist works, and a comprehensive one at that. However, Yve-Alain Bois criticizes the curator for not including sufficient interpretive materials. Bois (2004) states, “No chronology, no typology, no label explanations whatsoever, resulting in an exasperating feeling of pure randomness for anyone not already in the loop” (p. 201). Forty years after minimalism’s beginnings, the importance of critical discourse retains its necessity to understanding these works. Bois (2004) further elaborates, “a minimum of guidance is usually required for museumgoers to feel welcome rather than excluded – especially for a subject as utterly complex, in its apparent simplicity, as Minimal art” (p. 201).

In this research study, two of the most prominent artists of minimalism were investigated, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. At The Museum of Modern Art, minimal art belonging to the permanent collection is exhibited in the “final” gallery of the painting and sculpture floors. In February 2005, there were two Judd objects and one Flavin object on display that were created during the height of minimalism in the 1960s. These objects were placed among other minimal art objects created by other artists. In contrast, at Dia: Beacon, several large artworks by Judd and Flavin were exhibited. Representing Judd were a series of 15 plywood boxes, four progression reliefs, a series of six painted wooden boxes, a series of 12 steel boxes, and one large plywood piece. Twenty of Flavin’s *‘Monuments’* and one large barrier piece were exhibited in a large hall of the museum.

The mission statements of these institutions inform each of these contrasting exhibition practices. MoMA seeks to provide “a uniquely comprehensive survey of the unfolding modern movement in all visual media” (*The Museum of Modern Art*, n.d.). On the other hand, Dia is “dedicated to supporting individual artists and to providing long-term, in-depth presentations of their art” (*Dia Art Foundation*, n.d.). The display of art objects at each museum is a successful

execution of those missions. Consequently, a visitor to MoMA will see a few works by many artists, whereas a visitor to Dia: Beacon will see many works by a few artists. Also, with double the gallery square footage of MoMA, Dia: Beacon is able to display many works that MoMA simply does not have the space for.

The viewer experience

As stated earlier, the viewer is at the receiving end of an art object displayed in a museum. The discussion of this paper will now look more closely at the viewer experience. Regardless of what a museum's intent is with an exhibition, it is the visitor who decides what the actual experience will be (Falk & Dierking, 1992). For example, museums are often perceived to be elitist institutions. O'Doherty (1986) specifically discusses the gallery space:

For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is exclusive. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible – art is *difficult*.” (p. 76).

Negrin (1993) cites Benjamin's argument on this phenomenon. Benjamin argued in his 1979 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that museum viewing is perceived to be a solitary experience and that artworks demand reverence. For many visitors, this created “aura” makes art in a museum seem unapproachable. “Instead of the viewer absorbing the artwork and making it a part of her/his life, the artwork absorbed the viewer, overwhelming her/him by its authority” (Negrin, 1993, p. 110-111).

A museum visitor experience is an active exchange. “Experience is not simply had, it is taken; experience is a product of the transaction between a viewer and a work” (Eisner & Dobbs,

1988, p. 8). Much of the literature confirms that the visitor is an active participant. Dufresne-Tasse and Lefebvre (1994) write that the visitor “constructs for himself the meaning of the objects he looks at and has pleasure doing it, as long as this endeavour is supported” (p. 479).

Constructivist learning

The concept of the museum visitor as an active participant fits well into the constructivist theory of learning. “Constructivism argues that both knowledge and the way it is obtained are dependent on the mind of the learner” (Hein, 1995, p. 3). With this theory, it is believed that as new bits of knowledge are acquired the learner rearranges his or her construct of knowledge to assimilate, not merely add on, the new information to the existing information.

Knowing that personal context is perhaps the most influential factor to the outcome of a visitor’s experience at a museum, constructivism appears to be a sensible approach to art museum exhibition practice. Lankford (2002) states:

Constructivist theories of learning and recent research into aesthetic experience suggest that most people actually benefit by instruction in various means of engagement with art, and that engagement is most fulfilling when it actively challenges, builds on, and extends the knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities of the museum visitor. (p. 141).

An example of museum practice utilizing a constructivist approach would be an exhibit designed with multiple paths. This gives the viewer an opportunity to draw his or her own conclusions about an exhibit’s meaning (Hein, 1995). In a constructivist museum, the viewer is encouraged to utilize his or her personal context to shape his or her museum experience.

The challenge in using a constructivist approach is that the focus is inherently on the learner, and the onus is, therefore, on the educator to accommodate the many types of students. This presents the classic problem in school learning of teaching the pupil, not the subject.

Furthermore, the museum must relinquish some of its authority to allow the museum visitor to construct his or her own experiences. This is in direct conflict with the transmission model of education typically employed by museums (Lankford, 2002). In a constructivist museum, “The museum is no longer a dictator, but instead a *collaborator* in the meaning-making process” (Lankford, 2002, p. 146). It is important to note that constructivism does not compel the museum to take a “hands-off” approach to education; rather the museum fosters an environment where multiple interpretations are allowed by training visitors to contemplate the art.

Worts (2003) points out that the art museum experience can feel oppressive due to the authoritarian overtone inherent in many institutions. Since academicians have selected the objects, many visitors cannot help but feel that they are left no choice but to passively receive information.

Visitor experience at MoMA and Dia: Beacon

The nature of exhibition practices at MoMA and Dia: Beacon creates two completely different visitor experiences. At MoMA, galleries are filled with representative works by the most notable modern and contemporary artists, as validated by the field of art history. However, in the minimalist/post-minimalist galleries, the viewer may find himself or herself a bit overwhelmed due to the quantity of objects on display. According to Judd, minimal art objects should be viewed from multiple viewpoints and thus require a lot of space. However, with the goal of telling a cohesive narrative, several objects thought to be representative of minimalism were selected. Temkin agreed that MoMA’s minimalist gallery, at the time, was exhibiting too many works of art.

Dia: Beacon considers itself a permanent display of works. One gallery is devoted to one artist, and therefore, the viewer has a very different experience from that of MoMA. Instead of

telling a story of an artistic movement or period, a gallery at Dia tells the story of one artist.

There is not a linear arrangement of galleries. Plus, with 240,000 square feet of exhibition space, Dia: Beacon has the luxury of giving each art object plenty of breathing room. Dia encourages their visitors, in the words of educator José Blondet, “to waste some time” with the art (J. Blondet, personal communication, February 11, 2005).

Educators at both institutions appear to support an approach to museum practice congruent with constructivist theories of learning. Museum visitors are encouraged to formulate their own perceptions and are not inundated by wall text and labels at either institution. Due to the subtle imposition of a particular pathway, MoMA is more liable to influence the viewer along a predetermined journey of knowledge. However, the intention is to change the exhibits periodically to allow for slight variations of the main narrative. Temkin mentioned how she hoped that perhaps in later presentations of the minimalist galleries, MoMA would exhibit multiple works by the same artist, rather than a single work by multiple artists.

Art museum practice and the field of art history

In the book *How to Visit a Museum*, author David Finn (1985) makes the bold accusation that looking at labels teaches more about art history than art (p. 44). However bold, art museums are institutions heavily influenced by the field of art history. As the main overseers of an art museum’s aesthetic approach, it cannot be forgotten that curators are trained art historians. Levi (1985) states that the art museum is “the special protégé of the academic field of art history” (p. 37). Traditionally, art museums translate the narrative of art history using the gallery walls as the medium (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

As art history presupposes a narrative of art, chronological display has become common practice in museum exhibition. This manner of display is assumed to illuminate a historical

development in style. Negrin (1993) points out that, “Underlying such a form of organization was the assumption that the history of art consisted of a unilinear and progressive process of evolution from one style to another” (p. 104). It is this approach to museum exhibition that constrains visitors to feel burdened by the academic nature of the art museum. In a commentary on this practice, Tucker (1999) says, “‘We know what is good for you’ could have been engraved on the facades of most of our buildings” (p. 46). Preziosi (1992) also addresses this issue by saying that art museums and art history consort to display art in a particular manner to tell a particular story.

There is, however, an obvious push for a revisionist approach to the art museum. This likewise echoes a revisionist shift in art historical practice. Lankford (2002) states:

Today’s art museums are much more likely to place artworks in broader contexts of social change, offer reinterpretations and alternative interpretations of history and works of art that are more inclusive of multiple perspectives, and provide situational interpretations reflecting the values and convictions of the artworks’ originating cultural contexts. (p. 143).

Munson (1997) describes this phenomenon as an attempt to “subvert the master narrative” (p. 7). Without the strict limitations of a chronological display, an open-ended museum exhibition gives the viewer greater access to creating his or her own meanings and interpretations. Munson cautions, “though revisionists claim that their goal is to create a museums that is more inclusive and audience-centered than the traditional museum, they show a remarkable lack of interest in actual public opinion” (p. 11).

Museum professionals are thereby left with the task of determining how to balance their responsibilities to the art museum as art history laboratory and the art museum as educational

institution. Walsh-Piper (1994) advises museums: “There is a delicate balance between giving enough information to make art more accessible and allowing learners their own response” (p. 109). The museum is in a power position as the assumed “arbiter of beauty and aesthetic value”, and therefore should make its visitors aware that a museum’s exhibition approach is not a universal truth. One museum’s collection only represents one of many possibilities.

Lessons learned about art museum practice

After carefully collecting and analyzing data via a literature review and comparative case study, several recurring themes have emerged from this study. Pulling from written scholarship and case study data, suggested practices for art museums will now be discussed, grouped into one of two categories. The first section recounts suggestions of a practical nature for museum exhibition, and the second section will make suggestions of a theoretical nature for the field of museology. Suggestions arrived at from this study are not intended for either MoMA or Dia: Beacon. Rather, best practices were pulled from both the literature review and the comparative case study, which indicate that they would foster successful viewer experiences of minimal art in a museum.

There are three propositions of a practical nature for museum exhibition practice. The first is to provide sufficient space for the viewing of art. This is both for the benefit of the art object and the viewer. According to constructivist learning, the museum visitor must feel that he or she is allowed to spend time with the artwork. The second recommendation promotes the use of effective and informative text labels. Visitor studies show that when intrigued by a particular art object, the viewer will seek more information, and a label placed next to an object will provide that desired information most quickly. Studies also show, however, that most visitors do not read labels; therefore, it is not necessary for objects labels to be verbose. It is inferred that

more informative text be provided as an option for the inclined visitor; this could be in the form of expendable or non-expendable brochures and placards. Lastly, to combat museum fatigue, it is recommended that adequate resting areas be provided for museum visitors, and that they are readily available throughout the museum galleries. Since many museum galleries are labyrinthine, placing benches at the entrances and exits of galleries may be too little, too late for the fatigued visitor. Minimal art can be both physically and mentally exhausting to look at.

Addressing the museological field

After making suggestions for practical issues of museum exhibition of minimal art objects, I now propose a few items for consideration that are of a more theoretical, holistic nature. First, museum professionals are cautioned from letting art history dominate the dialog between the museum's exhibitions and the viewer. As stated earlier, it is claimed that reading object labels teaches the visitor more about art history than art (Finn, 1985, p. 44). If a museum desires to foster a constructivist-learning environment, museum professionals must be aware of the intrinsic subjectivity of art historical research. No one museum will ever be able to exhibit the authoritatively complete story of art history, because there is no one narrative. Along this line of thinking, much of the research advises museums to encourage visitors to derive their own story. While there are probably certain facts and pieces of information that a viewer should know about any one work of art, allowing the viewer to formulate his or her own series of relationships among those works might lead to a more positive museum experience. As discussed earlier, experiences are most rewarding to the visitor when he or she makes a personal connection with what he or she is viewing. Subsequently, the museological field might consider incorporating education earlier in the exhibition design process. This does not only mean for educators to be involved at the planning stages of exhibition design; rather, it is suggested that

museums, as educational institutions, embrace education practice in order to cultivate a richer experience to the public.

Applications beyond minimal art

While this study looked specifically at minimal works of art from the 1960s, the lessons learned from this study might have applicability to works from other artistic movements. One of the biggest challenges faced by museum professionals in exhibiting minimal art results from their characteristic large size. Many contemporary works of art have continued this trend of large, or even monumental, scale. The Museum of Modern Art has shown their responsiveness to this new art by designing the second floor contemporary galleries with 22-foot ceilings.

Also, while minimal art objects are more overt in their requirement of a multiple viewpoint engagement of the viewer, this type of engagement might be conducive to viewing art of almost any period. Active participation of the viewer is manifested through time spent walking around and really looking at an artwork from different angles, or even preferably at entirely different times. This type of viewing advocated by minimalism could provide an ideal model for looking at all types of art. It is suggested that employment of the findings gleaned from this study across all art exhibited in a museum might improve a visitor's overall museum experience.

The significance of this research

There are many reasons why this study has significance in the larger sphere of academic arts-related research. With this research study, I was particularly interested in bringing together fields, such as art history and museology, which despite their undeniable relevance to one another are not often investigated in union. In addition to bridging related, but disparate fields, this study also sought to bridge theory and practice through the selected methods of inquiry. The

comprehensive literature review provided the theoretical lens by which museum exhibition practice was investigated at two institutions. Also, the employment of a comparative case study generated the opportunity to look at two internationally important art museums that have diametrically opposed approaches to exhibition. Practices identified at both The Museum of Modern Art and Dia: Beacon underpin many of the main themes pulled from the literature review. Lastly, the outcomes of this study produced valuable lessons learned that might be applied to other art museums exhibiting minimal art, and perhaps as well as to other art museums exhibiting contemporary art.

It was the original intention of this research to be an exploratory study into the impact of museum exhibition practice on the relationship between the minimal art object and the viewer experience. Due to the exploratory, qualitative nature, there are no black and white answers to the questions of this study. The success of this study is that the door has been opened to further investigation of this intersection of academic fields. Museum work comprises many areas of expertise and requires its professionals to act responsibly as stewards of the public's aesthetic and educational interest. The suggestions brought forth in this paper encourage curators, educators, and all other staff to step out of their comfort zones and evaluate museum praxis through the eyes of their customer – the museum visitor.

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