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Objects and Logotypes

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In April 1964, an exhibit of 193 trademarks, symbols and logotypes opened at the National Design Center in Chicago. Entitled *TRADEMARKS/USA*, it was the first national retrospective exhibition of a selection of post-war corporate graphic design.

1964 was also a year of several important debut exhibitions for the group of artists whose works came to be known as “Minimalist.” Donald Judd's first New York one-man show opened the new year at Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, and Robert Morris's first show of L-shaped objects would close the year at the same space. Within another six months Sol Lewitt (Daniels Gallery) and Carl Andre (Tibor de Nagy) would have their first New York shows.

This set of events—a retrospective display in Chicago examining the triumph, over the preceding 20 years, of a graphic design style; and a cluster of individual art exhibits in New York galleries advancing a new manner of art-object making—seem very different in terms of place and intent. Nevertheless, these events can be interpreted as distinct but subjectively parallel responses to the same climate of values operating in American society in the 1950s and '60s.

The cases of the artists just mentioned reflect the development in their work of a material and compositional syntax whose programmatic application bears some striking resemblances to the practices and principles of corporate graphic design, especially the design of corporate identity programs. The importance of these design principles as reflectors of social values is that they are seen by both the corporate designers and the artists I shall discuss as manifestations of distinct and clearly defined attitudes toward what art is, attitudes which while strongly different (and at times mutually exclusive) reflect a common faith in the efficacy of form as a means of restructuring society through public exposure to works executed within particular systems of use.

The notion that a kind of symbolic investiture is implicit within the Minimalist object is not new to art criticism. In his 1967 essay, “Recentness in Sculpture,”¹ Clement Greenberg castigates the “more or less conventional sensibility” which comprises the experience of Minimalist art. This conventionality he equates with “Good Design,” and goes on to say, “By being employed as tokens, the ‘primary structures’ are converted into a mannerism.” What Greenberg refers to as “a mannerism” seems closely allied to certain aspects of usage in corporate identity programs.

In Donald Judd's wall boxes, for example, measures including the voids between elements, proximity to corners or projecting architectural elements, and distance from boxes to floor, are rigidly observed in installation. These measures are three-dimensional contextual cues to the identity of the works—spaces characteristically “Judd.” In a 1975 essay on the artist's work, William C. Agee describes Judd's use of “systematic solids and voids” in his “stack pieces”:

The stacks vary from five to 10 units, but their boxes are modular in two sizes, always measuring either 9 by 40 by 31 inches, or 6 by 27 by 24. Intervals between them are 9 inches and 6 inches respectively for the large and small stacks. 2

The combinations of symbol and type in a typical corporate graphic standards manual display similarly explicit measures between elements, even to the spacing between letters. The revised version of George Nelson's 1947 manual of style for Herman Miller & Company provides positioning requirements for uses of the company logotype ranging from printed business cards to building and vehicular signage. Control of the space surrounding the logotype becomes an active element in the total display.

Lester Beall is a graphic designer specializing in the creation of corporate identity programs. Among his works are the logotypes and manuals of style for corporations such as International Paper Company (1960), Connecticut General Insurance Company (1956), and the brokerage firm of Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. Beall's introduction to the catalogue for *TRADEMARKS/USA* is a concise statement of the way in which he and other corporate designers view their responsibilities with regard to the creation of corporate images. It reads in part:

Today, corporations characterized by their many faceted divisions (usually a result of acquisition) dictate the development of a graphic device that must positively project an 'all-encompassing' visual image. This requirement underscores the difficulties encountered in designing a trademark that is a mark of individuality, while at the same time having the qualities of universal application...

Any graphic device, no matter how well designed, cannot alone project an all-over positive image unless it is an integral part of the usage system. This system, or the organization and coordination of all usage areas, functions as an integrating synthesizer and is therefore an acutely essential factor in the development and growth of a corporate identity. However, in the development of a corporate design program a paradoxical phenomenon is often exposed.

For though the corporate objective is basically to create or develop individual corporate identity, the corporation sometimes ignores the fact that an effective realization of the objective depends on individual initiative and responsibility and not on group anonymity...

It is also a verity that man is too often obsessed by a desire to 'look-alike.' The use of the machine unquestionably aids this achievement of 'look-alikeness,' and as a result quickens a sense of the superficial meaning of security inherent in 'look-alikeness.' It also demonstrates a form of self-destruction; for a society based on a continuum of physiological and psychological controls can never be intellectually reprieved. Instead the individual as a sensory perceptive apparatus faces erasure.³

The “usage system” Beall refers to is specifically the context within which one could *always* expect to see a given logotype. But implicit in Beall’s use of the word “system” is the idea that the logotype would only be seen within a particular set of formal spatial relationships, acting to reinforce appropriately the “all-encompassing” nature of the image.

This notion of “all-encompassing” seems close in spirit to Robert Morris’s description of the “strong gestalt sensations” with which his work of 1963-68 was in part concerned. In the February 1966 issue of *Artforum*, Morris notes:

[Referring to 'the simpler regular polyhedrons'] one need not move around the object for the sense of the whole, the gestalt, to occur. One sees and immediately 'believes' that the pattern within one's mind corresponds to the existential fact of the object. Belief in this sense is both a kind of faith in spatial extension and a visualization of the extension... neither the theories nor the experiences of gestalt effects relating to three-dimensional bodies are as simple and clear as they are for two-dimensions. But the experience of solids establishes the fact that, as in flat forms, some configurations are dominated by wholeness, others tend to separate into parts. 4

The artist’s description of “a kind of faith in spatial extension,” which he links to the strong gestalt sensations in his simple polyhedrons, obviates the need to encounter these forms in a given situation by moving around them and/or violating their space. Such forms are therefore, “autonomous in the sense of being...self contained unit[s] for the formation of the gestalt, the indivisible and undissolvable whole...” Yet, “the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object and exist as unified variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator.”⁵

I believe that the particularity to which Morris refers exemplifies his recognition that the art gallery space itself is a context within which given works of art function as elements, and that different placements or arrangements of forms maintain or destroy the aesthetic viability of that context. What does “aesthetic viability” mean in this situation? How does the gestalt of a given configuration become shaped to a particular aesthetic intent by its location in a particular place? That depends upon the values accorded that place.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to give more than a brief outline of the enormous growth in power and influence of America's corporate infrastructure from the 1940s to the present, but the fact of that growth and its real effects on the character of this society has influenced all our lives. It is necessary to remember that the growth of enormous, multinational corporations proceeded almost unnoticed by the general public up to the early 1960s, although certain artists and intellectuals had become increasingly aware of some of the more disruptive symptoms of this phenomenon, if not of the causes behind it. The art director's and market researcher's roles in the promulgation of subliminal product advertising techniques was a highly controversial subject even in the early 1950s (witness the publication of Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*). Behind the day-to-day affairs of the marketplace there was a real change in the way corporations were structured in this country during the 1950s.

Part of the means for increasing industrial production in the U.S. during the Second World War has been the relaxation of federal standards concerning corporate acquisitions. America's war-based economy was geared toward centralized control of the means of production, and entire categories of products were placed under the authority of federal regulating agencies that supervised the assembly and distribution of such products. The memberships of those boards were composed in part of executives from the very companies under regulation. This sort of dual responsibility on the part of many corporate executives became the basis for a new type of relationship between some corporations and the federal government—especially in militarily significant industries, such as transportation and energy. In the years immediately following World War II a series of laws governing corporate acquisitions was passed which drastically altered the ways in which companies could merge. The Celler-Kefauver Bill of 1950 allowed corporate mergers only across industry categories which, while adding some legal support to certain aspects of the earlier Taft-Hartley law governing monopolization within a single industry, allowed for unparalleled corporate expansion across a range of industries.

The first corporate “conglomerates” to develop in the post-war period were almost exclusively militarily significant industries—the “military-industrial complex”—but by the 1960s the development of umbrella-type corporate conglomerates had spread throughout American business.

The sheer size and diversity of such corporate operations led to problems in the presentation of a public image not experienced by corporations in the past. Many corporate designers of the post-war period saw the phenomenon of the all-purpose logotype as a literal perceptual analogue to the social phenomenon of the multifaceted corporate conglomerate, and to a considerable extent, the new use of geometric, systematized modular configurations as logotypes was a manifestation of that analogy in their professional concern.

The problem with the analogy itself, however, is that the effect of “wholeness” in such configurations is a function of “physiological factors regarding the nature of binocular parallax vision and the structure of the [human] retina and brain.”⁶ It is only

through the use of such configurations within a particular social milieu that their particular properties are connected to a set of values. The issue for the corporate designer was how to relate a particular symbol to what the designer saw as a new corporate structure. The consideration of this symbolic relationship had nothing to do, however, with the uses to which a completed design program would be put by the corporation involved. This is the paradox which Beall articulates in the last part of the above quote.

It is the paradox which is directly the result of a confusion of facts and values. It seems, between the lines of Beall's text, that he has imbued the corporation logotype with the values of the corporation it signifies. Beall sees the logotype as "a graphic summation of individuality," and that a "belief in individuality is a belief in the human thought processes involved in achieving individuality."⁷

There is no meaning inherent in graphic forms. The "individuality" of a particular graphic form is merely the visible difference between it and other forms. That abstract configurations can convey meaning can be demonstrated by a glance at the cross on the nearest church steeple, but of course the information-bearing capabilities of logotypical forms can only be manifested through a given context.

The symbol for International Minerals and Chemical Corporation, designed by Morton Goldscholl in 1959, takes its shape from the theoretical molecular structure of the company's most important refining product—the phosphates used in chemical fertilizers. In describing the uses of this symbol as a corporate identifier, Goldscholl comments:

We found that the phosphate crystal in many cases, was formed as a Hexagonal Bipyramid.... We cut across the hexagonal center, placed the two forms side by side and gave the right panel to the 'Tree of Life' symbol which meant that the phosphate crystal had the capacity to grow food for man. We then included the letters IMC in the left panel to symbolize the fact that this company knew how to release this power to feed a hungry world. 8

The rationale for the IMC logotype functions on several philosophical levels, but the one relevant to this discussion comes from Goldscholl's description of the appropriateness of the crystalline form for its uses. It is the only place in Goldscholl's statement where poetic allusion is replaced by objective description of pure geometric form. For Goldscholl the hexagonal bipyramid configuration was given meaning by—and gave meaning to—the "tree of life" symbol and corporate initials it enclosed. If we examine the manifestos and criticism supportive of Minimalist art we can see a similar symbiosis of form and value.

At the time of his one-man show at Leo Castelli Gallery in March 1967, Robert Morris was interviewed by David Sylvester for BBC radio. The question of the form of Morris's work was raised by the interviewer:

Sylvester: What am I looking at when I look at one of your works. Simply a large object made of geometric shapes? Is this what I'm looking at?

Morris: Well that's certainly one of the things...I think this whole question of whether it is art or not has been asked because I'm not sure what I'm doing, what a few other people are doing, has any real legitimate connection to past art. I mean, it's still used as art, it's focused on as art, it's still meant as art. But it seems to me that there's a kind of order involved in this art that is not an art order. It's an order of made things that is pretty basic to how things have been made for a very very long time....I think as an object it doesn't refer to past art but to manufactured objects: it doesn't try to imitate but it's more like some of the aspects of manufactured objects or made things.... It's [like a] unit in a syntax that has been in the culture since the Stone Age, I suppose, and it's still very basic to industrial-type manufacturing—standardization and repetition and repeatability, the wholeness of a part that can be extended. 9

The idea here posited is that there are forms of order in the world whose manifestation has been the concern of many human societies in the past—hence Morris's and other Minimalists ongoing interest in Middle Eastern and Asian art and history—and whose promulgation in modern technological society are best offered through the materials of that society. For the Minimalists, the perception of such order was equivalent to the sense of calm and order provoked by the dolmens at Stonehenge, or a Japanese formal garden. Of such gardens, Carl Andre has written:

These are places charged with a great calm, a very strong calm, and a feeling of, if one cannot really contain the universe, perhaps, in ones mind, than in these gardens one has the very secure feeling that one is contained in the universe.10

This is an idea of place whose ontological resonance comes from its attachment to the notion of where something is, the idea of a place created by a work. That is, the awareness of one's position in relation to the (Minimalist) object and perception of the object's orderly presence makes possible an awareness of one's position in relationship to the universe. The provocation of that awe is the object's function.

In the concluding sentence of Morris's response is a potent archetypal reference—to the "Stone Age." It locates the artist's works in a continuum that reaches back before the beginnings of written history. Yet earlier Morris had denied any historical association with art, or at least the "art order." It is through the order of making that Morris separates arts and objects. Since Morris insists that what he makes is art, we are confronted with an apparent contradiction—unresolvable through the terms the artist has given us, though non-paradoxical because the actual objects involved do in fact reflect an order, one perhaps not recognized by their makers, but an order of values whose message is contained in a usage system as effective as that of the corporate logotype—because it is the same system.

For the Minimalists the revelatory potential inherent in their works is an order of value explicitly contained in the order of form. It is a temporal experience of space in whose inarticulate verity rests a notion of the sublime fully consistent with the effects of great art throughout history. It is in this notion, constituting a “leap of faith” as strenuous as any posited by Kierkegaard, that Robert Morris and Lester Beall come together; in their use of form as a manifestation of value, they are demonstrating a belief beyond the prior concerns of art, and one which is admirable in its own right.

But it is a belief which is infinitely corruptible, because of the confusion it creates between context and content, by associating a sort of raw value with specific configurations placed in specific locations *a priori* of the expectations of the viewer. It is precisely because of their awareness of the history of art that the Minimalists’ situations function symbolically, because of their understanding of art’s revelatory associations, which vitalize the inert forms they have made, and which form the unacknowledged basis for their claims to art.

Darby Bannard, writing in the December 1966 issue of *Artforum*, states:

... ‘the meaning’ of a Minimal work exists outside of the work itself. It is a part of the nature of these works to act as triggers for thought and emotion preexisting in the viewer...It may be fair to say that these styles have been nourished by the ubiquitous question: ‘but what does it mean?’ 11

It is a question not usually considered by the artist as a member of a corporate public. Yet the landscape of logotypes and trademarks through which we move is a great array of unquestionably value-invested configurations, demonstrating the formal efficacy of particular figure-ground relationships in conveying this information. In the ubiquitous presence of logotypes like the CBS “eye,” IBM’s girder-like initials, the pristine mechanics of Alcoa’s “A,” the artists who came of age in the 1960s assimilated the hard-core message of the successful logotype. And it is in the context of such graphic design that much Minimalist art yields up the secrets behind its formal effects. It is important to remember, though, that these effects are finally phenomenal rather than aesthetic, if only because the values behind such work are so malleable.

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Notes:

1. From the exhibition catalogue, *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. G. Battcock, ed. New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1968, pp.180-186.
2. Agee, William C., "Unit, series, site: A Judd lexicon." *Art in America* 63, 3 (May June 1975):pp40-49.
3. Beall, Lester, "The trademark: a graphic summation of individuality." *TRADEMARKS/USA* (exhibition catalogue). Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, 1968, separate folio.
4. Morris, Robert, "Notes on sculpture," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. p.224.
5. *Ibid.*, p.226.
6. *Ibid.*, p.226.
7. Beall, "The trademark: a graphic summation of individuality."
8. Goldscholl, Morton. "International Minerals & Chemical Corporation." *TRADEMARKS/USA*.
9. Sylvester, David, "A duologue: Robert Morris and David Sylvester," *Robert Morris*, M. Compton & D. Sylvester, eds. London, The Tate Gallery, 1971, p.16.
10. Serota, Nicholas, *Carl Andre* (exhibition catalogue). London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1978, n.p.
11. Bannard, Darby, cited by Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of sculpture," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. p. 184.