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Kerr Houston

There may indeed be a general sensibility
in the arts at this time.

—Robert Morris,
"Notes on Sculpture"¹

Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," originally published in four issues of *Artforum* in 1966, 1967, and 1969, have long been recognized as a seminal explication of Minimalist theory.² Declaring that "there has been little definitive writing on present-day sculpture," Morris promptly proceeded to offer a series of assertions that were as influential as they were provocative. Rejecting Donald Judd's blurring of the distinctions between painting and sculpture, and pressuring Judd's notion of the specific object, Morris also challenged the pervasive interest in optical readings of sculpture, stressing instead the importance of embodied perception. In the process, as James Meyer puts it, Morris "shifted the focus of debate from the empirical object of Judd, with only an implied viewer, to a sculpture orchestrated as a contingent and inextricable relationship between a subject and an object."³ The very manner in which Minimalist art was seen and discussed had shifted substantially.

Unsurprisingly, art historians have long shown interest in the essay's intellectual patrimony. Morris was an ambitious reader, and as Maurice Berger points out, a list of the sources on which he drew in the 1960s and early 1970s would include names as diverse

as Peirce, Piaget, Lévi-Strauss, and Wittgenstein.⁴ "Notes on Sculpture" is fully typical of this catholic attitude. Part 1 opens, for example, with an epigram drawn from Goethe and then soon turns to ideas drawn from George Kubler and Erwin Panofsky. José Ortega y Gasset and Anton Ehrenzweig are quoted in Part 4. But perhaps most famously, the essay draws openly and repeatedly on gestalt theory, which Morris had encountered while an undergraduate at Reed College, and on phenomenology (and especially on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], which had first been translated into English in 1962). No doubt, as Berger puts it, Morris's philosophical sources were broad.

In this article, I would like to posit a further possible source—or, better, a further affiliation or element—in what was often termed, at the time, a general sensibility. In 1960, Leo Steinberg joined the faculty at Hunter College. His students soon included Morris, who entered Hunter in 1961 as a candidate for a master's degree in art history (he would eventually complete, in 1966, a thesis on Constantin Brancusi).⁵ Morris turned thirty in 1961 and was then, in Berger's phrasing, a "little-known artist and performer."⁶ Steinberg, meanwhile, was a relatively established art critic (he had written for *ARTS* since 1955) and a promising historian of Italian Baroque art; his 1960 dissertation was a formal and iconological

study of Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, and he had published in 1959, while still a graduate student, an article in the *Art Bulletin* on the Cerasi Chapel.⁷

That 1959 article, in retrospect, is a remarkable piece of art-historical thought. While earlier art historians had occasionally considered (especially in analyses of Renaissance perspective and discussions of sculpture) the implied position or viewing angle of the observer, Steinberg carried such an analysis to a degree that was arguably unprecedented.⁸ Throughout, he proposed a basic and essential connection between the effect of the chapel and an embodied viewer. Indeed, he wrote, even as we stand outside the chapel, various occluded elements force us to anticipate or to think in terms of likely forms—a miniature Latin-cross church, in this instance. In turn, as we walk toward the altar, we see the angled sculpted heads of the Cerasi, which pivot toward the altar and thus invite us “to participate in an act of worship which enacts itself in his own proper ambience.” Subsequently, he argued, we then sense other (formal, spatial, and narrative) correspondences; the two paintings by Caravaggio, for instance, seem to be lit by the heaven that is rendered in the oval dome above. And, finally, we realize that the very angle from which we see the paintings is fundamentally significant:

They are so placed that they are strafed by our glance even before we have entered the chapel. From the line of the balustrade under the entrance arch, they are both clearly visible, thanks to the narrowing span of the choir and the wide-angle vision of normal binocular sight. . . . We pass into the chapel as far as the triumphal arch of the choir—the limit, I believe, of our expected ap-

proach—and we still see the paintings obliquely. And at this angle of vision, avoiding the perpendicular confrontation, the placing of the bodies of Peter and Paul undergoes a marked change of meaning.⁹

What is that change? Steinberg was specific. Seen from such a particular (and strictly delimited) angle, the axes of the paintings read as extensions of our own sight lines. Their foreshortenings, in other words, are due “wholly to our standpoint and distance,”¹⁰ and, consequently, we are implicitly involved in, or related to, the events depicted on the walls of the chapel. The chapel thus assumed, Steinberg concluded, a vital place in the Baroque turn toward more active engagements of the spectator.

Written well before most art historians showed anything more than a passing interest in the embodied viewer (or, more broadly, in what would eventually be called reception theory), Steinberg's piece feels prescient. But it is also predictive in a more local sense, for it closely anticipates some of the themes and interests of Morris's “Notes on Sculpture.” Indeed, Morris's assertion that “the better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision” virtually echoes Steinberg's reading of the chapel as a site in which meaning is generated through spatial relations, correspondences in lighting, and our “binocular wide-angle vision.”¹¹

But the correspondences between the two writings are not merely general; they are also precise. Both, for instance, accent the viewer's sense of formal anticipation—that is, our tendency to predict, when our angle of vision is restricted, the apparent or expected form of a viewed object. Steinberg

describes our initial sense of the chapel's form like this: "Beyond these piers lies the anteroom, a rectangular chamber—for the present of indeterminate width, since its recessed side walls have not yet come into view."¹² We thus perceive the rectangularity of the chapel even before we have actually seen its limits. A few sentences later, he extends the idea: "Standing at a short distance from the chapel . . . we are asked to imagine a miniature Latin-cross church, complete with transept, domed crossing, and choir." Once again, we imagine or envision a form, despite our limited visual access to it. Or, as Morris would put it in Part 1 of his "Notes": "One sees and immediately 'believes' that the pattern within one's mind corresponds to the existential fact of the object."¹³ Indeed, this sense of visual expectation deeply intrigued Morris. In Part 3 of "Notes," he added that "we have no apprehension of the totality of an object other than what has been constructed from incidental views under various conditions."¹⁴ Admittedly, Morris's interest was grounded explicitly in gestalt theory, an approach that is never explicitly mentioned in Steinberg's essay. Nevertheless, both authors hold that when we see art from a restricted vantage point, we are able to discern or anticipate forms on the basis of what we already know or expect.

At the same time, however, the two writers also evince an obvious interest in the ambulatory viewer and in an art that gradually reveals itself. Steinberg, first: "The spectator's mobility and intrusive participation," he argues, "is permitted and sought." As we advance, the perceived shape of the chapel evolves. "The simple space of the chapel," wrote Steinberg, "grows restive." And our very sense of the nave as nave—as a longitudinal axis—"is supplied by the visitor's

motion, his sense of direction and focus."¹⁵

Morris, in turn, had something similar to say about certain recent sculptural works. "It is the viewer," he averred, "who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work." And, further, "One's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships."¹⁶ Such an idea was, of course, part of what alarmed Michael Fried, who perceptively observed in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" that to experience Morris's work is to experience "an object *in a situation*—one which, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*."¹⁷ But that aspect was hardly unique to Morris or to Minimalism in general. After all, Steinberg had made a remarkably similar point in 1959. "The intended illusion," Steinberg claimed in a brief aside regarding an altarpiece painted four years before Caravaggio's panels, "though staked across a short distance and without the tragic dimension, is precisely that of an aesthetic space which includes us."¹⁸

The two essays overlap provocatively in other ways as well. Both Steinberg and Morris employ the term *actuality* in articulating the contrast between a viewer's sense of a static, absolute form that exists in a tension with the perceived artwork.¹⁹ Both mention binocular vision as an important factor in the viewer's perception of the artwork.²⁰ And then, too, there is the fact that Morris refers to Baroque sculpture and sentiment at two points in his "Notes."²¹ To be sure, his notion of Baroque visual culture is hardly identical to Steinberg's (and, in fact, Morris forcefully contrasts a typical Baroque bronze sculpture, with its irregular form, with contemporary sculptures that assume more predictable forms). But it does seem clear that

Morris was thinking, in writing “Notes,” art-historically—and, specifically, of the very period addressed by Steinberg in his article.

If we are willing to admit common ground here, though, how might we understand or explain it? Might Morris have read, while a student in Steinberg’s seminar, his instructor’s essay on the Cerasi Chapel? Perhaps. But in a recent e-mail, Morris in fact claimed that he had no memory of reading the article. Might we posit, then, a more informal course of influence—the young instructor referring at some point, in class, to his only published art-historical essay? Perhaps. But, again, there is no hard evidence for such a claim: the conversations held in the Hunter College classroom were, of course, ephemeral and can be re-created only sketchily and in part. And yet, even at a distance of half a century, Morris recalls Steinberg’s interest, in that classroom, in the embodied viewer. “Leo very often demonstrated,” Morris recently told me, “the contorted body positions of Michelangelo’s sculpture by striking the poses himself in front of the class.” And while Morris did not always admire Steinberg’s approach (which he has characterized as narcissistic), he did in fact go on to paraphrase his former instructor approvingly in

his 1973 essay “Splashes in the Ebb Tide.”²²

Influence, then, can be indirect or complex—as Harold Bloom’s attentiveness to creative misreadings reminds us.²³ But perhaps it is not even necessary here to speak of influence. In her widely read 1965 *Art in America* essay “ABC Art,” Barbara Rose confidently spoke of an emerging attitude in the visual arts: “That a new sensibility has announced itself is clear, although just what it consists of is not.”²⁴ Morris, in turn, opened “Notes on Sculpture” by referring to, and generally endorsing, Rose’s claim and then sought to articulate what constituted that new sensibility. Might Steinberg’s ideas have contributed to it? In a recent book, Robert Stecker contends that Steinberg’s analysis of contemporary art and its public (in an essay in *Harper’s* in 1962) broadly corresponded to Morris’s infamous statement of aesthetic withdrawal (in *Document*, a 1962 piece).²⁵ In the points of contact between Steinberg’s discussion of the Cerasi Chapel and Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” we can see a further and still more specific correspondence—a further illustration, in other words, of an emerging sensibility alert to the importance of the embodied, perceiving viewer.

NOTES

I am grateful to Mónica Amor and Robert Hobbs for their perceptive readings of, and suggestions regarding, a draft of this article. All shortcomings, of course, remain my responsibility.

1. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (Feb. 1966):42–44, esp. 43.

2. *Ibid.*; *id.*, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (Oct. 1966):20–23; *id.*, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 3: Notes and Nonsequiturs,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10

(June 1967):24–29; *id.*, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects,” *Artforum* 7, no. 8 (Apr. 1969):50–54. The essays were subsequently republished, with minor revisions, in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

3. James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 166.

4. Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris,*

Minimalism, and the 1960s (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 6.

5. In a personal e-mail (24 Mar. 2013) to the author, Morris recalled his experiences with Steinberg: "I was in a graduate seminar at Hunter College with Leo Steinberg sometime in the early '60s (don't recall the exact year)." Unfortunately, the Hunter College Office of Records, Office of the Registrar, and Department of Art have each failed to respond to my repeated requests for specific information about the exact date and title of the course.

6. Berger, p. 1.

7. Leo Steinberg, "San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane: A Study in Multiple Form and Architectural Symbolism" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1960); *id.*, "Observations in the Cerasi Chapel," *Art Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (June 1959):183–190.

8. Among the most influential discussions of Renaissance perspective in relation to the role of the viewer were Erwin Panofsky's "Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form,'" in Fritz Saxl, ed., *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1924–1925* (Leipzig: 1927), pp. 259–330; and John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957). Also relevant here are the writings of Richard Krautheimer, with whom Steinberg worked closely while a graduate student and whose *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956) includes several explicit references to the position of the onlooker, and H. W. Janson's *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). In a 1958 review, Steinberg wrote that "as the pages are turned, the camera walks us slowly around every free-standing sculpture; the image repeats with those slight shifts of angle which perpetually recast its silhouette, imposing thereby the integrity of an unhurried, pondered contemplation"; Leo Steinberg, "Professor Janson's Donatello," *ARTS* 32, no. 9 (June 1958):41–43, 61, esp. 43.

9. Steinberg, "Observations," 186. The preceding quotations appear on 183 and 184.

10. *Ibid.*, 186.

11. Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," 21; Steinberg, "Observations," 190.

12. Steinberg, "Observations," 183.

13. Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 44.

14. *Id.*, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3," 25.

15. Steinberg, "Observations," 183, 184, and 190.

16. Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," 21.

17. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967):12–23, esp. 15.

18. Steinberg, "Observations," 189.

19. *Ibid.*, 186: "We pass into the chapel as far as the triumphal arch of the choir—the limit, I believe, of our expected approach—and we still see the paintings obliquely. . . . And the terrible actuality of these paintings no longer resides in them alone, but invests our relation to them, which is never ideal, geometric, and neat, but in disorderly flux." And Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," 23: "The constant shape of the cube held in the mind, but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing perspective views are related." Admittedly, the term also recurs in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, a fact that may help to explain Morris's use of the word.

20. Steinberg, "Observations," 186 and 190; Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 44.

21. Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," 21; *id.*, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3," 25.

22. *Id.*, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, pp. 130–131. All other views attributed to Morris in this paragraph are taken from an e-mail to the author, 24 Mar. 2013.

23. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

24. Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," *Art in America* 53, no. 5 (Oct.–Nov. 1965):57–69, esp. 57.

25. Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 15.