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Defining Maximalism: Understanding Minimalism

Patrick Templeton

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Over the past decade the term maximalism has emerged in architectural publications with vague and assumed significance that has never been fully explored. As both a reflection, developing a critical understanding of the concerns and implications of minimalism, and a projection toward the possibility of maximalism in architecture, this research fills this gap in critical discourse. By addressing minimalism and maximalism as adjacent ideas, this research arrives at an understanding beyond what has proliferated as the unfortunate and superficial application of the terms, used not only by architects and scholars, but by bloggers and journalists contributing to the aesthetic discourse over the past decade. With a lack of theoretical rigor, minimalist architecture has come to connote little more than the prominence of smooth white surfaces turned to lustrous enamel in glossy photos. The investigation into the history of minimalism, in both art and architecture, reveals that an acute spatial consciousness and an aspiration toward the essential were central themes. In terms of signification, content was reduced until only the clarity of presence in physical space could be conveyed. It was a movement deeply tied to the modernist ethos of its era, striving for purity and apparent objective truths.

Maximalism as a theoretical construct, detached from the formal opulence of *complex* contemporary architecture, is positioned opposite the idea of minimalism. It represents an extreme complexity that obfuscates all significations blurring even the fundamental distinctions between what is literally present and merely illusion. As minimalism diminished content to an essential state, aspiring for a sublime purity, maximalism compounds content creating a condition in which meaning cannot contend with extreme complexity. Maximalism rescinds the clarity of form through a totalizing deluge of content.

Though minimalism and maximalism are linguistically opposites, they are close in the sense that both establish totalizing asinificant experiences that challenge perception and distance the subject. This inimical relationship with the subject highlights the adjacent similarities and differences between the two ideas. Minimalism, achieved through a reduction to silence, creates a sublime void, in which the subject is disengaged from the purely opaque object. Maximalism however, is the inundation of totalizing noise, a deluge that provokes apprehension but denies conception.

Presented in three parts, this thesis explores the theoretical foundations of minimalism and establishes a definition of maximalism. The first section explores the history of minimalism, to discover its concerns as an aesthetic of essentialism, presence, and an austere disengagement with the subject. Developed in parallel to these ideas, the second section defines maximalism as an aesthetic of irreducible complexity, ambivalence, ethereality, and an inimical re-engagement with the subject. The third section brings the two ideas together to investigate the sublime condition created when signs are no longer able to signify and meaning emerges as an ascription from the subject when confronting the void created by a negated perceptive relationship.

Defining Maximalism: Understanding Minimalism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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Patrick A. Templeton

Thesis Committee:

David Buege,

Dr. Ethel Goodstein-Murphree

Dr. Alissa Walls

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Index

Introduction – Defining Maximalism: Understanding Minimalism	1
Part I – Minimalism	6
Literalness	13
Presence	17
Part II – Maximalism	21
Ambivalence	24
Engagement	31
The Possibility of Maximalist Architecture	34
Part III – Experiencing the Void	38
Silence	41
Noise	46
Conclusion – Toward Maximalism	49
Bibliography	52
Notes	54

Introduction

Defining Maximalism, Understanding Minimalism

Over the past decade the term maximalism has emerged in architectural publications with vague and assumed significance that has never been fully explored. Barcelona architect Aurora Cuito has written on the subject of maximalist architecture in *minimalism MAXIMALISM* contributing a catalogue of labeled buildings but little more toward a definition of the term than that.¹ In her book, Cuito collected contemporary architectural works labeled as maximalist on one page in direct comparison with works labeled minimalist on the corresponding page. The little text sparsely interspersed among images of the buildings does nothing to illuminate the criteria or process by which these buildings were deemed relevant to either title. In the introduction Cuito identifies some characteristics of maximalism suggested by the name including a “new extremist style” and a propensity toward complex eclecticism.² This idea of complexity, which may be inferred instantaneously from the term maximalism alone, provides neither an exhaustive nor a meaningful definition. Cuito is not alone in using the term without providing any meaningful explanation of its relevance. It is an oversight that has become so severe that over the past decade that numerous authors have used the term superficially in the titles of their books, essays, and articles without even mentioning the term again. To use the term with any degree of confidence requires exploration of maximalism to more clearly establish the range of its concerns.

Beyond the problem of adopting the new and undefined term maximalism, many, if not all of the architects, scholars, artists, bloggers, and journalists who have taken up the label have placed it in a direct dialectical relationship with minimalism. Variations of *Minimalism*, *Maximalism and Everything In Between*³, *From Minimalism to Maximalism*⁴, *Minimalism and*

*Maximalism*⁵, or *To Be Minimalist... or Maximalist*⁶ are ubiquitously used as titles while what binds the two in this assumed opposition has never been sufficiently explored or justified. Though the two terms are linguistically opposite, it seems dubious to immediately accept that maximalism, which has been proposed as an emerging and contemporary aesthetic, would be responding to a historic art movement from the 1960's. The connection would anachronistically cut across half a century, including the succession from modernity to postmodernity into contemporaneity. For Cuito the connection to minimalism is not so far reaching, pointing instead to the resurgence of minimalist architecture in the 1990's, where the pursuit of "simplicity became a fashion, and shades of white, right angles and subtlety as a design strategy were exploited to the hilt."⁷ Assuming the title of minimalists, architects such as John Pawson, Tadao Ando, and Alberto Campo Baeza came to prominence as a welcomed "respite following the opulence of postmodernism and deconstructivism."⁸ Their architecture pursued a stylized aesthetic simplicity that mimicked the reductivist art of minimalist sculptors. While this architecture adopted the name of its precedent (minimalism) it did not necessarily pursue the same exigencies and ambitions. Too often the similarity exists as a shared propensity for smooth surfaces and rigid unarticulated forms. This understanding of architectural minimalism served Cuito's cataloguing well, as it avoids the critical implications and the legacy of the term instead focusing on the prominence of white paint.

Assuming that the ideas are as close as their linguistic proximity suggests, constructing a definition for maximalism upon that of what has been deemed the minimalist architecture of the 1990's does not pose a promising foundation. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to the origin of minimalism; the art movement of the 1960's, to glean an understanding of the concerns and attributes, which form a principle set of criteria for the discussion of maximalism. A meaningful

theoretical framework for maximalism rooted in the concerns of minimalism may still illuminate aspects of contemporary architecture; however, this research does not attempt to clarify an existing contemporary style but to explore the possibility of maximalism through a deeper understanding of minimalism. It is simultaneously a consideration and projection of architecture explored through the dialectic between minimalism and maximalism.

The painter and scholar Allen Leepa characterized minimalism as art in which, “clarity is maximal; the means used are minimal.”⁹ The reciprocal logic of this rhetoric describes an inverse relationship between clarity and content. The term clarity characterizes a sign’s ability to efficiently signify. Clarity, or the unhindered conception of meaning, emerges as content is simplified to what is essential. The term minimalism suggests a radical end to this reductive process toward a pure simplicity of content. When pushed to this extreme, purest simplicity is achieved by reduction to silence. Here the term clarity no longer serves as a sufficient description; because, at this degree, where signification is minimized to an absence of meaning, there is very little or nothing left to be signified. Indeed, many of the progenitors of minimalism had this transcendental simplicity in mind; wanting to create art that is wholly literal and free from signification. Disinterested in conveying meaning, and in fact opposed to it, minimalists concerned themselves with the essentialist aspects of their work, and spatial presence and objecthood became prominent ideas. Minimalist art, in this regard, surpassed the implications found in the unfortunate and inadequate use of the term in architecture today as a description of anything aesthetically reserved.

Reordering Leepa’s observation about minimalism, to suggest that clarity is minimal and the means used are maximal, provides the basis for a reciprocal definition of maximalism. As minimalism reduced content to an essential simplicity toward achieving a condition of silence,

maximalism inflates content toward a condition of utter chaos. In contrast to essentialist simplicity, complexity arises to underpin maximalism with a complexity that reaches a critical level at which it becomes irreducible. This complexity is therefore invariably associated with multiplicity. An irreducible multiplicity, negating the possibility of simplification, cannot be compounded into a singular unit (*unité*).¹⁰ Fully maximized, complex multiplicity can become the chaos of totalizing noise, which provides no significance. Neither discernible as a whole nor as discrete parts, radical complexity questions the legibility of presence and objecthood challenging meaning in its most primal form.

In terms of signification, the simplicity of minimalism and the complexity of maximalism achieve similar ends. Though they occupy the extremes of a spectrum and would typically be understood as opposites, they are more precisely described as adjacent ideas, having enough resemblance to be interconnected, yet differences enough to be at odds. As with many dialectics, these terms are in fact remarkably close, because silence and noise are both asignificant conditions; the former is one of absence while the latter is one of inundation. Whether minimized to the point of reticence in its simplicity or maximized to recondite complexity, an object at either end of this spectrum has lost the capacity to signify.

More than the ability to signify has been lost when a sign approaches the condition of either minimal simplicity or maximal complexity. When an object is asignificant, it is also asubjective. Removed from the transmissive relationship with the subject, an object, which can no longer be considered a sign, disengages from the subject creating a void between the two. Linguistic philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe this void as a dissonance in which a thing “ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world,” becoming the primary experience of the asignifying sign, whether it is

replete or austere.¹¹ The imagination, as a mechanism of conception, attempts to fill this void with extraneous meanings. These meanings project from the subject into the unbridged void as they are no longer provided by signs. This attempt to conceive where there is nothing to comprehend is experienced as a disequilibrium between subject and object, which represents a form of the sublime. This hermeneutic sublime occurs when the subject confronts indeterminate signs that yield an absence of meaning.¹² This asignifying and sublime condition is at the core of minimalism. Conversely, an escalation to totalizing complexity is maximalism.

Presented in three parts, this thesis will explore the theoretical foundations of minimalism and establish a definition of maximalism. The first section explores the history of minimalism, to discover its concerns as an aesthetic of essentialism, presence, and an austere disengagement with the subject. Developed in parallel to these ideas, the second section defines maximalism as an aesthetic of irreducible complexity, ambivalence, ethereality, and an inimical re-engagement with the subject. The third section brings the two ideas together to investigate the sublime condition created when signs are no longer able to signify and meaning emerges as an ascription from the subject when confronting the void created by a negated perceptive relationship.

Part I

Minimalism

Coined to recognize a wide range of twentieth century sculpture, painting, literature, music, and architecture, the term minimalism came to characterize an aesthetic that, as art historian Edward Strickland described it, “Makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible, resources, an art that eschews abundance of composition detail, opulence of texture, and complexity of structure.”¹³ In architecture the term was not widely recognized until the mid-1990’s when architects such as John Pawson, Tadao Ando, and Alberto Campo Baeza adopted the name from the minimalist art movement to describe their aesthetically reserved work. The term originally came to prominence in 1963 as artists Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Robert Morris displayed geometrically reductive sculptures that pronounced their self-sufficiency and literal presence in the space of the Green Gallery in New York City. These three artists, each working within their unique idiom, shared a primary concern with the clear presence of art objects in real space, unburdened by inessential content. The extreme reduction they explored diminished their art’s capacity to signify any meanings beyond mere objecthood. With content abated to a level of pure essentialism and meaning drastically diminished, these minimalist artists established a new relationship between subject and object characterized by extreme austerity.

In December 1963, Judd composed an exhibit of simple box floor pieces made of wood painted cadmium red and subdivided by a sheet of purple Plexiglas (fig 1). Judd explained that the bold colors accentuated the objects’ crisp edges.¹⁴ This exhibit marked Judd’s turning away from painting toward the creation of simple three-dimensional objects.¹⁵ This shift evolved from “Judd’s distrust of illusion, his almost ethical rejection of anything that was not concrete.”¹⁶ This

literalist, objective ethos resonated with minimalist artists and architects whose work followed his.

In November 1964, Dan Flavin displayed his iconic fluorescent lights on the walls, on the floor, and in the corners of the Green Gallery. While the phenomenological aspect of Flavin's work is not to be underestimated, the relationship between his "color sticks" and the space around it was paramount.¹⁷ Just as the sculptures sat on the ground or extend from the walls bridged corners, made frames, and occupied space in the gallery, the emanating light filled a space around the object as a halo that delimited the affected boundaries of the work. Unlike contemporaneous artists such as James Turrell who painted and explored sculpting with light, Flavin's work was preoccupied with the "color sticks" presence in the gallery space.

Robert Morris installed two similar series in the Green Gallery in 1964-5. Each was an array of large, innocuous, grey masses arranged in the space (fig. 2). The show in 1964 consisted of an array of grey polyhedrons; a plane was suspended from the ceiling, one rectangle spanned the corner, one with a chamfered edge ran down the center of the space, and another L-shape leaned against the wall, forming a boxed arch. Attempting to transcend the fetishization of objects, Morris advocated for sculptures composed of simple polyhedrons that reveal shape as shape and nothing more.¹⁸ Therefore, unlike the slick and refined boxes of Judd's object-centered installation or Flavin's captivating lights, Morris's project was clearly preoccupied with the relationship of objects in the literal space of the subject in an almost didactic way, in which the sculpture, having been reduced to primary shapes, is secondary to the simple reality of its presence within the space; its condition of *thereness*. All three installations in the Green Gallery demonstrate a new consciousness of objects situated within physical space. These sculptors' interests verged on the architectural as the dialectic between object and space became paramount.

Though these prominent sculptors dominated most critical discussions during minimalism's formative years, the acute awareness of presence and space was not limited to minimalist sculpture. In painting, minimalism was characterized by the seemingly blatant pronouncement that the art exists as an object affixed to a wall. According to art and architecture historian Mark Linder, the minimalist painters' intention was to, "force the viewer to encounter the picture as first of all a flat object," and during this era, painters seemed to revel in the flatness of their work by revealing as much raw, unaltered canvas as possible.¹⁹ This may seem antithetical to the three-dimensional determination of contemporaneous sculptors. However, though paint is generally a two-dimensional medium, a

painter such as Robert Ryman viewed this as only one aspect of the medium. Just as the minimalist sculptors situated their work within the space of the gallery, Robert Ryman filled the two-dimensional field of the canvas. Ryman "conceived of the paper [canvas] as not an empty screen onto which an image could be projected but as a concrete object with qualities of its own: a front, back, determinate thickness, and permeability to ink [paint]."²⁰ The canvas itself is an object affixed to the wall, which exists within the literal space of the gallery. Ryman explored

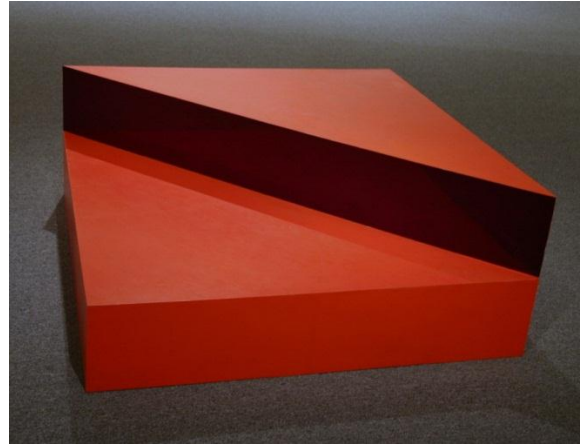


Figure 1 Donald Judd, "Untitled" Green Gallery installation, December 1963

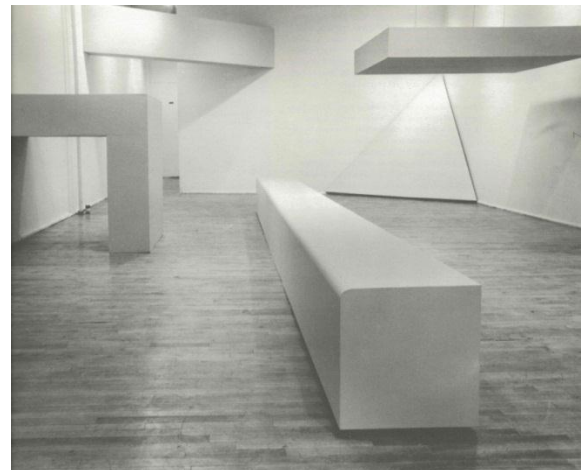


Figure 1 Robert Morris, "Untitled" Green Gallery installation, 1964

this idea by challenging the convention of the hung painting. In 1983, Ryman fastened his, by then iconic, minimalist white paintings to the wall with industrial bolts that allowed for a narrow gap between the wall and canvas transforming the painting into a redundant wall surface. In his work entitled *Pace* (fig 3), Ryman attached his work perpendicular to the wall surface supported by two thin metal rods, transforming the painting into a tabula rasa protruding from the wall. This re-conceptualization of the traditional role of painting from wall furniture into an object with presence and only a coincidental relationship to



Figure 3 Robert Ryman "Pace," 1984 wood, aluminum, fiberglass

the wall surface echoes the expansion of art, unburdened by anything deemed inessential, projected into the same physical space that the sculptors of that era were exploring.

Artists operating within the minimalist era were not only concerned with the presence of their work in the literal, architectural space of the gallery, but with how their work could define space. This was generally accomplished by the creation of a “distinct and undifferentiated holism or all-over pattern: the field and/or the grid or other regularized geometrical schemes.”²¹ While Ryman’s canvases were transformed from the medium of paint into a spatial field, Carl Andre explored how his sculpture could transform the ground into distinct fields within the space of the gallery. This exploration in ways of defining space blurred sculpture and architecture, because as architect and artist Tony Smith described it, “Architecture has to do with space and light, not

with form; that's sculpture."²² In the numerous tiled floor pieces, Andre installed a flat sheet of material onto the gallery floor (fig 4). These pieces were not roped off, and viewers were invited to walk on them. In Andre's work the art object was made into the simple



Figure 4 Carl Andre "Altstadt Copper Square," 1967

differentiation in floor surface that causes the "theatrical activation of the space around the work."²³ The exploration not only of presence but of an object's ability to delimit and transform space is prominent in the work of many other minimalist sculptors. Donald Judd often explored the serial repetition of similar



Figure 5 Donald Judd, "100 Untitled Works in Milled Aluminum," 1982-1986 Marfa Texas

objects that established a field or delimited the space of the work. Acting in conjunction with his establishment of a holistic field through undifferentiated repetition, Judd often constructed frames, and attached them to the wall or set them on the ground to create an interior and exterior space to the work (fig 5). In his repurposed aircraft hangar in Marfa, Texas, Judd installed a series of square metal frames that fill and reinvent the space. Through not only the engagement with literal space but also the delimitation of holistic fields, minimalist artists such as Judd and Andre challenged the defining and conceptual differences between art and architecture.

Though minimalist art engaged physical space and thus encroached on the ideas of architecture, the term did not enter the sphere of architectural discourse until the mid-1990's, when the minimalist aesthetic was seen as a welcomed respite from the excesses of 1980's historicist architecture and the formally opulent deconstructivist movement. However, its concerns have their roots in such early modernists as Ludwig Mies van Der Rohe, whose often quoted motto "less is more," became the mantra of the minimalists that followed. According to architect Franco Bertoni in his book *Minimalist Architecture*, the German Pavilion in Barcelona (1929) marks the beginning of the Rohe's exploration into the "progressive dematerialization of architecture."²⁴ Similar to the geometrically reductive sculptures by Morris and Judd, minimalist architecture is characterized by its extreme austerity; however, unlike the sculptures preoccupation with objecthood, minimalist architecture's primary concern was with the definition of a lucid and universal space. The divide between art and architecture here is marked by the difference in creation of a minimalist object, exhibiting its literal presence in space, and the creation of a minimalist space. Embodying this new spatial consciousness, the pavilion delimits space through the minimal means of dark onyx partitions (fig. 6). Bertoni explains that these partitions do not capsuleize space but rather with incredible austerity and simplicity of form, "Indicate a limit beyond which lay 'interminable spaces,' 'superhuman silences,' [and] 'extraordinarily deep quiet'."²⁵ These themes evoked through the extreme minimization of anything but the essential in architecture recurs in Mies's work in projects such as his own home in South Tyrol (1934), the Farnsworth House (1951), and the New National Gallery in Berlin (1968).²⁶

These minimalist principles explored by figures such as Mies van der Rohe would continue to resonate and evolve in the work of successive architects, including those of the

International Style and the early work of architect Philip Johnson. In his iconic Glass House (1949), Johnson reduced architectural form to horizontal planes held by attenuated black columns and a monolithic cylinder. Johnson employed extreme austerity to establish a singular, ubiquitous, and unhindered space. Revising



Figure 6 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe "German Pavilion in Barcelona," 1929-30 (rebuilt in 1986)

Rohe's precept, architect Alberto Campo Baeza, working in the 1990's, pursued a paradigm of "mas con menos" (more with less).²⁷ This rephrasing is imperative as it marks a shift in concerns with what has adopted the name of minimalist architecture. Too often what qualifies recent architecture to be dubbed minimalist beyond a propensity for a reserved style is



Figure 7 Alberto Campo Baeza, "De Blas House" Sevilla la Nueva, Madrid, 2000

not apparent. However, the work from some of the new generation of minimalists such as Yoshio Taniguchi, Claudio Silverstrin, and Baeza is distinguished by its extreme formal austerity and purity of space punctuated only by the presence of light. While the dematerialization of architecture pursued by Mies may not be paramount, it certainly finds resonance in Baeza's work. In buildings such as De Blas House (2000), the Centre for Information Technology in Inca Majorca (1998), and the Gaspar House (1992), Baeza composes vast swaths of glass and pure

white surfaces emblazoned by crisp Mediterranean light that dematerializes the architecture and yields what Bertoni calls, “a sophisticated effect of metaphysical stillness (fig 7).”²⁸

The term minimalism may refer to a wide and diverse range of ideas and works by artists and architects during the twentieth century, but in principle it can be characterized by a few crucial aspects. Minimalism embodied a literalness in which objecthood emerged from the rejection of illusion and the unessential. This literalness provoked a preoccupation with spatiality as objects have presence in a minimal space. Through the expulsion of the unessential and the preoccupation with its own existence, the experience of minimalism is one of complete austerity, a sublime silence, and pure simplicity.

Literalness

You can look at clouds and see faces in the clouds, that kind of thing. That’s not really there; it’s just the imagination of the viewer. I don’t intend that. What the painting is, is exactly what they see...²⁹-Robert Ryman

It is no coincidence that minimalism increased concern with the primary condition of objecthood and spatial presence coincided with an unprecedented degree of formal austerity. The “severity of means, clarity of form, and simplicity of structure and texture” that distinguish the minimalist aesthetic were the necessary condition for creating art and architecture unhindered by meaning.³⁰ Donald Judd’s apprehension toward what he regarded as the spurious illusionism of painting led him toward geometrically primitive sculptures that blatantly pronounced their objective and literal presence in the gallery space. Morris echoed this disengagement with unessential meaning by asserting that, “The sculptural facts of space, light, and materials have

always functioned concretely and literally.”³¹ Similarly minimalist architect Alberto Campo Baeza describes his architectural project as a proposal for “an Essential Architecture of Idea, Light, and Space.”³² In this regard minimalism can be characterized as an essentialist ambition to absolve meaning and achieve a purity of object and space through a critical reduction of content.

Nearly two decades before the rise of minimalism in the 1960s, the tone of modernist art was cast as one of necessary reduction and essentialism by prominent art critic Clement Greenberg. In his pivotal work *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), Greenberg argued that art had entered into an era in which the “artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works.”³³ Symbols and references are elements under the larger umbrella of content, which encompasses all formal and figurative aspects of an artwork, including expression, imagery, and artistic volition. The response or the subjective reaction to content is defined as meaning. In semiotic terminology, artistic content is an objective signifier, while meaning is the subjective reception of the signified. Greenberg advocated for a pure and reductive art in which, “Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”³⁴ Greenberg used his critical influence to promote his idea of pure art that only involved content that was essential to the medium. Characterizing overt signification as *kitsch* and moribund, Greenberg argued that, “Subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”³⁵ With this theoretical position, Greenberg championed the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis whose paintings flattened composition and avoided figuration by reducing painting to the pure application of paint.

While Greenberg heavily criticized minimalism because he disagreed with the new sculptures’ overt engagement with physical space, minimalist artists certainly explored and

developed his essentialist paradigm. Gainsaying Greenberg's advocacy for painting, Judd argues that all paintings are illusionistic and imply a virtual space in-between and behind the paint. In his essay *Specific Objects* (1964), Judd argues that "Anything on a surface has space behind it."³⁶ For Judd, even pure color-field paintings were insufficient, because the paint references the shape of the canvas, which in turn references the wall. The illusion, rather the *meaning* of implied space, which Judd viewed as an inevitable condition of painting, lead him to unabashedly reject painting as a dead medium for the literalness of minimalist sculpture. Judd's position is more than the rejection of painting; it represents the minimalist preoccupation with abandoning content that evokes any meaning other than the literal presence of the work. If Judd was unable to accept painting because of the conceptual space it suggests, than narrative or authorial meanings were completely unfathomable.

Where Judd saw a medium trapped in inescapable illusionism, painter Robert Ryman saw the opportunity to explore minimalist painting devoid of any content and only concerned with the pure application of pigment to surface. While Judd rejected painting for its paradoxical spatial flatness yet illusionistic depth, Ryman embraced the three-dimensional object qualities of a painted surface. Following the Greenbergian paradigm and in concordance with Judd, Ryman rejected the idea of illusionary and allegorical content, focusing instead on the essential and objective realities of painting. In an interview Ryman characterized his work by saying, "I do something with the paint, but I'm not painting a picture of anything. I'm not manipulating the paint into an illusion of something other than what the paint does."³⁷

Minimalist artists were concerned with the absolution of narrative and authorial meanings in their work by reducing content to an essential and objective level. Anything besides the literal facts of the object is extraneous to the concerns of the minimalist. For sculptor Robert Morris

this idea translated into the immediacy of the gestalt. In his essay *Notes on Sculpture* (1966), Morris advocated for a sculpture of simple three dimensional shapes. He argued that when sculpture approaches the purity of the gestalt form, one is “released because of the exhaustion of information about it, as shape, and bound to it because it remains constant and indivisible.”³⁸ When content is as simple as mere and essential shape, even gestalt meaning is absolved through its immediate exhaustion. This represents a simplicity minimized beyond clarity. The minimalist object ceases to be a sign for any meaning as its own presence provokes only vapid recognition.

Like minimalist painting and sculpture, minimalist architecture negated meaning by reducing content to a simple essential state. Though the idea has transformed over the progressive manifestations of minimalism, the essential state of minimalist architecture remains the idea of pure unhindered space in which form serves fully yet subtly to delimit and define. Mies van der Rohe’s architecture is characterized by its effect of dematerialization, achieved through the simplification of architectural content to a critical point where it becomes lost as it ceases to signify and its meanings are absolved. On an immediate level, structural elements are present as subtle objects within a space, yet they are not articulated to express, exaggerate, or understate their function. However, the reduction of architectural content was pursued to a further, critical degree. For example, the threshold, the architectural element that signifies the separation of space, was eliminated or reduced to a simple transparent plane of glass. As such, space became universal with no delimitation of interior or exterior. Without the architectural meaning of the threshold the subject is in an ambivalent space that is minimal and indiscriminant of where the architecture begins or ends. Minimalist architects distinguish themselves by creating not only austere forms but through reduction of architectural content, such as the threshold, to a critical degree, but by producing minimalist space. The dematerialization that

Mies approached was a centralization of unobstructed space. Just as the presence of object was paramount to the minimalist sculptors, the presence of absence, which is to say space, was the essential concern of minimalist architecture.

Presence

With the content of a work minimized to the critical point at which an object can provide no meaning other than to signify its own literal presence, the relationship between the subject and the object is no longer characterized by the transmission of meaning. Austerity creates a condition of, as art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss called it, “pure opacity.”³⁹ By expelling all content that was unessential to simple literal presence, minimalism can be said to be disengaged from the subject. In extreme simplicity, perception is relegated to the vapid recognition that the subject coexists in a space with the object. For this reason the aesthetic of minimalism has appealed to many architects because it transforms the subject-object relationship into a recognition of presence in space – the architectural medium.

In an attempt to make sense of minimalism’s expansion of art into the real spatial field of the gallery and to synthesize discussions started by artists Judd and Morris, art historian and critic Michael Fried, in his essay *Art and Objecthood*, established an analog to the dialectical relationship found in theatre – the actor and the audience. Fried mistakenly interpreted Robert Morris as claiming that because of sculpture’s newfound sense of presence that the subject was inextricably linked to the work, and that only the engaged experience of the subject validates the work. Fried claimed that, “Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually

by definition, includes the beholder.”⁴⁰ Identifying the objects in a situation or in space, Fried claimed that the body engages the work by walking around the objects and apprehending it from multiple points of view. However, focus on the body’s interaction with objects in space as a form of theatre in which, the active subject is prominent in the unilateral art experience, does not address the broken transmissive relationship between the austere object minimized to the point of asignification. While minimalism did engage the literal space of the subject, it made every effort to eschew perception, which represents a complete rejection of the subject.

If minimalism had a theatrical stage presence as Fried claimed, it certainly lacked any performance. Art historian James Meyer explained that, “Hostile viewers complained that the drastically reduced geometries of [minimalism] lacked complexity; that the visual experience of the work was impoverished.”⁴¹ Therefore, it seems dubious to analyze minimalism in terms of the subject’s engagement and comprehension of the object as Fried, because the painters and sculptors seemed uninterested, and in fact hostile, to entertaining anything apart from the literal *thereness* of the object or the processes of its production. With their dogged dedication to forms in space, there would seem to be no place for the subject, subjectivity, or perception in the artwork. For instance, Judd flatly rejected the idea that sculptures could even be an assemblage of constituent elements because, in his view, this caused the object to lose its wholeness and allowed for the possibility of anthropomorphism and empathy.⁴²

Pure simplicity that eschews content to the point of asignification negates the transmissive relationship between object and subject, which is replaced by the experience of mere presence in physical, architectural space. When discussing architecture, essentialism is not limited to the austerity of forms, but expanded to describe an emptiness of space, a pure absence. Bertoni characterizes minimalist space saying:

The emptiness itself, the extreme and difficult simplicity that characterizes minimalist architecture, in the process of stripping down and reducing the setting to the essential, is radically functional to the aim of shifting values away from the oppressively physical nature of self-referencing architecture to the immateriality of human actions.⁴³

Minimalist architecture disengages the subject to establish a simple space devoid of signs. In this minimalist space, the objectified subject recognizes its presence as the traditional subject-object dialectic becomes an experience of the silent void.

Many works of art and architecture that strive for refinement and are formally reserved are often described as minimal; however, the idea of minimalism represents something much more specific than mere visual simplicity. The term can no more be isolated to connote a single artistic moment in the 1960's than it can be applied to any contemporary building painted with a monochrome pallet. Instead the term minimalism should refer to its ideas, so that a reductive work may be said to be approaching the concept rather than being labeled. Minimalism describes an eschewance of everything that is not literal and unessential leaving an extreme simplicity that approaches a state of pure presence in space. Abandoning anything unnecessary, distracting, and misleading minimalism achieves clarity between object and space; it signifies only the plain distinction between what is presence and what is absence. Minimalism represents an essentialism that strives for a condition of wholeness not only of the singular discrete object but of an unobstructed universal space. Furthermore, minimalism creates a condition of radical austerity that denies the traditional role of signification. Minimalism reduces the experience of any meaning to the vapid and instantaneous recognition of presence. It isolates the work as purely opaque and disengaged from the subject creating a condition where the simple recognition of

one's coexistence with the object in space becomes paramount. In all, minimalism represents a radical simplicity at which any meaning beyond the most primal is lost through reduction to silence.

Part II

Maximalism

Over the past decade the term maximalism has been tossed around in architectural discourses as little more than a sensational tagline. Many of the authors and scholars do little but use the word as a catchy label, leaving the impression that maximalism connotes nothing more than a superficial visual complexity. It is a pervasive oversight and misuse that has spread widely; used not only among architects and scholars, but by bloggers and journalists to describe apparent complex and eclectic styles. For example, in a 2010 interview with *Vanity Fair*, writer Matt Tyrnauer and National Public Radio's Liane Hansen discussed trends in architecture revealed through a recent poll of prominent architects and scholars. The title of the radio broadcast was, "Minimalism, Maximalism and Everything In Between." Highlighting Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao, Tyrnauer indirectly implied that maximalism may be characterized by formal audaciousness. However, despite the intriguing title, the term maximalism was never mentioned directly and no attempt to cast light on the meaningless term was ever made.⁴⁴

Architectural writers have also fallen into the trap of shallow surface evaluation. Falling short of a definition, Barcelona architect and writer Aurora Cuito has offered an interesting description of maximalism as, "a new complex and eclectic modernity."⁴⁵ This suggests that maximalism is a modality of inclusiveness or of value in complex multiplicity, diverging from the Modernist ethos of essentialism and transcendental purity.

Though quick to publish the term, it remains rare to find an author who has committed any definition to maximalism. Often the reader must infer from glossy photographs how and why the term applies. A critical discourse delving into the implications of the term and its applicability to the discipline of architecture has been sorely missing. However, in some fields

like literature and music, scholars have made diligent efforts toward defining the term, and as such their work has been useful in clarifying a definition for maximalism in architecture.

By name alone, the term maximalism brings to mind an excessive degree of complexity. However, complexity alone does not warrant the name, as forms of complexity may be found in any work of art or architecture, even in those that appear visually reductive like minimalism. Therefore, it is better to speak of maximalism's complexity as an extreme visual incoherence among its content to the point that nothing can be isolated as a discrete thing, thus preventing the recognition of a whole, which develops from a reduction or compilation into singular *unité*. Maximalism represents a critical degree of complexity that is abstruse and irreducible. As the musician David Jaffe characterized it, maximalism connotes an aesthetic that, "Embraces heterogeneity and allows for complex systems of juxtaposition and collision."⁴⁶ Embedded in this description and in the complexity that the term maximalism infers, exists the idea of multiplicity; because, juxtapositions and collisions require the establishment and configuration of multiple parts. Furthermore, in approaching the radical degree of complexity necessary to be considered maximal, this configuration of multiple contents must negate any cohesion that would allow the work to be considered a discernible whole; it must resist reduction to the singular. Maximalism creates conditions in which complex multiplicities force a resistance to "the illusion that turns... object into an objective fact."⁴⁷ Anything capable of being reduced to a singular and discrete entity or brought together into a measurable *unité*, may not be described as maximal because any complexity it contains becomes secondary to the immediacy of its homogeneity and the coherence of its content. This extreme complexity produces a condition that challenges contents ability to signify. Maximalism's linguistically adjacent idea minimalism, approached a condition in which all authorial and narrative meanings were abated, and ontology was reduced

to the immediate recognition of the primitive gestalt revealed through severe austerity. Adjacent to the minimalist reductivism, maximalism denotes a condition in which meanings become insoluble as multiplicity and immense complexity obscure rather than reduce.

In this sense minimalism and maximalism define two ends of a spectrum, along which lie degrees of complexity and multiplicity ranging from the most simple to the eclectic. At the extremities of this spectrum the similar phenomena of absolution and obfuscation of authorial, narrative, and ontological meanings occur. With this spectrum defined, the ideas of minimalism and maximalism can be detached from the limitations encountered when the terms are reserved for describing artifacts that resemble and coincide with a specific style or movement. Instead of becoming canonized, the terms adopt directional properties pointing to the extremities of their spectrum, on which works may be described as approaching either idea.

Meaning may exist in a work taking many forms. Traditionally, narrative meaning has been a direct attribution to the work by the author to convey an idea through images. In more recent history authorial meaning and the expression of volition became prevalent. Both of these forms of meaning use the content of the work as signifiers, which refer to abstract ideas external to the objective condition. However, the idea of meaning may be extended to include an object's ability to signify itself. The gestalt is fundamental to the ontological processes; enabling a perceptive subject to comprehend of the work's objective properties: its spaces, forms, and patterns. It exists as the primary level of signification that deals in the seemingly blatant condition of objecthood - an object's ability to be recognized as a thing. The gestalt can be said to be the basic form of meaning because before a sign may transmit narrative or symbolic meanings, it must first be capable of signifying itself. Therefore gestalt meaning indicates the awareness of an object's discrete qualities, dimensions, and presence. The condition of

maximalism challenges the legibility of meaning on all of these levels. The immense complexity that comes with a lack of coherence in the multiplicity of contents obfuscates meaning so that a work ceases to signify to the point that even its own objective properties become elusive.

Ambivalence

“When the distinction between the figure and the background of the observed image is less evident, ambiguous structures appear. These perceptive experiences do not exist as real physical objects.”⁴⁸
-Cecil Balmond

The potential for maximalism exists within collage. The typical process requires decontextualizing content and through compilation the imbuing of new meanings that trace the origins of its decontextualized content. Though the multiplicity and complexity, which are essential to maximalism, may be present in this method of collage, they are secondary to the new synthesized meanings; the tumultuous whole yields to the immediacy of a singular gestalt. Maximalism avoids this condition as the complex collision of juxtaposing content creates a state of irreducibility. Therefore, capturing the idea that maximalism obfuscates authorial, narrative, and ontological meaning through complexity, a collage may operate only within the processes of de-contextualization and amalgamation. For maximalism a critical degree of multiplicity and a complex contrivance are necessary to dissolve the legacies of meaning held in the parts fully into the processes of collage. This mode of collage does not establish synthesized meanings but rather negates them through the hodgepodge complexity of content. Collage illuminates two aspects central to maximalism; one is the multiplicity of overabundance, in which there is simply too much and the other, the complexity of its configuration. These principles work together to achieve maximalism. However, neither the presence of multiplicities nor complexities alone

render a work maximal, rather maximalism is defined as the condition of recondite meaning that complex multiplicity achieves.

Though a maximal work may be definable by its multiplicity, it is not necessarily a matter of how much or how many. As such, the term multiplicity must be kept separate from the idea of multiple, which implies the idea of quantifiability, and suggests that something may be more or less maximal if it is composed of more or less constituent parts. This is not necessarily the case because maximalism connotes a specific condition, generated through the conflation of multiplicity and complexity of content, which obfuscates all meanings. Furthermore, the idea of multiplicity defies quantifiability; because the reduction of anything down to definable quantity represents an abatement to a singular idea – an amount. As such, the quality of multiplicity and complexity, not the quantity of content, yields maximalism.

When confronted with the question of whether his music on *Civilization Phase III* (1994) had become uncharacteristically New Age because of the compositional use of silent pauses and the long duration of notes in songs like *N-Light* and *Beat the Reaper*, musician Frank Zappa concisely dismissed the possibility with the pro-maximalist response that, “There’s too much going on in it.”⁴⁹ These two songs capture the idea of multiplicity in Zappa’s work. These songs are not necessarily too noisy per se nor too successive; rather, they are compositions overwrought with an abundance of eclectic and often eccentric noises from standard orchestral instruments, to industrial sounds, to belching. Coming in bursts, seemingly at random, the songs are heterogeneous collages of disparate noises that overlap and destabilize the self-sufficiency of their constituent parts. Furthermore, the noises do not come together to establish a distinct and identifiable whole. Nearly unable to be described as songs in a conventional sense, Zappa created these sound collages from ambivalent patterns and anonymous noises.

Zappa achieved the quality of maximalism through an array of many sounds; however, he accomplished the same condition using only two juxtaposing pieces. In the song *Rubber Shirt* Zappa used a technique called xenochrony, which layers two or more musicians playing different songs with different time signatures. Random bursts of noise and chaos yield no ascertainable time signature, melody, rhythm, etc. Though there may not be much in terms of variety of noises, the song still has “too much going on in it.”⁵⁰ Instead of the abundance of multiplicity, complexity yields the collisions of maximalism. In all of Zappa’s maximal music collages, no particular rhythm, melody, structure, or voice predominates. Therefore, the meaning of the music has been diminished by the contentious forces of its multiplicity and complexity. The irreducibility of Zappa’s maximalist collages represents a condition in which the subject is “forced to resist the illusion that turns musical object into an objective fact.”⁵¹ Or rather, unable to discern any singular condition other than incongruence and chaos itself, the subject cannot perceive any homogenizing or unifying aspect in the work.

Jason Rhodes shaped gallery installations with an eclectic vocabulary of found and consumer objects. He often used luminous neon text suspended in midair as part of chaotically arranged assemblages that make the signage on the Las Vegas strip seem tame (fig 8). His suspended words overlap creating a density and multivalence in which the individual signs become completely illegible. As the words become blurred in the complexity of the collage they lose the ability to clearly signify the meanings they carry. The collage exists as a collection of fragmented signifiers that fails to be either legible as discernible parts or recognizable as a definitive whole. This ambivalence created as the text loses its meaning through collision demonstrates a condition approaching maximalism that inhibits the capacity of a sign to reference external meanings. However, true multiplicity and complexity challenges a sign’s

capacity to signify in all senses.

Architecture operates not only within the capacity of a sign to signify external meanings associated with an object, but within the primal ability of a sign to signify its own presence. Therefore, a maximalist architecture creates a condition of ambivalence in which, along with the loss of any external meaning, the fundamental dialectic between object and void (presence and absence) is challenged; because a critical degree of complexity and multiplicity denies the capability of a sign to fully signify its own existence.

An early progenitor of environment art, Kurt Schwitters is best known for *The Merzbau*, a sculptural, architectural, and spatial assemblage (fig. 9). It is inaccurate to speak of the work as a singular fixed object or environment, because over its twenty year installation in six or more rooms of a family house in Hannover, Germany, Schwitters continuously added new bits and pieces. Falling victim to the war in 1943, all that remains are three “photographs that



Figure 8 Jason Rhodes "Tijuanatanjierchandelier" 2006

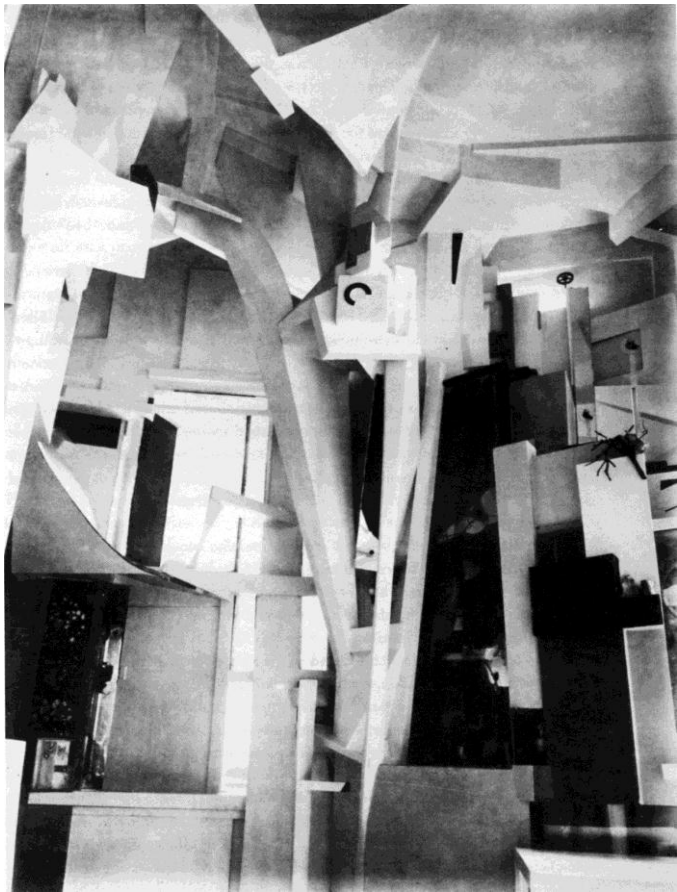


Figure 9 Kurt Schwitters, "The Merzbau" 1923-1943 Hannover, Germany

tantalize rather than confirm experience.”⁵² In the course of its morphology *The Merzbau* became a receptacle and referent for the ever inundating chaos of the metropolis. In work that was ahead of his time, Schwitters’s process was to incorporate random found objects, debris, and rubbish often painting them white, and reassembling them until ambiguous forms developed in the space of the house. Whitewashing the object was a decoupage technique to decontextualize the object. Its legacy as a relic was obliterated, and left only to be recounted in the artist’s statements. The continuous state of flux in which Schwitters operated only added to the ambiguities in the installation. At any given moment, the environment was renewed, giving way to the force of continual aggregation. Shaping new grottos, layering redundant surfaces, and revealing new thresholds, Schwitters assemblage formed an ever-changing multiplicity of forms and spaces. Furthermore, as it developed the magnitude of its complexities began to inhibit a reading of it as a whole or as a mere collection of distinguishable parts. The work entered into an ambivalent condition in which it can be reducible neither to the whole nor the parts. Therefore, the found objects, having already been reduced to mere forms, became indistinct, a condition in which meaning loses solvency at a critical degree of collision. In Schwitters’ words:

The juxtaposed surfaces give rise to forms twisting in every direction, spiraling upward. An arrangement of the most strictly geometrical cubes covers the whole, underneath which shapes are curiously bent or otherwise twisted until their complete dissolution is achieved.⁵³

The “complete dissolution” that Schwitters identified represents more than the concealment of parts within the chaos of the whole; it is the recognition that the work approached a condition of maximalism. Though Schwitters often ascribed a narrative of metropolitan chaos to the work, the forms themselves do not provide any explicit narrative or authorial presence. Irreducible to a

singular tumultuous whole, *The Merzbau* became more than the sum of its parts. Struggling to self-signify through layer upon layer of content, forms lost the immediacy of their independent gestalt. In this regard, the multivalence and complexity of the assemblage destabilizes the clarity of ontological meaning to the point that is lost. According to art historian Rudi Fuchs, “Schwitters was never fanatic about purity,” and was a renegade completely disinterested, in fact working against, the essentialism that characterized his time.⁵⁴ Schwitters operated within a modality of inclusiveness constructing an ever growing space of complexities.

Schwitters’s work moved into architectural territory by creating an environment and giving shape to spaces. More recently in 2011, architects Mark Foster Gage and Marc Clemenceau created a series of temporary store interiors for fashion designer Nicola Formichetti (fig 10). The organization of one particularly significant design is a simple configuration of faceted mirrors that create a prismatic cavern in the 1300 square foot store space.⁵⁵ However, the visual effect of this architectural decoupage is confounding. Like a house of mirrors the complexity generated by the phenomenon of infinite reflection distorts the literal delimitations of the space. Space appears virtually infinite and densely filled with crystalline fragmentations. The reflectivity denies any shadows, which would typically indicate depth and space. Therefore, though literally deep, the space appears optically flattened becoming an ambivalent condition that blurs the virtual and the literal. As a room for display filled with manikins that assume the role of the subject; the space defies scale, appearing simultaneously infinite yet flattened by its overwrought complexity. The manikins, the subject, appear to float in dense ether coexisting with an overabundance of content, unable to coherently signify its own gestalt properties. Though the design may only objectively consist of a limited number of facets, they are infinitely reflected to the extent that legibility is lost in the multiplicity, and the parts become

indistinguishable from one another, failing to either maintain their own legibility or establish a definable whole. Where Schwitters achieved dissolution of discrete and individually discernible objects in the tumult of the assemblage, Gage and Clemenceau created an ethereal and ambivalent condition in which objects become indistinguishable from their virtual reflection. It achieves a maximalist condition that challenges any certainty about what is present and what is merely reflection. The “walls” and “ceiling” reflect themselves until neither remains distinguishable from one another or from the specular image of itself. Though literally and tangibly definable, the



Figure 10 Gage and Clemenceau “Store for Nicola Formichetti” 2011, New York City



Figure 11 Gage and Clemenceau “Store for Nicola Formichetti” 2011, New York City

boundaries of the space become obscure; the edges of the facets are juxtaposed with its virtual counterparts to a point in which it cannot withstand the collision (fig 11). Failing to signify the truth of its objecthood, the architectural content loses its capacity to convey its ontological meaning, having lost individual sovereignty to chaos. Like Zappa’s technique of xenochrony, Gage and Clemenceau employed a simple process to achieve a critical degree of complexity and multiplicity that approaches maximalism.

Maximalist architecture therefore connotes a condition of ambivalence where forms and spaces dissolve into each other falling prey to the collisions and the juxtapositions of its content. United only in the chaos of its incoherency, both object and space, indistinguishable by their mutual dissolution, are irreducible by the idea of the singular part or whole. The primary distinctions between interior and exterior, open and closed that are the fundamental aspects of gestalt recognition are obfuscated through the complexity of both object and space. As multiplicities produce paradoxes, space becomes simultaneously infinite as the signifiers that reveal its limits dissolve, yet remains dense and filled with the deluge of content both literal and virtual. In this regard, maximalism challenges the primary recognition of what distinguishes presence from absence. The collage that produces maximalist architecture represents not just one of multiple objects, but of a blurring of space and object to the point that neither may clearly signify its own existence. It represents the extents of the capacity of signification. As work approaches a condition of maximalism it becomes asignificant through a multivalence that eschews the clarity of meaning. The resulting ambivalence is the symptom of the condition of radical complexity in which simple gestalt meaning, let alone narrative or authorial meanings, lose legibility as content becomes chaotic noise. In this condition that approaches asignificance the relationship with the subject comes into question as maximalism engages perception but negates conception.

Engagement

“By questioning the mechanisms of perception, we can open a debate about re-establishing the central role of the observer”⁵⁶ –Cecil Balmond

Through the abstraction of drawings, diagrams, or computation, architectural complexity may be reduced to a quantifiable condition. Maximalism’s collisions and juxtapositions may be

resolved and its resulting incomprehensible chaos may be reduced to an accessible whole. The conceptualization of maximalism through methods of abstraction effectively neutralizes all that characterizes it. Therefore, the experience of maximalism invests heavily in the properties and mechanisms of perception. Maximalism's extreme complexity engages visual perception to create an experience that confounds the subject and denies that anything other than its baffling ambiguities may be apprehended. This demonstrates a seemingly paradoxical condition in which maximalism relies on the perceptive subject in order to establish an experience that defies the subject's perception.

When examined through the abstraction of sectional and plan drawings (fig 12), Gage and Clemenceau's design for the Nicola Formichetti store interior become incredibly legible; the tessellated cavern-like space is clear and quantifiable. However, these quantitative tools of abstraction lack the capacity to capture the full complexity of the work. The disparity between the legibility of the drawings and the incomprehensibility of experience demonstrates maximalism's investment in the subject and the methods of perception. As such, it is not possible to separate the experience of the space from the phenomenon of reflection, which virtually extends the space infinitely, and by denying shadow, creates the illusion of flatness. The reflection that engages perception yet challenges the capacities of comprehension results in the ambivalence that characterizes this space. The space exists as simultaneously physical and illusion as perception loses the ability to distinguish immediately between material and specular content. However, through this confrontation with the subject's ability to comprehend, maximalism essentially centralizes the subject. Without the limitations of the subject's mechanisms of perception, the abstruse and recondite qualities that define maximalism would

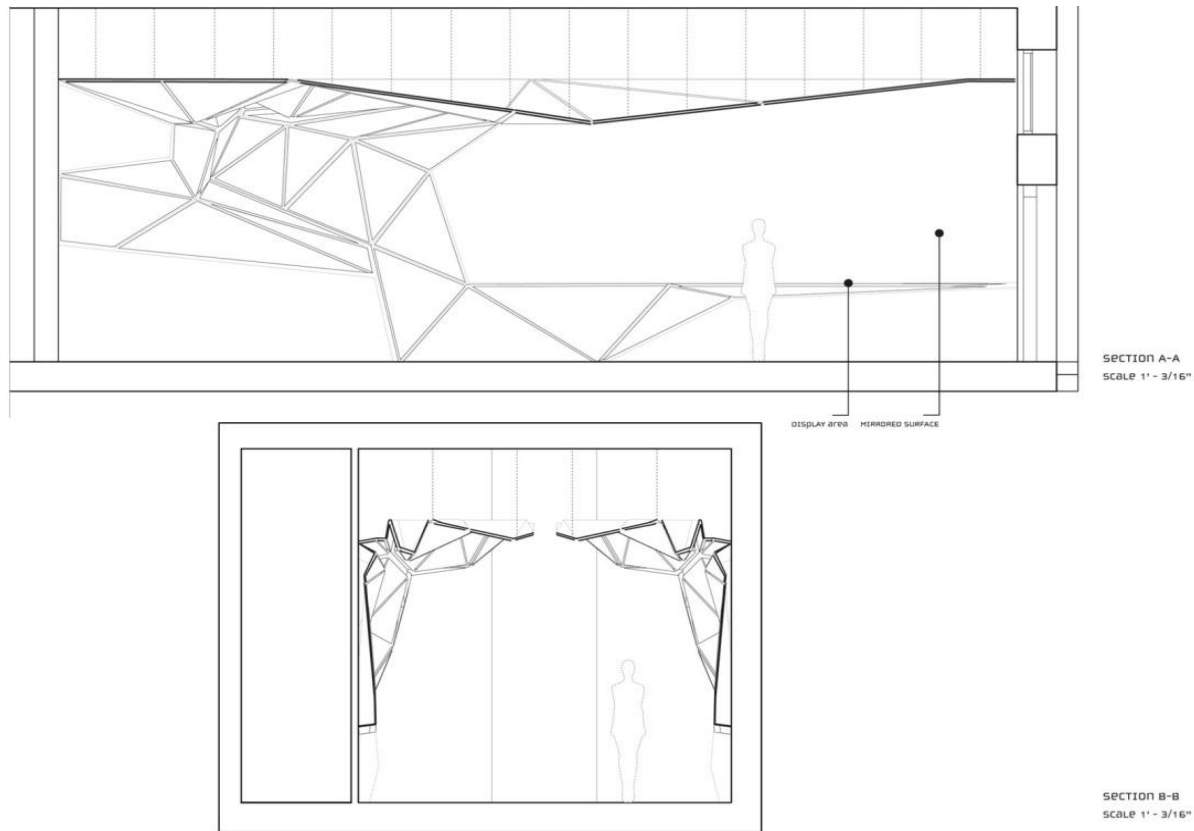


Figure 12 Gage and Clemenceau “Store for Nicola Formichetti” 2011, New York City, Sections

not exist. In this regard, maximalism can be characterized as an inimical form of engagement that, on the one hand, provokes apprehension, and, on the other, denies comprehension.

In 2012, Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno installed a large architectural folly called *Cloud City* on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It was composed of stacked polygonal frames with some sides filled in with mirrors and some left open as frames or enclosed with glass (fig 13). The subject experiences the work by climbing stairs from pod to pod. Like Gage and Clemenceau’s store interior, Saraceno’s installation uses the phenomena of reflection to blur the difference between what is frame and what is surface, what is space and what is image. Open to views outward, the space becomes a chaotic ricochet of images of the city, the sky, and the polygonal frames, reflected at distorted angles. As the subject engages the space by moving through the pods, comprehension is challenged to discern. The subject cannot

distinguish between what exists literally as object and what exists as mere image.

This experience can be described as disorienting, and even nauseating.⁵⁷

Saraceno uses the elements of reflection and frame to create a flattened spatial collage that blurs literal presence and illusion. In approaching a condition of



Figure 13 Tomás Saraceno, "Cloud City" 2012, New York City

maximalism Saraceno not only confounds the optical capacities of perception but the whole body as the subject climbs through the disorienting chaos of the work. Saraceno shapes a mindboggling space of illusion that challenges the capacity of perception to fully discern the primary dialectic of space and void. By challenging perception, maximalism engages the subject only to reject comprehension. It represents a paradoxical condition that centralizes yet displaces the subject in the broken relationship of signification.

The Possibility of Maximalist Architecture

With any genre, movement, or style, it becomes difficult if not hazardous to describe a building as the definitive paragon of the ideas; because, the truest embodiment of the concept may exist purely in imagination as a theoretical possibility. What would be the unquestionable exemplar of minimalism? A gap exists between theoretical propositions and their materialization. Therefore, it is better to understand buildings that embody a propensity toward a critical degree of complexity that obfuscates meaning not as maximalist per se but as approaching the idea. By exploring this gap, the limitations of translation between the theory and the possibility of maximalism, new insights into dimensions of the definition may be discovered. This thesis has

described the concept of maximalism as an insurmountable multiplicity and an optimized complexity, which results in a complete denial of signification. This challenges architecture traditionally characterized as the art of building and making because these narratives are lost along with all other meanings. Architectural values in material, tectonic expression, and volition are antithetical to these concepts because maximalism fundamentally severs the dialectic of form functioning as sign.

In their discussion of logical complexities, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the basic parameters for true multiplicities. They propose that, “All multiplicities are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions.”⁵⁸ This establishes that a truly irreducible multiplicity and the complexity generated from it can be described as totalizing. A frame limits multiplicity and therefore reduces it to a singular whole; because it exists within a boundary becoming definable and quantifiably singular. Frames reduce multiplicities to a dialectic of interior and exterior. Therefore, true multiplicities defy boundaries; because, the limit of multiplicity exists in observance from an exterior dimension. This poses a problem for the manifestation of maximalism in architecture, because as a multiplicity fills its dimensions it can be understood as filling only those dimensions. In terms of scale, a fundamental consideration of the discipline, the maximalism of the detail is reduced when it understood in the context of the room, the maximalism of the room is reduced when understood in the context of the building, the maximalism of the building is reduced when understood in the context of the city, etc... Created by the inevitable hierarchy of scales, this reduction prevents maximalist architecture from becoming truly totalizing. Therefore the experience of maximalism may only function within the scale it is perceived.

Facing this problem of scale, which limits the possibility of a true architectural multiplicity, two of the examples selected for their propensity toward maximalism utilize purely optical phenomena to create a complexity that appears scaleless. Gage & Clemenceau and Tomás Saraceno both set mirrors at odd angles to create illusionistic spaces that are simultaneously flat and infinite. The phenomenon of reflectivity adds a level of complexity not achievable through the articulation of forms alone. By denying shadows and distorting visual experience the mirrored surfaces in both instances are able to surpass the physical limitation of scale. The reflective ricochet blurs the legibility between what exists literally as physically present content and its specular illusion. This does not insinuate that maximalism in architecture is distinguishable only through the prominence of mirrors or that phenomenal reflectivity is the only way of overcoming the limit of mere formal contrivance. It does however bring illusion to the forefront as a necessary characteristic of maximalist architecture transcending the limitations of literalness. Illusion represents the severance of the foundational architectural dialectic between presence and absence as extreme complexity destabilizes all meanings. Maximalism negates the capacity for signification at even this most primal level by blurring the distinction between what is object and what is void.

Maximalist architecture connotes a unique spatial condition, albeit a deleterious one that blurs the most essential architectural dialectic – the separation of form and space – through an irreducible complexity. Valued architectural ideas such as tectonic expression or material logics, as meanings are lost in immensity. Maximalism represents complexity of content at such an extreme level that it challenges the discipline of architecture by destabilizing the capacity for meaning in all forms, bringing into question the basic legibility of presence. These characterizations of maximalism make what writers and architects have deemed maximalist up to

this point seem reserved. For example, the formally eclectic opulence of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao and similar buildings may demonstrate a degree of complexity that has too often led some to call it maximal, but now appears remarkably conservative compared to this definition that has been explored. The concept of maximalism represents a challenge for architecture to create an extreme complexity that negates the capacity of form to function as a sign of any meanings.

Part III

Experiencing the Void

The teachings of the medieval catholic church outlined two roads to grace: the *via negativa* and the *via activa*. The former represented the life of asceticism that shunned the excesses of distracting worldly complexities for the simplicity of unhindered contemplation, which was favored by the Cistercian monks. The latter, favored by Franciscan missionaries, was a life filled with holy works that fully engaged the world by enacting the faith.⁵⁹ The ancient theologians recognized that both sides of this dialectic, these seemingly oppositional ideologies, achieved the same spiritual transcendence. The dialectic between austerity and eclecticism holds true similarly in aesthetic discourse echoing the adjacent relationship of minimalism and maximalism. The transcendence of the soul translates into a mitigation of signification and divine grace into a sublime experience created by both. Minimalism eschews unnecessary content in attempting to arrive at an essential condition where no meanings exist beyond mere presence. It represents extreme reduction to the extent that it is disengaged from the subject and from the world. It defines an aesthetic with aspirations toward purity. Conversely, maximalism is filled and fully engaged with the subject, so much so that it becomes too immense and tumultuous to be understood beyond basic apprehension. It represents an aesthetic defined by chaos and ambivalence.

The minimalist era was deeply rooted in the conviction of its progenitors for the necessity of achieving purity, whether of form or of the sublime void of universal space. The minimalists sought to transcend the role of signification by reducing content to the instantly exhausted gestalt form. Minimalists valued the blatant certainty of presence and objective clarity. In its effort to remove all meanings by becoming wholly austere, minimalism distanced itself

from the subject, negating the role of perception. The term perception describes a relationship built upon the transmission of information from object to subject. The object provides signs that the subject consumes through sensory mechanisms and comprehends through processes of codification. When a sign is mitigated to the point that it may only self-signify as in minimalism the ontological meaning conveyed is exhausted immediately, and the perceptive relationship between subject and object becomes so reduced that it reaches a critical point of inconsequence. Denied any narrative meaning the subject is left only with the immediacy of mere object recognition and the vapidness of the pure gestalt. This condition of total opacity, achieved in the diminishment of meaning to mere self-signification, represents a challenge to the traditional dialectic of perception. Reduced to such an elemental state the work disengages the subject by invoking the perceptive relationship in the most minimal and laconic manner.

While the signifying object may symbolize content extraneous to the literal and physical dimensions of a work, such as narratives, illusions, and artistic volitions, above all, the object must first signify itself. Recognition of a sign's objective presence is the precondition for any signification. As in maximalism, when an object cannot signify its own existence it is neutralized, unable to imbue any meaning at all to the subject. If a sign cannot signify, the object exists as a broken signifier unable to clearly convey its own objecthood but still able to confront basic apprehension. Unlike the normal perceptive process, this condition yields a state of confusion caused by fragmented signs incapable of clearly signifying. A fragmented sign can lend itself only to the primary mechanism of perception; apprehension, which may be stretched ad infinitum. However, comprehension, which connotes the codification of perception, has a finite capacity. Exploring conditions of the sublime, historian and literary critic Thomas Weiskel explains this limitation of comprehension:

For if the apprehension has reached a point beyond which the representations of sensuous intuition in the case of the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others, as much, then, is lost at one end as is gained at the other, and for comprehension we get a maximum which the imagination cannot exceed.⁶⁰

This confusion of an object's self-signification impedes the relationship between signifier and subject causing the alienation of the subject from the object; the perception-object dialectic fails. This incomprehensibility, caused by the sign's inability to fully self-signify, represents the unraveling of the subject-object transmissive relationship and a disengagement of the subject through the subversion of sensory perception.

Both minimalism and maximalism connote a fracturing of the perception-object relationship in which the subject is alienated from the object through either a denial or a confusion of perception. Though the object may disengage the subject by refusing meaning and resisting the relationship of perception, experience remains inextricable. Therefore, though the minimalist object may be opaque, and the maximalist confounding, there exists an effect upon the subject that arises from the disequilibrium between apprehension and comprehension.

Weiskel describes this as a sublime depth, which is experienced viscerally because "unattainability is phenomenologically a negation, a falling away from what might be seized, perceived, known"⁶¹ Like an expressionless gaze, disengagement is an inimical form of engagement. Similarly, there is bewilderment with chaos. When all that can be conceived is silence, or similarly, totalizing noise, the imagination swells to fill the void left between the subject and the object from the broken transmissive relationship. This represents a condition of

meaning that emerges from the loss of meaning; an experience that can be described as a form of the hermeneutic sublime, which Weiskel describes as “a rhetoric, a discourse of connotations. Its signs consist of relations between indeterminacy and a ‘meaning’ predicated on indeterminacy.”⁶² Minimalism demonstrates the sublime of totalizing stillness and monotony; the vastness of the void. On the other hand, maximalism demonstrates the sublime of chaotic multivalence; a magnitude of immensity replete with content.

Silence

Minimalism’s austere silence and impenetrable opacity quickly found a place in popular culture as a brooding otherworldly presence in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film, *2001, A Space Odyssey*. A mysterious black monolith periodically appears in the film to embody a metaphorical origin of intelligence, creativity, and aggression (fig. 14). Its ominousness is the result of its total opacity. The monolith provokes an unsettling feeling like the coldness of a blank, expressionless stare. It relates nothing beyond its own presence. In the collapse of the traditional role of perception, the subject bridges the void created by the unattainability of anything more than existence with abstract connotations. The minimalist object becomes a receptacle for extraneous and often elusive ideas such as intelligence, creativity, and aggression. Unable to embrace passive coexistence or accept the fissure left by the disengagement of the object and the subject, imagination imbues the black monolith with new metaphysical meanings that are ultimately external to the literal object. This demonstrates a condition of disequilibrium between what the object signifies and the experience of the subject. The object itself no longer carries meaning as a signifier, but rather the negated perceptive relationship becomes a void filled by the subject. This chasm of experience may be described as sublime silence. Weiskel explains that this sublime space between the subject and object replaces the object as the prominent aspect of

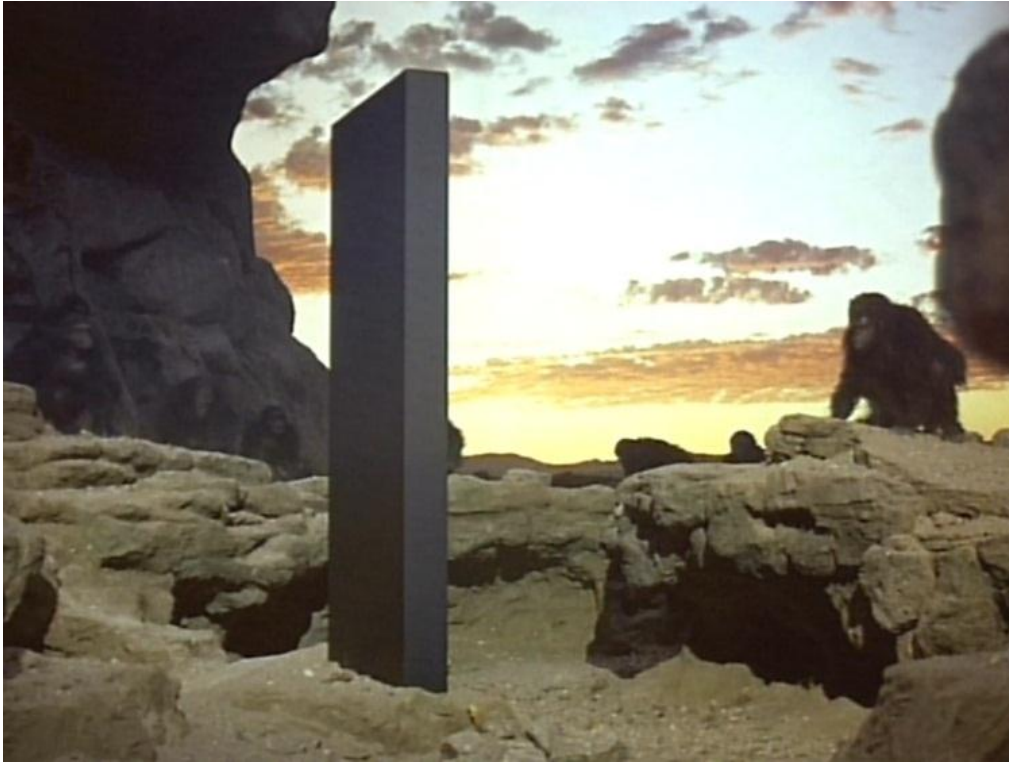


Figure 14 Stanley Kubrick, still from "2001, A Space Odyssey" 1968

experience saying that, "In the sublime, a *relation* to the object – the negative relation of unattainability – becomes the signifier in the aesthetic order of meaning."⁶³ When experience becomes negation, the void left between the subject and object becomes paramount. Kubrick's black monolith, the epitome of minimalist sculpture, functions effectively in the film because it disengages the subject through pure silence leaving only the experience of a sublime void rather than establishing a perception relationship.

The art historian and critic Michael Fried identified this division in the traditional perceptive relationship in his flagrant attack on minimalism in *Art and Objecthood* (1967). Characterizing it as a deficiency, Fried asserts that minimalism, "Objectifies this subjective relationship [because it] distances the beholder – not just physically but psychically."⁶⁴ Citing minimalism's typically large scale objects, its symmetry, and what he describes as its corporeal

hollowness, Fried fills the void created by the broken perceptive relationship with an imagined anthropomorphism:

Here again the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended — and unexacting — relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly — for example, in somewhat darkened rooms — can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.⁶⁵

This element of surprise is certainly a factor in the experience of minimalist art but not because of the analogously anthropomorphic qualities that Fried alleged. Fried's analysis of minimalism as body-like seems odd and completely disregards painting, architecture, and a large portion of sculpture including any work by Carl Andre, Robert Morris's less geometrically rigid sculptures,^a or Judd's wall pieces. Fried's analysis of minimalism's invocation of the body forces an assertion of empathy, which represents a form of meaning that minimalism eschewed. To further this assertion, Fried pointed to a statement by sculptor Tony Smith: "I didn't think of

^a In response to Fried's critique, sculptor Robert Morris explained the large body-like scale of many minimalist artworks. He gainsaid the claim that the large sculptures were akin to the triumphalism of fascist architecture as had been insinuated. Furthermore, he rejected the notion that it was to create a covert anthropomorphic quality, which would lead to a form of empathic meaning. It was rather, "one of the necessary conditions of avoiding intimacy." His response further demonstrates that minimalism attempted to distance the object from the subject, and not as Fried argued, reflect the presence of the body.

them as sculptures but as presences of a sort.” Indeed as for any minimalist, the condition of objective existence was of critical importance; however, that is not necessarily anthropocentric. In a discussion of his sculpture *Die* (1958), Smith described his thought process for determining the dimensions of this work. He explained that he did not want to make an object that was small enough for the subject to look down on it as a commodity, nor did he want to make it so large that it would become a monument.⁶⁶ Smith’s work then did not create a covert body, but rather sought to completely deny the subject’s consumption of the object or the monument’s domination of the subject. Smith was attempting to break the perceptive relationship between the subject and the object by creating a void between the two. The shock or disquieting effect that Fried rightly identifies is the discovery of something completely inaccessible – the discomfort of confronting something that bares no meaning other than its own presence. It is the sublime void established between the subject and the object when the typical transmissive relationship is broken by an extreme abatement of content to the point that an object may only self-signify.

The hermeneutic sublime that characterizes the experience of minimalism results from of the reduction of content to such an extent that the perception relationship becomes broken through its immediate exhaustion. Architects commenting on minimalism often describe this void left in its wake as a metaphysical stillness. In architecture, minimalist spaces often assume a narrative of existential purity or are understood to embody some Zen-like philosophy. However, regardless of authorial intentions, this ascribed narrative is extraneous to the literal object, and is the attribution of the subject filling the sublime chasm left when an object merely self-signifies. The sign does not transmit this meaning to the subject but rather the meaning originates from the imagination as an interpretation of sublime silence.

This type of meaning prescribed by the subject can be said to be noumenological because it does not originate from a perceptive experience of the object but is the invention of imagination compensating for the disequilibrium experienced in the wake of the negated transmissive relationship. In a sense, these meanings come as a reaction to the experience of negation. In architecture much has been written on the apparent transcendental philosophy of the minimalist aesthetic. Often these interpretations have come from the architects' own characterization of their work. In his essay *minimum*, self-described minimalist architect John Pawson argued minimalism's inextricable link to an existential truth:

The idea of simplicity is a recurring ideal shared by many cultures – all of them looking for a way of life free from the dead weight of an excess of possessions. From Japanese concepts of Zen, to Thoreau's quest for simplicity, minimal living has always offered a sense of liberation, a chance to be in touch with the essence of existence, rather than distracted by the trivial. Clearly simplicity has dimensions to it that go beyond the purely aesthetic: it can be seen as the reflection of some innate, inner quality, or the pursuit of philosophical or literary insight into the nature of harmony, reason, and truth. Simplicity has a moral dimension, implying selflessness and unworldliness.⁶⁷

Pawson's position conflates the metaphysical realm of the subject with architecture. It is not that simplicity and minimalism inherently carry these connotations of moral selflessness and unworldliness, but rather by eschewing all but literal presence (the most primal form of meaning) it creates a void unhindered by signification, where these spurious philosophical connotations can develop. In this sense, Pawson is right to claim that simplicity does not distract, because the

only relationship it has with the subject is vapidty of mere coexistence. These noumenological meanings are evidence of the subject contending with the hermeneutic sublime of totalizing silence.

Noise

“We call an object sublime if the attempt to represent it determines the mind to regard its inability to grasp wholly the object as a symbol of the mind’s relation to a transcendent order.”⁶⁸ –Thomas Weiskel

The obfuscation of meaning by a radical degree of complexity and multiplicity can create another form of the hermeneutic sublime; one of sheer magnitude. Maximalism fragments the sign through collisions and juxtapositions of content. The inability of the object to merely self-signify let alone provide any extraneous signification negates the dialectic of the perception relationship. Therefore the maximalist object cannot be fully comprehended. Unlike the sublime silence and metaphysical stillness that characterize the experience of minimalism; this connotes the experience of chaotic noise reaching a magnitude in which all meanings yield to the sublime. In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) philosopher Emmanuel Kant addresses this experience in describing what he defined the mathematical sublime as a condition in which, “The mind confronts an object whose extreme magnitude challenges the imagination (as the faculty of sensible representation) to an extraordinary effort.”⁶⁹ The sheer immensity described exceeds comprehension and therefore destabilizes the perception relationship. Due to its sheer immensity, maximalism represents a form of the mathematical sublime.

The hermeneutic sublime of chaotic noise in maximalism may be an omission of meaning more totalizing than silence. Through reduction to the critical point of asignification, minimalism creates a void, which can be filled by the imagination with extraneous meanings. However, signifiers in maximalism are fragmented through the destabilization of anything reducible to a singular unité. Therefore the experience is not a void available to be filled, but is a deluge of replete and incomprehensible immensity. In the experience of maximalism no room for noumenological meanings exists; because, the subject is overwhelmed by the magnitude of content that remains apprehensible but no longer comprehensible. This paradoxical condition of sublime distancing yet with full engagement demonstrates the complex relationship of maximalism with the subject.

In this light, maximalism represents a totalizing complexity that not only destabilizes the dialectics of signification, but that challenges the perceptive relationship by filling apprehension and denying comprehension. This sublime immensity evokes an experience rarely found in architecture. As such, it may not be possible or desirable at the present moment to claim that maximalism is an aesthetic movement with the same certainty that can be had when dealing with the history of minimalism. The buildings architects and writers have labeled maximalist thus far pale in comparison to the sublime complexity that has been explored through this thesis. Even the deconstructivist movement, which may come to mind in a discussion of architectural complexity, seems retrospective, abiding by the clear dialectics between the subject and the object, and with form functioning as sign. While there may be too few architectural exemplars of maximalism, with a glance at some recent architectural publications, the language of complexity and multivalence finds resonance. In a post-structural age dominated by the awareness of instability, the aesthetic of ambivalence taps into the reality that complexities and multiplicities

are inevitable. Unlike the postmodern yearning for catharsis and the attendant irony, maximalism fully embraces the condition in which meanings are present yet fragmented and inaccessible.

Maximalism connotes an intriguing relationship with the subject, which in one sense represents a reengagement that is completely antithetical to the aspirations for purity and cold essentialism that characterized the minimalist era. However, maximalism's sublime immensity distances the subject in a state of total ambivalence, which is similar to minimalism's disengaging austerity.

Maximalist architecture could be a reflection of an age that embraces paradox and revels in the byproducts of juxtapositions. It has the potential to echo the ineffable scientific discoveries of the quantum multiverse that blur the domains of the subject and the object to the point of indistinguishability. Too often contemporary architects have taken the *via negativa* hoping to achieve an idea of truth or of purity, while the discourse has embraced the reality of complexity and multivalence. Maximalism poses a challenge for architecture to take the *via active*, destabilizing the dialectic *truths* associated with signification and construct a sublime space of ambivalence and complexity.

Conclusion

Toward Maximalism

This research has been both a reflection, developing a critical understanding of the concerns and implications of minimalism, and a projection toward the possibility of maximalism in architecture. By addressing minimalism and maximalism as ideas, this research has arrived at an understanding beyond the unfortunate and superficial application of the terms proliferated, not only by architects and scholars, but by bloggers and journalists contributing to the aesthetic discourse over the past decade. With a lack of theoretical rigor, too often minimalist architecture came to connote little more than the prominence of smooth surfaces turned to lustrous enamel in glossy photos. The investigation into the history of minimalism, in both art and architecture, revealed that an acute spatial consciousness and an aspiration toward the essential were central themes. In terms of signification, content was reduced until only the clarity of presence in physical space could be conveyed. It was a movement deeply tied to the modernist ethos of its era, striving for purity and apparent objective truths.

Maximalism as a theoretical construct, detached from the formal opulence of *complex* contemporary architecture, suggests the opposite approach of minimalism. It represents an extreme complexity that obfuscates all significations blurring even the fundamental distinctions between what is literally present and merely illusion. As minimalism diminished content to an essential state, aspiring for a sublime purity, maximalism compounds content creating a condition in which meaning cannot contend with extreme complexity. Maximalism rescinds the clarity of form through a totalizing deluge of content.

Though minimalism and maximalism are linguistically opposites, they are close in the sense that both establish as significant experiences that challenge perception and distance the subject. This inimical relationship with the subject highlights the adjacent similarities and differences between the two ideas. Minimalism, achieved through a reduction to silence, creates a sublime void, in which the subject is disengaged from the purely opaque object. Maximalism however, is the inundation of totalizing noise, a deluge that provokes apprehension but denies conception.

The formal convolution associated with the deconstructivist movement and computationally driven architecture does not begin to approach the sublime extent explored in this research. While the language of multiplicity and complexity finds some resonance, there are too few exemplars of maximalism to claim it as a contemporary movement or style. Perhaps this is because the totalizing immensity that maximalism suggests, challenges architects to abandon many of the long valued dialectics ingrained in the discipline. Maximalism questions the fundamental distinction between form and space, and abolishes the narratives of material expression and logic of construction. Fracturing the capacity for signification, maximalism challenges the traditional role of form functioning as sign.

While too often the buildings labeled maximalism have been retrospective, generally abiding by the narratives of process, making, and clarity, the discourse, dominated by post-structural thought, has embraced the reality of complexity. The theoretical definition of maximalism that has been outlined in this thesis appears remarkably close to the contemporary discussions centered on questioning the role of the perceptive subject, the instability of knowledge, and the loss of certainty that accompanies the destabilization of all steadfast *truths*. Maximalism then, represents a challenge to architecture to abandon the narratives inhibiting the

exploration of true complexity. It provokes the potential of architecture to reflect the ideas of ambivalence and multivalence, and to abandon once and for all the aspirations for essential purity and transcendent truths, which linger as trite remnants of outmoded thought. It is then the call to go beyond the complexity of formal manipulation, which is so closely tied to material fetishization and enthrallment with production processes, to explore the possibility of maximalism.

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¹ Cuito

² *Ibid*, 10

³ Hansen

⁴ Pearson

⁵ Bekleyen

⁶ Pawson

⁷ Cuito, 8

⁸ *Ibid*, 8

⁹ Battcock, 206

¹⁰ Deleuze, 8

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8

¹² Weiskle, 34

¹³ Strickland, 7

¹⁴ National Gallery of Art

¹⁵ Varnedoe, 120

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 120

¹⁷ Meyer, 4

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 7

¹⁹ Linder, 51

²⁰ Hudson, 77

²¹ Strickland, 12

²² Battcock, 384

²³ Varnedoe, 114

²⁴ Bertoni, 17

- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 16
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 17
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 182
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 182
- ²⁹ Hudson, 153
- ³⁰ Strickland, 4
- ³¹ Linder, 123
- ³² Bertoni, 182
- ³³ Greenberg, 4
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 6
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 5
- ³⁶ Stiles, 115
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 240
- ³⁸ Battcock, 228
- ³⁹ Linder, 31
- ⁴⁰ Battcock, 125
- ⁴¹ James Meyer p.3
- ⁴² Ziska
- ⁴³ Bertoni, 23
- ⁴⁴ Hansen
- ⁴⁵ Cuito, 10
- ⁴⁶ Delville 13
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 13
- ⁴⁸ Balmond, 26
- ⁴⁹ Delville 13
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid* 13
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- ⁵² O'Doherty, 43
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, 43
- ⁵⁴ Gamard, 5
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- ⁵⁶ Balmond, 27
- ⁵⁷ Smith
- ⁵⁸ Deleuze, 9
- ⁵⁹ Barth
- ⁶⁰ Weiskel, 39
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, 24 -25
- ⁶² *Ibid*, 34-35
- ⁶³ *Ibid*, 23
- ⁶⁴ Linder, 128
- ⁶⁵ Battcock,
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 228
- ⁶⁷ Bertoni, 27
- ⁶⁸ Weiskel, 23
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 38-39