

Art is often continued by creatively missing the point of earlier art. Minimalism, the operational grammar of so much art of the last 35 years, has had its various points missed perhaps more consistently and comprehensively than any other 'movement' of the 20th century. This is cause for general celebration, of course, except perhaps among minimalism's purists who, having missed the point just as much as anyone else, then missed the point that they had missed the point. The real legacy of minimalism is a bestiary, a hall of mirrors, the Hell rather than the Heaven of a Bosch altarpiece. Art is continued by being continuously corrupted, and minimalism has been continued in any number of ways. For many, the apparent emptiness of minimalist form has been something to be appropriated and filled in. (It doesn't matter whether minimalist form can properly be described as 'empty'; it's enough that it can be made to appear so under certain circumstances.) The minimalist box has become the perfect container for all sorts of foreign bodies – actual bodies, virtual bodies, animal, vegetable or mineral bodies. In John Wood and Paul Harrison's videos, it is as if the generic, geometric, blank, white container – not-quite-sculpture and not-yet-architecture, and not any actual specific object – has been broken-into, squatted and used to host an unofficial slow-motion party. It's a strange party, to be sure, with strange dancing and strange drugs, but it's a party in the sense of something improper and unlicensed going on. At least, that is how it appears ...

In 1961 Robert Morris made a 2-foot by 2-foot by 8-foot plywood 'column'. It was painted pale grey and placed on its own in the centre of a stage. The audience watched it stand there for three-and-a-half minutes until suddenly it toppled over, landed on its side and rested there for a further three-and-a-half minutes. The object had been set in motion by a wire which the artist had pulled from the wings, although Morris had intended to stand inside the hollow form and knock it over with his own body-weight. When he tried this in rehearsal, however, Morris split his head open as the box hit the ground. (Imagine a horizontal pale grey 2-foot by 2-foot by 8-foot box with a small pool of crimson blood seeping out of one end.) This anecdote is a tiny footnote in the history of minimalism but it is a useful reminder that the human body and some sense of performance was literally and not just philosophically connected with minimalism; it indicates that artists such as Morris and Nauman, and perhaps also Judd, Andre, Flavin and LeWitt, were open to the comic possibilities of geometry; and it suggests that the work of Wood and Harrison enacts a kind of return of these often repressed characteristics of the genre. That is, if Wood and Harrison have continued minimalism by corrupting it, it is a corruption that has come from within rather than one visited from without.

But whose minimalism is being corrupted? Not any actual work made by one of a few North American artists during the 1960s. Rather the myth of minimalism as it has been propagated and handed down, more by art historians and interior designers than by artists. This mythical minimalism is also the mythical 'white cube' of a mythical modernism. It never actually existed (minimalism was rarely simply white

falling over

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or simply cubic), but it had to be brought into being in order then to be ritually put to the sword. Wood and Harrison's micro-dramas are enacted in such a white cube, a 'pure' and therefore unreal space which nevertheless has had a very real effect on the Western cultural imagination. Whiteness, of course, has long been the locus of virtue and purity in the West. Its recent history includes neo-classicism and the rhetoric of architecture from Adolph Loos and Le Corbusier to the interior designs of John Pawson and Claudio Silvestrin. The deconstruction of whiteness, in the hands of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, is a kind of parallel text to the writings of Winkelmann and Walter Pater, but it is in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin that the 20th century found its most brilliant critic of whiteness and, not coincidentally, analyst of corruption. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* is largely a discussion of the grotesque imagery in Rabelais' work, but it is also easy to read as an assault on the 'classicism' of Stalinist Socialist Realism. For Bakhtin, this classical form is above all a self-contained unity, a body or form which is finite, closed and individuated. It is cut off from all around it, and anything that 'protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off' is carefully 'eliminated, hidden or moderated'. This body has no orifices, and therefore nothing can enter it or be expelled from it. It is impenetrable. It cannot mutate or merge with anything beyond its boundaries. It has no relationship with the rest of the world and it has no inner life. This body is ultra-apolline: the elimination of all contingency and uncertainty. This imagery of an impenetrable, uninfected whiteness is counterposed by Bakhtin with the strikingly visceral and dionysiac vision of the medieval body, a body which is constantly in the process of filling itself up and emptying itself out, of gorging and vomiting. It is all orifices and motions, constantly blending with other bodies and the world, mutating and becoming fluid. Bakhtin's universe is an opposition of the pure and clean and static (which is dead) and the impure and dirty and dynamic (which is living); it is also an opposition of the official and the popular, exclusivity and vulgarity, piety and laughter. His Carnival is the corruption of the official and the formal by the unofficial and improvised; it is a dethroning of the fixed by the mobile; and thus it is a renewal of life.

Bakhtin's imagery is both beautiful and desperate; his

Carnival is gorgeous but out of reach. Nevertheless, his imagery still plays on the imagination and it is played out in aspects of minimalism, pop art and performance. And, arguably, it is replayed by Wood and Harrison in works such as 'Device', '3 Legged', and '6 Boxes', albeit in a far more homely and domesticated manner. The impenetrable whiteness of their white cube appears to fill nothing more grand than the plastic casing of a television monitor; their bodily interventions don't mess up the space too much. Although they do occasionally rattle the box and reveal some dodgy carpentry, they tend more often to rattle themselves. They mess up their clothes a little in the process. Their struggles are not epic or heroic, and although their comedy is occasionally painful, for the most part they enact history as farce. Their corruption is a small downfall from no great height, with minor degradation and superficial bruising. It leaves a residue, nonetheless. The residue is the possibility that every hermetic architectural or artistic white cube we pass by might have a choreographed punchup going on inside. It also leaves behind the question as to why these days the Fall is a subject better suited to comedy than tragedy. For Baudelaire, the laughter that follows seeing someone slip on a banana skin is a complex laughter, both comic and tragic; it is both the pleasure that is never far from someone else's misfortune, and the pain of humanity's collective fall from grace. For Wood and Harrison, the Fall is an everyday occurrence, repeated like an expressionless habit of everyday life: get up, get dressed, fall over, get up, etc, etc. It is hardly a catastrophe. There are no catastrophes, just a little discomfort here and there. And just as there are no catastrophes, nor are there any great victories worthy of being remembered for more than a couple of minutes after the event. It's a small world with small gains and small losses. Somehow that's funny, but it's also frustrating. The frustration registered in Wood and Harrison's work is not that of the dispossessed, as there is little sign of real fear or anger. Rather theirs is the frustration of knowing nothing much will happen today, just as it didn't yesterday or the day before. It is the frustration of knowing that the big catastrophes and the big victories will happen in another country to other people who we don't recognise and won't meet. None of this is necessarily true, of course, but sometimes art can make it feel that way, because in art the grand statement seems an increasingly remote possibility.

This perhaps is the real problem with minimalism: it is exhausted and in that sense truly empty, but somehow it remains an inescapable framework for so much contemporary art. And this may be why it all feels so frustrating, so repetitive and, occasionally, so funny. Minimalism is to Wood and Harrison something like what religion was to Dr. Aziz in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: he is caught (also after cracking his head open on a hard surface) in a state of incomplete apostasy, and he is left 'no longer praying to a god in whom he could not entirely disbelieve'.