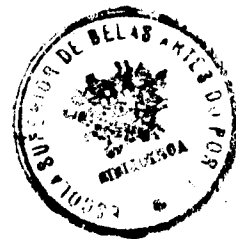


# **TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE SPACES**

**Formal Implications in the Development of the  
'Alternative Spaces' Phenomenon in the 70s American Art Scene**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of M.A. in Gallery Studies

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University of Essex

1994



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Michaela Gielbhausen, for her constant enthusiasm, dedication and for the independence she gave me to pursue my academic ideas. I would also like to thank Professor Peter Vergo for those valuable comments and advice he gave me throughout the year.

I would like to thank my parents who made it all possible for me to be here in the first place. Besides the financial support I received, without their constant encouragement this year would have been a much more difficult one. I am also deeply indebted to all my family members, in particular to my grandmother, for their support and encouragement.

I would also like to mention in particular James Gomez and Sérgio de Faria. Their friendship and help have made my life in Essex a much more comfortable and easy one. I wish them both all the best in their academic careers.

Back home I would like to mention Nuno, who enthusiastically encouraged me to pursue my academic endeavours and whose help was vital in the early stages of this paper.

I would like also to express my gratitude to : Escultor Alberto Carneiro, Carlos Sá da Costa, Eillen Adams, Emilia Malta, Graciela Machado, Inés Maria Amorim, José Portocarrero, Joyce Lu, Maria Antas de Campos, Marita Metropoulous, Paulo Rossadas and Sofia Coelho, for their advice, encouragement and support.

Finally, I would also like to thank the Junta Nacional de Investigação Científica e Tecnológica (JNICT) in Portugal for their financial support.

# Towards Alternative Spaces

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	ii
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER ONE : Greenberg's Modernism and the MoMA</b>	
Europe and America, "Avant Garde" and "Avant Gardism" or from "Modern" to "Modernism" .....	6
From "Avant Garde and Kitsch" to "Modernist Painting" .....	8
MoMA : from "Utopia" to "Forever Modern" .....	11
The "Labyrinth": MoMA's Permanent Collection .....	15
MoMA : "Forever Modern" .....	20
<b>CHAPTER TWO : Minimalist Art and Greenberg's Conventions of Spectatorship</b>	
A Counter -"Modernism " Ideology .....	22
"Specific Objects " .....	29
The Modernists conventions of Spectatorship and Fried's notion of "Theatricality" .....	34
<b>CHAPTER THREE : "Alternatives Spaces" Re-viewed</b>	
The Art Museum 's "Boom" in the Sixties.....	39
From Greenberg's Modernism to the "Sculptural Museum " .....	40
"Alternative Spaces" Re-viewed .....	44

<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	51
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	53
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	58

*"The centre of the world for me, naturally, is where I live. I'm also a little hesitant about what is called the Art World. If it is a world, it is a very small one indeed. I know that art which lasts has to get outside of that small world. I also know that in the end most of the art that's made will be forgotten. It will only be looked at if someone loves it and cares for it. And Love is really all there is."*

*David Hockney*

# **Towards Alternative Spaces**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study is not about “Alternative Spaces“. It is not about their function and role in the seventies American art scene. Instead, it is about a particular aesthetic theory and about the way in which the structural image of the post-war American art museum was to be influenced and shaped by a particular theoretical position : Clement Greenberg's modernism. Therefore, the principal aim of my dissertation is to demonstrate how the critical arguments surrounding the practices of post-war American art provided the modern art museum with certain structural and programmatic models. My purpose, is to trace from a historical perspective the structural development of the post-war American art museum in parallel with Greenberg's theories and to argue that the structural models offered by the exhibition space of the art museum were to provide the incentive for the development of “Alternative Spaces“ in the seventies American art scene.

It is often argued that it was the ideological crisis in the mid-late sixties American art world which provided the stimulus for the growth and development of the “Alternative Spaces“ phenomenon in the seventies American art scene.

The mid-late sixties witnessed a drastic change to the political and social system of the United States (US). The brutal display of power of the American military in Vietnam brought to the surface questions pertaining the values of “democratic freedom“ that the US government was trying to promote. To question the political system means, obviously, to question the politics of the art world and consequently the politics of the museum world. Seen now as a bureaucratic and manipulative institutional system ideologically biased towards the maintenance and perpetuation of the State cultural values the art museum was to be re-analysed, by the artist, on political and social terms

and declared a corrupted and ideologically failed institution. Consequently, the artist left the museum and opened his own exhibition space.

However, the concept of "Alternative Space" is hardly new in the history of modern art. In fact, if Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du Peintre*, (of 1855), is today considered widely as the first modern art work,<sup>1</sup> then the first "Alternative Space" appeared precisely in the same year. Because his work was refused by the jury of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, Courbet decided to embark on an anti-exhibition initiative by mounting its own exhibition "just round the corner from the Salon".<sup>2</sup> Following this individual and isolated example, Félix Féneon, Georges Seurat, Paul Signac and Odilon Redon organised in 1884 the *Société des Artistes Indépendants* "(...) for the suppression of juries and (...) to help artists to freely present their work."<sup>3</sup> In 1978, Lawrence Alloway described the term "Alternative Spaces" as following:

*"Alternative Spaces" is a general term referring to the various ways in which artists show their work outside commercial galleries and formally constituted museums. It includes the use of studios as exhibition spaces, the temporary use of buildings for work done on site and co-operatives of artists, whether for the purpose of putting on an exhibition or for running a gallery on a long-term basis.*"<sup>4</sup>

From Courbet's example until the seventies the principal aim of the "Alternative Space" seems to be the same; to create "alternative" exhibition spaces where the artist was free to show his/her work outside the ideological constraints of the art museum. However, due to their growth in number and to their popularity among the artistic community the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies American art scene was to achieve the status of the "major new art phenomena"<sup>5</sup> of this decade. Undoubtedly, the questions here are : why did "Alternative Spaces" become so important in the seventies? Why did they increase so rapidly? Was it just because the modern art

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<sup>1</sup> Lecuw, Reit and Beer, Evelyn, *Exposition Imaginaire : The Art of Exhibiting in the Eighties*, The Hague, London et.al. 1989, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, Douglas, *The Museum Transformed : Design and Culture in the Post-Pompidou Age*, Abbeville Press, Ithaca and London 1974, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is taken from Gear, Josephine, "Some Alternative Spaces in New York and Los Angeles", in *Studio International*, vol. 194, nr. 977, February 1978, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

museum was now seen by the artistic community as an ideologically failed institution and thus ideologically limiting art's possibilities?

An explanation of the "Alternative Space" phenomenon simply as a consequence of the ideological crisis in the sixties and seventies American art world seems, from my point of view, not to provide convincing answers to those questions. The development of "Alternative Spaces" in the seventies coincided almost exactly with the prominence in the American art world of a group of young artists, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt and Carl André who came to be known as the Minimalists. Strongly committed ideologically with the same dominant cultural system that was now being strongly questioned by other artists - Clement Greenberg's modernism - the Minimalists were also deliberately ignoring the museum and showing their work in "Alternative Spaces". This means that other limits, besides ideological ones, were imposed upon art by the art museum. Therefore, to explain the development of the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies simply as a consequence of the museum ideological closure to certain art practices provides an incomplete analysis of the phenomenon. Strongly influenced by Clement Greenberg's conventions the space the art museum offered was limiting, by the very nature of its structural organisation, the possibilities of art.

Therefore, my intention is to reveal to the reader how Greenberg's theories when applied to the realms of the art museum played a significant role in increasing structurally the incapability of the museum to transcend the ideology it produces and consequently to present the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies American art scene not just as a consequence of the museum ideological limits but also as a result of its structural limitations. In order to this I shall survey the writings of Clement Greenberg, Donald Judd and Robert Morris and reinterpret them together with the structural model offered by the exhibition space of the paradigmatic American art museum : the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MoMA).

By re-viewing the factors that led to the creation of "Alternative Spaces" in the seventies from a different perspective it is my hope that my study can shed some light on how the contemporary art museum can extend its structural limits and consequently the limits of a conventional museology and therefore, enhance its own contemporaneity.

In order to explain my approach this dissertation will be organised in the following way:

**Chapter One:** In this chapter I will first present briefly the historical conditions within which Greenberg developed his theories. Next, I will introduce the central ideas presented in his three articles, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"<sup>6</sup>, "The Decline of Cubism"<sup>7</sup> and "Modernist Painting".<sup>8</sup> I will then embark on an examination of the first American modern art museum: MoMA. Finally, I will end this chapter by demonstrating how Greenberg's theories, presented in the above three articles, influenced the way MoMA presented itself and its permanent collection in the period between 1939 and the end of the sixties. Using MoMA as the paradigmatic American modern art museum the aim of this chapter is to show how Greenberg's modernism was radicalised structurally within MoMA's gallery space and as a consequence the museum was to close itself not just ideologically but also architecturally.

**Chapter Two:** I will begin this chapter with a brief exposition of how Greenberg's modernism was to achieve, in the beginning of the sixties, the status of cultural regime as a consequence of the American political system of the "Cold War" period. Next, I will consider the emergence of counter-cultural movements as the moment of modernism's rupture. I will then try to demonstrate how consequently the modernist art museum was re-examined by the artists and declared ideologically a closed entity.

I will then embark on an examination of the Minimalists aesthetic proposal as it was presented by Donald Judd in his essay "Specific Objects"<sup>9</sup> and by Robert Morris in "Notes on Sculpture I-IV".<sup>10</sup> In opposition to the Minimalists project I will then present Michael Fried's article "Art and Objecthood".<sup>11</sup> Using concepts from these three articles the aim of this chapter is to present Minimal art as structurally opposed to Greenberg's ideas and thus, as structurally impossible to be exhibited in the modernist museum.

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<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, New York et. al., 1992, pp. 529 - 541.

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "The Decline of Cubism", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, New York et. al., 1992, pp. 569 - 572.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, New York et. al., 1992, pp. 754 - 760.

<sup>9</sup> Judd, Donald, "Specific Objects", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, New York et. al., 1992, pp. 809 - 813. This essay was first published in *Arts Yearbook*, 8, New York 1965.

<sup>10</sup> Morris Robert, "Notes on Sculpture I-IV", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, New York et. al., 1992, pp. 813 - 822.

<sup>11</sup> Fried, Michael, "Art and Objecthood", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford et. al., 1992, pp. 822 - 833.

**Chapter Three:** This chapter attempts to demonstrate how museum architecture was influenced by Greenberg's theories and to argue that the structural model offered by the modernist museum together with the "museum boom", in the mid-late sixties, provided the incentive for the development of "Alternative Spaces". In order to present this argument this chapter will be organised in the following way. First, I will try to demonstrate how Greenberg's theories provided museum architecture with solutions to one of its major problems : its conceptual submission to a utilitarian format. I will then, try to demonstrate how consequently the "Sculptural Museum"<sup>12</sup> emerged.

I will then survey the development of some "Alternative Spaces" in the seventies. Using Minimal art as an example of "site specific" art I will try to demonstrate how the modern art museum ignored Minimal art just because it was structurally impossible to exhibit inside its walls and thus to demonstrate that the "Alternative Space" in the seventies emerged not just as a consequence of the ideological closure of the museum but also as a consequence of its structural limitations.

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<sup>12</sup> Goldeberger, Paul, "What Should a Museum Building Be?", in *Art News*, vol. 174, October 1975, p. 34.

## CHAPTER ONE **Greenberg's Modernism and the MoMA**

### *Europe and America, "Avant Garde" and "Avant Gardism" or from "Modern" to "Modernism"*

In the United States of America, the unprecedented economic "boom" of the post Second World War years seemed to provide the conditions for a radical transformation of the museum through which the "temple of the muses" was to be transformed into buildings without thresholds to accommodate a revitalised art. However, looking back we realise that those ideals will hardly leave lasting impressions or repercussions. After the War, an authoritative art criticism epitomised in the writing of the American art critic, Clement Greenberg, was to give a totally new significance to the word avant-garde and consequently to the word art museum.

The principal aim of Greenberg's criticism (formalist theory) was to remove all the inessential from the practices of art in order to preserve the quality of a particular representation of culture : modernism. In his essay "Modernist Painting", written in 1960 and published in 1961, Greenberg declared that "each art had to determine through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself"<sup>13</sup>. According to Greenberg, to restrict to the effects exclusive to itself means that art has to hold on its traditional practices and develop accordingly to what those practices could offer. Painting has to confine to the flat surface of the canvas and use of pigments and sculpture to traditional sculpting techniques. However, for Greenberg to accept "the effects exclusive to itself" also means that art has to reject any external influences. Therefore, for Greenberg art has to be structurally traditional and ideologically autonomous in order to be considered a

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<sup>13</sup>Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 755.

“truly“ modernist art. Just following those parameters could art achieve a privileged position within the dominant American cultural system of the sixties.

Due to the American artistic atmosphere prevailing at the time, Greenberg's theories were to be read as “something close to an ultimatum“.<sup>14</sup> Since the Armory Show in 1913, American art was clearly dominated by European art and aesthetic theory. If there was such thing that could be called a “truly“ American art it was identified as “naive“, “topographical“, “folk“ and “romantic“.<sup>15</sup> With the establishment in 1935 of the Federal Art Project (FAP) a new era for American art seemed to emerge. As part of Roosevelt's New Deal government, the principal aim of the FAP was to overcome artists' unemployment by providing the conditions for the artist to work for public institutions. However, if the FAP seemed to provide the conditions for a “truly“ American art to emerge, by 1943 (when the FAP was over) what had been done as American art was identified as “mediocre compromises with academicism in a heavy-handed, dull illustrational style that had neither the authority of academic art nor the unpretentious charm of illustration.“<sup>16</sup>

After the Second World War the conditions for the development of a “truly“ American art seemed finally to arrived. After the fall of Paris, in 1940, many European avant-garde artists found their way to New York City. Europe was economically devastated and culturally discouraged. With the rise of Fascism the idealistic linkage between aesthetic and social concerns, that was a characteristic of the European phase of the avant-garde, lost its philosophical credibility. Culture, including art was used by Hitler and the Italian Fascist as vehicles for ideological inculcation. Consequently, the belief that the avant-garde art positively changes society was no longer possible. The US emerged from the War a ideologically and economically powerful country. The physical presence of so many European avant-garde artists in the US, together with the economical prosperity of this country seemed to provide the conditions for a revitalisation of the avant-garde institution and for a “truly“ American art and culture to emerge.

In the mid-fifties, the conditions set after the Second World War together with Greenberg's theories finally produced a “truly“ American art - Abstract Expressionism.

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<sup>14</sup> O'Brian, John (ed.), "Foreword", in *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1993, p.xv.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, Jonathan, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960" in *Modernism in Dispute - Art since the Forties*, Paul Wood et. al., Yale University Press, new haven and London in association with the Open University, 1993, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

By the mid-sixties Greenberg had placed America as the centre of world culture; a world culture as manifested by his concept of modernism.

**From "Avant Garde and Kitsch" to "Modernist Painting"**

Greenberg's first essay on the conditions of post-war art in general and American art in particular, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"<sup>17</sup> was published in the autumn of 1939. Focusing on culture rather than on painting or sculpture this article announces the theoretical framework through which modernism was to be defined.

For Greenberg, the avant-garde was more than an ideological concept inherent in artistic innovation. An avant-garde was a concrete (thus, not predetermined) cultural phenomenon, with a construction and a definition that resulted from a discursive practice. However, in "Avant Garde and Kitsch", Greenberg was not just concerned with a definition of what the avant-garde was but also with what the avant-garde was not. The avant-garde is never alone "[w]here there is an avant-garde generally we also find a rearguard"<sup>18</sup>. In his introductory remarks he observes that "one and the same civilisation produces simultaneously two different things" which are "both parts of the same culture and products of the same society"<sup>19</sup>: Art and "mass culture"; avant-garde and "Kitsch".

By defining "Kitsch" as "a product of the industrial revolution which urbanised the masses of Western Europe and established what is called universal 'literacy' - a sort of commodity", produced to satisfy the urban population, "now enjoying leisure sufficient to be bored" - Greenberg proclaims a concept of culture that is intrinsically selective, evaluative and elitist. Expressing avant-garde in opposition to "Kitsch", "mass culture" as enemy of "high culture", Greenberg was proclaiming a notion of culture, not as a producer of ideal values as it was characteristic of the European phase of the avant-garde, but instead, as a repository of ideal values. The concept of "Kitsch" was then the key to secure solutions. To advance and to legitimate by opposition Greenberg's modernism. Therefore, he proclaims the avant-garde as a socio-artistic and intellectual

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<sup>17</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", Op.Cit. This essay was Greenberg's contribution to a debate about the role and nature of the revolutionary art and literature, which was undertaken by this magazine between 1936 and 1940. The Partisan Review was a Trotskyist literary magazine founded in 1934 by Philip Rahv and William Phillips with the intention of publishing the best writing and critical literature from the viewpoint of the revolutionary working class.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 533.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 533.

agency through which culture can be advanced. However, culture needs to be subjected to selection if it wants to move forward. Consequently, Greenberg's intellectual agency is achieved by a mutual compromise between artistic expression (avant-garde) and critical response (selection).

One does not need to go further in reviewing Greenberg's writing to realise that he presented an idealistic theory and criticism, although its ideal object is not yet identified.

However, to say that this new avant-garde transcended its European examples does not mean that American art was not formally embedded in a European tradition. Whatever happened in the US, much of the avant-garde art still remained attached to European ideals. In fact, despite the strong conviction of the American artistic community that Paris had ideologically failed, this conviction was still accompanied by a deep sentiment of loss. It is not by its genius alone that a capital of culture arises. Rosenberg's prophecy, that the European avant-garde together with the "Paris Style" created an unlimited number of "possibilities that will occupy mankind during many cycles of social adventure"<sup>20</sup> was still, from the viewpoint of the American artistic community, worryingly real. Surrealism, despite its large representation in New York, was ideologically attached to Europe. Furthermore, representing the most successful moment of the European avant-garde Cubism was still the artistic community formal ideal and institutionalised avant-garde object. Using Greenberg's words, Cubism was "the epoch making feat of twentieth century art, a style that has changed and determined the complexion of Western art as radically as the Renaissance naturalism once did".<sup>21</sup>

However, in his essay "The Decline of Cubism",<sup>22</sup> published in 1948, Greenberg declares that Cubism is as dead and past as the Renaissance itself. For him, Cubism was "disorientated", "in crisis", in "decline".<sup>23</sup> After "The Decline of Cubism" American culture was finally free from being permeated by European values and the moment for a "truly" American art had finally arrived.

Finally, in "Modernist Painting", Greenberg canonised its ideal object : Abstract Expressionism. Artists, such as Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, earlier associated with the "mediocre" art of the FAP years were now the key figures of a "truly" American art and culture. With the institutionalisation of Abstract Expressionism as the "official"

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 542.

<sup>21</sup> Greenberg, "The Decline of Cubism", Op.Cit., p. 570.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 569-572.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 570.

American avant-garde Greenberg's modernism was to achieve a new status. With an avant-garde object that was now synonymous with Abstract Expressionism, modernism was a distinctively American project, which finally, absorbed and surpassed the European phase of the avant-garde.

These essays must be read, primarily, as a reaction to the growth of totalitarian philistinism prior to the Second World War and as an urgent attempt to free American art from the weight of European culture. What Greenberg denominated a sort of "Alexandrianism", that constituted a "academicism in which controversy is avoided and creativity declines into virtually, repetition, or variation of established themes and modes". In a period when the US was slowly coming out of the Depression years and the American art scene was still confined to the "mediocre" art of the FAP, Greenberg's essays emerged as a manifesto of optimism. The "Alexandrianism", inherited from the Enlightenment, based on an educated layman's taste and mainly confined to the domains of journalism, was then substituted by a more aggressive and academically based art criticism, in order to preserve the quality of culture against the overwhelming influence of "Kitsch" and to provide a "truly" American art with strong and credible theoretical arguments.

Between 1961 and 1963 Greenberg became closely involved with three art history post-graduate students of Harvard University, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss and Jane Harrison Cone. Their academic training in formal analysis was to be determinant in accentuating Greenberg's art criticism and in providing it with academic credentials. "Protected" by an academic aura from collapsing again into a journalistic and thus, subjective domain, art criticism was now free to judge, free to contain its own "alertness" and to "make its own declarations".<sup>24</sup>

This shift, from the art school and the studio to the art department of the University was to provide painting and sculpture with instrumental solutions. What was presented thus, was the belief that by solving the ideological problems of the avant-garde through a powerful, aggressive, personified and academic criticism, capable of transforming ideological concepts into instrumental ones, the cultural problems raised by a "society in crisis", and thus an art in crisis, could be solved. However, by collapsing art into an instrumental art criticism, Greenberg was not just providing art's problems with

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<sup>24</sup> Harris, Jonathan, "Abstract Expressionism and the Politics of Criticism", in *Modernism in Dispute - Art Since the Forties*, Wood, Paul, et.al., Yale University Press in association with The Open University, London et.al., 1993, p. 60.

instrumental solutions, he was also indulging a myth that those solutions could be immediate and thus, the problems could be solved "now".

Under an "academic" protection art criticism moved onto a larger platform. No longer concerned with emulating great works of art, art theory was now able to objectively discover and promote "emerging talents", to provide, (albeit ignoring the artists' intentions and the historical circumstances in which decisions are made), art history with new style labels and to adjudicate meaning and value to some artistic movements in detriment to others. Protected by an academic aura Greenberg's arguments presented in "Modernist Painting" seemed to allow little room for counter-arguments. After "Modernist Painting" either artists accepted the logic of Greenberg's rationale or "they risked producing 'minor' work."<sup>25</sup>

### **MoMA : From "Utopia" to "Forever Modern"**

The early growth and development of the art museum in Western Culture was linked, in complex ways, to a variety of what can be read as disparate solutions to a number of historical problems that affect the way in which they represent the past, the present, and themselves. As social entities, first and foremost, the choice of a cultural process and methodology the museum endorses, will represent the critical and historiographical perspectives on art assumed at the moment of its formation. Thus, strictly dependent on an "epochal analysis",<sup>26</sup> the cultural process the museum represents follows a cultural system articulated by "epochal" dominant features. Shaped by art history, and thus, effectively validated through the past, the cultural system (museological field) that the museum represents is predominantly "residual",<sup>27</sup> in the sense that it uses the past as an active element for the present.

However, if the articulation between the past and the present raises the question of art history, the articulation between present and future will obviously raise the question of the status of art criticism and of its role in the formation of the contemporary art museum. The question here is: how does a museum develop when it is established consistently on art theory and intentionally sharing its priorities?

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<sup>25</sup> O'Brian, Op. Cit., p. xv.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, Raymond, "Dominant, Residual, Emergent", in *Art in Theory - 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford et. al. 1992, pp. 979 - 983.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*The Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MoMA)*

Representing a new and foreign taste when it opened in the late twenties,<sup>28</sup> by 1960 MoMA had become a model not only for every American city with aspirations to "high" culture but also for every capital of the "free world". With an institutional history that can be traced back to 1939, (the same year of "Avant Garde and Kitsch" first publication) the different stages in the development of MoMA were to be closely linked and stimulated by Greenberg's criticism. Primarily conceived as a *Kunsthalle*, a house dedicated to temporary exhibitions, in the beginning of the 1960s the museum was to abandon its "Utopian" ideals to become the paradigmatic museum of modern art. The museological symbol of Greenberg's modernist project.

In an essay dedicated to trace the cultural logic of MoMA, "The Museum of Modern Art : The Past's Future",<sup>29</sup> Alan Wallach argues that MoMA's history can be divided into three periods : "Utopia", "Vindication" and "Forever Modern". However, if one compares Wallach's three different periods with Greenberg's writing, clearly the development from "Utopia" to "Forever Modern" can be traced in parallel with the development from "Avant Garde and Kitsch" to "Modernist Painting."

Although MoMA was established in 1929, it is ironically the year 1939 that was to mark the museum's high point as an institution and the beginning of its transformation into a "powerful corporate elite"<sup>30</sup> that was to project Greenberg's art criticism.

MoMA was already ten years old when the opening of its "New Building" demanded a total reorganisation of its programmes and aims. The founders established the function of the museum as an educational institution designed to promote a public understanding of all arts. Consonant with this revolutionary agenda was the cause of contemporary architecture. In 1932, MoMA held its historic exhibition, "Modern Architecture : International Exhibition", which offered a detailed confrontation between European and American architectural work. Organised by Henry Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, the aim of the exhibition was to isolate certain principles from

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<sup>28</sup> The Museum opened in the autumn of 1929 in a few rooms in a office building, The Hecksher Building, on Fifth Avenue with an exhibition of Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh. Ten years after its foundation the Museum moves into a private house on 53rd Street and finally into its own building that was for several years known simply as 'The New Building'. For a complete history of 'The New Building' see Dominic Riccioti, "The 1939 Building of the Museum of Modern Art : The Goodwin-Stone Collaboration", in *The American Art Journal* , vol. 17, Nr. 3, Summer 1985, pp. 50-76.

<sup>29</sup> Wallach, Alan, "The Museum of Modern Art: the Past's Future" in *Art in Modern Culture - An anthology of Critical Texts*, Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (eds.), Phaidon Press Ltd. London 1992, p. 282 - 291.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

contemporary architectural production in order to promote a new American architectural style, which they called "The International Style".<sup>31</sup> With its ideological parameters defined as utopic, idealistic, anti-historicist and anti-symbolic, the "International Style" was the one that MoMA's new building was to promote.

In the spring of 1939 the new building, designed by Phillip Goodwin in collaboration with Edward Durrell Stone, opened on West 53rd Street. Promoting the "International Style" architecture, that some years before MoMA helped to engineer, the building was not just to function as a "public evidence of its aims and ideals". Its design was also to become a part of the museum collection, because it was not something collected but something deliberately and carefully created, MoMA's new building was to become the museum's "most representative artefact, the most potent signifier"<sup>32</sup> of its modernists' aspirations.

Although today the building has been totally eclipsed by its "International Style" high-rise neighbourhood, the museum was planned for a site still constituted mainly by elegant town houses dating from the nineteenth century (see Appendix, fig. 1). Within this urban context, MoMA's building, with its clear, simple lines and polished facade created an enormous contrast. With its design, promoting the three principles of the "International Style", volume rather than mass, regularity rather than symmetry and anti-ornament and contrasting enormously with its urban context the building represented perfectly the ideological parameters proclaimed by Greenberg in "Avant Garde and Kitsch" that art removes itself completely from the actual world of social and political struggle in order to preserve the "historical essence of civilisation".<sup>33</sup>

As MoMA's architecture incorporated an ideological shift by appealing to the rational and intellectual position defended by Greenberg in "Avant Garde and Kitsch", the museum needed to adapt its interiors and policies accordingly.

The museological interior space of MoMA's "utopian" years was completely open. The galleries were divided into three floors "united by the single 'termolux' window that was apparently meant to signify the gallery function taken as a whole"<sup>34</sup> (see Appendix, fig.1). However, its open gallery space was ideologically in opposition

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<sup>31</sup>The conclusions taken from this exhibition were published by Henry Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in "The International Style : Architecture Since 1922". The aim of this book was to promote the 'International Style' as an architectural style and to define its stylistic and ideological parameters.

<sup>32</sup>Wallach, Op. Cit., p.284.

<sup>33</sup>Greenberg, Clement, "Avant Garde and Kitsch", Op. Cit., p. 533.

<sup>34</sup>Ricciotti, Op. Cit. p. 69.

with the selective discourse proclaimed by Greenberg. As Greenberg stated, culture could produce simultaneously two different products : avant-garde and "Kitsch". This means that a totally open space (formally as well as ideologically), by the same token could exhibit (sometimes without knowing) avant-garde and "Kitsch" products.

Clearly, what was happening inside MoMA's open spaces were successive events. However, the history of successive events can never be reduced to an objective discourse. It lacks a linear and continuous meaning. This situation could have been overcome if MoMA had established a coherent exhibition policy. However, in this period such was not the case. Emerging at a time when the values of European art were in crisis and the American avant-garde art was confined to the FAP project, to establish a long-term exhibition policy was problematic, if not impossible.

MoMA's principal aim was to achieve a leadership role within the American cultural scene. Ten years were needed for the "New Building" to open, not because of lack of financial resources but because almost seven years were needed to choose one architect that "would not jeopardise"<sup>35</sup> MoMA's intentions. The same situation was happening with its exhibition policy.

The "Armory Show" (that was clearly an event rather than a simple exhibition of modern art) was the only example of a successful exhibition of modern art in the US. As such, it was the example MoMA wanted to follow. However, in doing so, what the museum was presenting was not a clear understanding of all arts. Instead, it was a discontinuous programme reflecting the museum lack of orientation and well-defined aims. As such, MoMA's intention to achieve a leadership position as the paradigmatic modern art museum was threatened by the very nature of the structural organisation of its exhibition space.

Furthermore, Greenberg also stated that in order to advance art must accept its own history as a continuous process. A continuous process that follows a problem/solution model. The structurally open exhibition space that MoMA offered was not, from a Greenbergian point of view, able to provide such continuity and to define structurally as well as ideologically solution models. With the system of moveable walls any spatial model and consequently any solution could be promoted. Consequently, a particular model, and thus a particular understanding of modern art could not be achieved.

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<sup>35</sup> This statement was made by Alfred Barr Jr., MoMA's director at the time the "New Building" opened. The quotation used in this paper is taken from Ricciotti, *Op. Cit.*, p. 63.

### *The Labyrinth : MoMA's Permanent Collection*

The open exhibition space of MoMA's galleries proclaimed an ideological freedom that was against Greenberg's dictums. After the cultural liberation proclaimed by Greenberg in "Avant Garde and Kitsch" and the "Decline of Cubism", the American artistic atmosphere was confident and optimistic, but uneasy at the same time. In 1948, René d'Harnocourt wrote that "this terror of the new freedom, which removed the familiar signposts from the roads that makes many of us wish to turn the clock back and recover the security of yesterday's dogma".<sup>36</sup> However, this strong affirmation must not be read as a reflection of the artistic community, but instead of another particular community : the museum's curators and the art collectors. New York was now the centre of the world culture, but American culture was still without an object, and thus without a clear definition. As such, a "truly" American culture could not be materialised, conceptualised and thus, developed.

René d'Harnocourt was not an artist. He was an expert in the organisation and installation of art exhibits. In 1949 he became MoMA's director and was responsible, during the 1950s, for MoMA's International exhibitions programme. As such, MoMA's decision to exhibit a permanent collection of masterworks, officially declared in 1956, must not be understood, as the artists' "terror of the new freedom". Instead, it must be understood as the museum community's wish to "recover the security of yesterday's dogma". Undoubtedly, in 1949, MoMA's exhibition space was far from being able to provide the so wanted "signposts" or "roads" that, as d'Harnocourt believed, were fundamental for the "security" of artistic dogmas. Influenced by an ideology of universalism MoMA's white and open gallery space, conceived on the basis of the "Internationalist Style" arguments, coincided wonderfully with the utopian cultural ideology of post-war America. White, to provide the neutrality of the space and therefore to devoid it from any cultural interferences. Open, to avoid any kind of regional separation.

However, this utopian discourse, as any other utopia, rejected any "security" or "signposts" arguments as they would destroy the sense of universalism that MoMA was trying to promote. However, in spite of this formal ideological commitment, the

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<sup>36</sup> René d'Harnocourt made this affirmation in the 1948 annual meeting of the American Federation of Art. The quotation used in this paper is taken from Serge Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant Garde in America : Greenberg, Pollock or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center'", in *Art in Modern Culture - An Anthology of Critical Texts*, Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (eds.), Phaidon Press, London 1992, pp. 239-249.

museum's open flexible exhibition space, unusual for the time the building opened, was to be completely transformed with the installation of its "permanent collection". The innovative system of moveable walls, symbol of architectonic freedom and MoMA's internationalist ideal, was going to betray the museum pioneering technique of creating a neutral and indeterminate environment in which any art work, whatever its origins, could find a democratic place.

Without any collection policy so far, MoMA's permanent collection was to be mainly constituted by the private masterworks of the museum's founders.<sup>37</sup> Collected with a spirit that "was an odd mix of avant-garde and established temperaments",<sup>38</sup> the transition of the founders' masterworks to the public domain, was to be responsible for a drastic change in MoMA's exhibition space.

A personal collection, big or small, important or unimportant, is always a celebration of the glory of art that suggests, by extension, the celebration of the glory of its owners. Art-owners never left the presentation of their possessions to chance. They had their own ideas about how to display them to the public and accordingly they designed spaces for their possessions, "Studioli", "Kunst-und Wunderkammer", Court Galleries, Salons and Museums. Different in character and architecture, all those spaces have a common characteristic. They are an instrumental reflection of a personal dream for the sanctification of art and consequently for the glory of an art collector, a nation or an artist. The transition from private patronage to public patronage is always a reflection of this dream. It implies a wish for the immortality of the artwork and by extension for a public recognition of the glory of its owner.

MoMA's patrons were no exception. They had their own understanding of modern art, and consequently their own ideas about how this one should be displayed. For them, modern art was seen "as essentially domestic in scale". It was an art that "was never intended to be collective", and that was ideally shown in an "apartment or small studio".<sup>39</sup> Therefore, besides ideological implications, the private/public transition always suggests instrumental transformations.

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<sup>37</sup> MoMA's Founders were Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. (Abby Aldrich), Miss Lizzie P. Bliss, and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan (Mary).

<sup>38</sup> This affirmation was made by the critic Paul Goldberger, to justify the founder's choice of the 'New Building' Architects. Alfred Barr, that was the director of the museum at the time, wanted the German Mies van der Rohe to design the building, but the strong voices of the founder preferred Goodwin's American vision of the new architecture.

<sup>39</sup> This statement was made at the time the museum opened by Talbot Hamlin. The quotation used in this paper is taken from , Ricciotti, Op. Cit., p.57.

Intended as a *Kunsthalle*, the spatial organisation of MoMA's museological field had almost completely divorced itself from its role as a treasure house. From the artists' perspective, such a spatial organisation was the ideal place for the artwork to show itself completely and at ease. However, from the instrumental viewpoint of the art collector, such museological space was, above all, a container without character and history.

The ideal, white, open, flexible and so-called neutral space, designed by Goodwin and Stone, seemed to have no limits *a priori* and thus, no value and character given *a priori*. From an instrumental point of view, an open, flexible and empty gallery space means nothing for an "intimate" private art collection that demands permanence and sanctification. MoMA offered in the past its interior space as a cultural open field, but now, the display of its permanent collection demanded a space that could present itself as a "linguistic metaphor",<sup>40</sup> as a museum. Searching for its "vindication" as museum, the functional and open spaces, designed by Goodwin and Stone for the second and third floor, were completely restructured during the expansion of the building, which was carried out between 1962 and 1964 under the direction of the "International Style" architect Philip Johnson. The open spaces of the second and third floor were transformed into a series of twenty narrow rooms (see Appendix, fig.4 and fig.5). By dividing the space into a "Labyrinth"<sup>41</sup> of narrow windowless white cubes a space that was essentially one of modelling was to become one of construction through the use of the moveable walls system.

### The "Labyrinth"

MoMA's choice of a "labyrinthine" structure to divide its open exhibition space is not as innocent as it might seem at first sight. The use of a "labyrinthine" structure implies a belief system and a well-defined art-historical pattern. As observed by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "the image of the 'Labyrinth' has a great number of meanings in Western Culture. However, its most common feature is the representation of a trial that ends in triumph. It usually represents metaphorically a movement from darkness to light, from death to rebirth. A movement towards values, that implies the fulfilment of a

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<sup>40</sup> Tschumi, Bernard, "Questions of Space : The Pyramid and the Labyrinth (or the Architectural Paradox)", in *Studio International*, Vol. 190, nr. 977, Sept./Oct. 1974, p.142.

<sup>41</sup> Duncan, Carol and Wallach, Alan, "Ordeal and Triumph on 53rd Street", in *Studio International*, Vol. 194, nr. 989, pp. Feb. 1978, p. 48-57.

prophecy“.<sup>42</sup> They are normally sacramental structures through which certain beliefs can be promoted. The sacramental nature of MoMA's “labyrinthine“ exhibition space is clear. In its search for values, MoMA's museological field, that was conceived to be context became now content, a thing. What was a space, become a place - a space with character. Within such spatial organisation the pictures are given meaning by their location in the place. In fact, one of the major characteristics of a place is that it has the power of imbuing all its components with certain meaning.

Within a place, even the walls have a meaning. As pointed out by Brian O'Doherthy, “[the] wall, the context of art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to art.(...) the aesthetic of the wall will inevitably ‘artify‘ the work in a way that frequently diffuses its attention“.<sup>43</sup> The wall itself implies an architectural limit, a scale, a place, and therefore a meaning. Thus, the object and the place in which it is exhibited provide meaning to one another. Artworks that are considered to have a “special weight by the dogma are framed by doorways and are often visible from several rooms away. Works deemed of lesser importance occupy corner spaces, or are hung in tiers“.<sup>44</sup>

### MoMA's Iconographic Programme

Influenced by an academic art criticism, that was now sharing its methodologies, problems and crises with art history, MoMA's choice of an iconographic programme more dependent on criticism than on art history was not seen as problematic. In this period, Greenberg was still searching for a “truly“ American avant-garde object. MoMA, by the same token, was searching for its “museum“. Therefore, governed by the same purposes and aims, a complete dialectic of theory and art practice, using the museological space as an experimental field, seemed to be the only solution for the promotion of Greenberg's aesthetic project and for MoMA to achieve a definitive position within the American art world. With a labyrinthine architecture inviting a prophetic movement, which was already a reflection of Greenberg's concept of art history as a continuous

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> O'Doherthy, Brian, " Inside the White Cube, Notes on the Gallery Space, Part I" in, *Artforum*, Vol. 14, March 1976, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Duncan , C. and Wallach, A., Op.Cit., p.53.

process that obeys a problem/solution model, the iconographic programme of MoMA's permanent collection was to be strictly dependent on Greenberg's theories.

The second floor "main route" was then mainly constituted by Cubism and Surrealism. Put differently, Europe and the Immigration years, with everything else - German Expressionism, Futurism, the Constructivists, *Die Brücke*, *Der Blaue Reiter* and Matisse - acquiring significance in relation to these two key movements. According to MoMA's programme, the history of modern art starts with Cézanne's *The Bather*, which is displayed at the beginning of the "labyrinth". After Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists, the next four rooms (see Appendix, fig.4) are entirely dedicated to Cubism. MoMA's attachment to Greenberg's belief that Cubism "was the epoch making feat of twentieth century art", is also very clear in the display of Matisse's work. In fact, after leaving the futurist's room, where the "signpoint" is Boccioni's *City Rises*, the first visible Matisse's work is *The Music Lesson*, which happens to be one of his most cubist works. According to MoMA, Cubism is the avant-garde movement of the twentieth century, everything else acquires meaning in relation to it, or is a foreshadowing of it, in the case of Cézanne.

As pointed out by Duncan and Wallach, before leaving the second floor "the history of modern art has already reached complete freedom from the material world"<sup>45</sup> with the works of Kandinsky and Malevich. Moreover, "this moment of enlightenment is duly marked by the first and only window in the labyrinth".<sup>46</sup>

The third floor recommences with Cubism. The first visible work displayed at the beginning of the second floor is Picasso's *Guernica*. With cubism appearing at the beginning of the second and third floors, clearly the construction of MoMA's iconographic programme was waiting for the materialisation of Greenberg's prophecy, proclaimed in "The Decline of Cubism". This fact is also clear in the choice of Cubism's "signpoints". In fact, the two Cubists works chosen to represent Cubism key moments and thus, occupying a special place within the "labyrinth", were *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* and *Guernica*. The first cubist painting and the last impact moment of the Cubist tradition. The beginning and the "decline" of Cubism so wanted by Greenberg. In MoMA's second floor Cubism was still the avant-garde movement of the twentieth century, but by the time one reaches the third floor it is a "historic avant-garde", it is "dead". With "Modernist Painting", American art found its ideal object and MoMA's

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 53

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

iconographic trial ended finally in "triumph". As argued by Wallach and Duncan, within MoMA's iconographic programme Abstract Expressionism appears as "the logical fulfilment of the original historical scheme, which in effect prophesied its coming".<sup>47</sup>

The influence of "Modernist Painting" in the construction of MoMA's iconographic programme is also very clear in the exhibition of sculpture. It is exhibited in a succession of small rooms, forming a corridor along the left side of the third floor completely apart and bypassed by the "main route" (see Appendix, fig.5). The display of sculpture only enhances MoMA's attachment to Greenberg's argument that "for the sake of its own autonomy painting has above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture".<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it is clear that, by accepting Abstract Expressionism as the logical fulfilment of its "labyrinthine" route, and thus, compromising itself with Greenberg's premises, MoMA could not include sculpture into its "main route" iconographic programme. In fact, the apparent coherence of MoMA's iconographic programme was not just achieved by enhancing the importance of some artistic movements in detriment to others, but also by ignoring completely certain artistic manifestations.

The work of the American Pop Artists is one case in point. Established as a major avant-garde in the mid-fifties, their work was coined by Greenberg as a "novelty art" undistinguished by any "real newness". Undoubtedly, the forms of the so-called Pop Art, associated with the world of advertisement, comics, films and other forms of "Kitsch", in the sense that Greenberg uses the term, could never acquire the status of "high art". This assumption also explains why the prominent figures of this movement such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, were so late incorporated within MoMA's permanent collection. In fact, it was just in the museum 1991 re-hang, that Pop Art works from the late 1950s and 1960s were incorporated within the iconographic programme of MoMA's "main route".

### **MoMA : "Forever Modern"**

With "Modernist Painting" the "labyrinth" scheme was definitely closed. Transformed into a sanctuary for the preservation of "high values", MoMA found itself in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 756.

a position of oppressive authority that was not just ideological but also structural. As observed by Norberg-Schulz "the capacity of a spatial structure to receive content is determined by its degree of articulation".<sup>49</sup> If such articulation is "general" it allows for "changes" and thus the "space will be capable of covering several contents". However, if "the articulation consists in the establishment of a particular form, the content has to be correspondingly special".<sup>50</sup> This means that, if the space is construed for a special content it closes itself to any other re-articulation. Therefore, it becomes a closed structural form.

Spatially and ideologically organised around the Greenbergian dogma, MoMA's direction and activities stagnated. Its iconographic programme, with Abstract Expressionism finally appearing as the logical fulfilment of the museum's labyrinth scheme, was completed. Never before was an art "movement" so rapidly and successfully incorporated by art history. Thus, MoMA had good reasons to be proud and confident of itself. In twenty years it had overpowered the art it exhibited and acquired a special social cachet.

With its last attempt to incorporate new art practices - organising the "Responsive Eyes" exhibition in 1965 - coined as a "pathetic", and "irresponsible" gesture, MoMA proved that it was no longer able to provide solutions to the new art problems. Its "domestic" and "intimate" scales became its "domestic" and private mode of addressing art.

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<sup>49</sup>Norberg-Schulz, Christian, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, Studio Vista Limited, London 1971, p. 38.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Minimal Art and Greenberg's Conventions of Spectatorship**

#### *A Counter - "Modernism " Ideology*

The 1960s witnessed a radical reorganisation to the American political, ideological, economic and social systems. The reorganisation of the whole social system was consequently followed by a total reorganisation of the American art world. The success of the first entirely American art movement, Abstract Expressionism, produced a belief that an autonomous and independent American art world could exist. This belief together with the American post war prosperity was to establish officially Greenberg's modernist project. By the end of the fifties American dominance in the international cultural scene became an undeniable fact. "The New American Painting" exhibition, organised by MoMA, which toured eight European capitals in 1958 and 1959, was an incredible success.<sup>52</sup> As a consequence of its triumph outside the US, Abstract Expressionism achieved a new position within the American art scene. Although, "truly" American, it was not a regional phenomenon, but instead a "universal" artistic project.

To recognise the triumph of Abstract Expressionism and adopt its products as the symbols of America's cultural dominance over Europe presupposed a recognition of Greenberg's prophecies. Never before were the prophecies of an art critic so correct. If in "The Decline of Cubism" the moment of opportunity for a "truly" American culture was a prophecy, ten years later it was an undeniable reality. Venerated as a prophet, an aesthetic "Guru",<sup>53</sup> Greenberg was to occupy the central position within the artistic and

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<sup>52</sup> For a more detailed information about "The New American Painting" exhibition see, Harris, Jonathan "Abstract Expressionism and the Politics of Criticism" in Wood, Paul, et. al., *Modernism in Dispute - Art Since the Forties*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London in association with The Open University, London 1993, pp. 42-65.

<sup>53</sup> Reise, Barbara, "Greenberg and the Group : A Retrospective View", in *Art in Modern Culture - An Anthology of Critical Texts*, Francina, Francis and Harris, Jonathan (eds.), Phaidon Press , London 1992, p. 252.

intellectual American community. In the beginning of the sixties to talk about art theory was to talk about Clement Greenberg. Totally and blindly adopted by the American intellectual community Greenberg's modernism was to achieve the status of a cultural regime. After the publication of "Modernist Painting",<sup>54</sup> Greenberg not just synthesised formally and ideologically a "truly" American artistic movement, now internationally recognised, but also an entire cultural system : modernism. To understand the importance of Greenberg's modernist project and why its judgements and arguments were so rapidly considered as the only representatives of a "truly" American culture, it is necessary to relate the modernist project to the political and ideological context within which it was produced.

Greenberg's modernist project achieved its "official" recognition in a period of deep political and ideological reorganisation. After the end of the Second World War it became clear that a new world power was emerging : the Soviet Union. Furthermore, that this new world power promoted a political and ideological system that was seen as anti-democratic and thus, anti-American. If after the War, Fascism was no longer a threat for the Western World another one was now emerging as ideologically victorious as the US of America: the communist world. Therefore, seen as the new enemy (of the victory) of liberal capitalism in the wake of Nazi defeat, the communist world had to be fought against with the same conviction as Fascism was before. As a consequence a new war was declared : the "Cold War".

With the onset of the "Cold War" immediately following the defeat of Fascism, culture became a site of struggle between the two leading world powers. The Nazis and the Italian fascists demonstrated how powerful culture could be in the political arena while, at the same time, the European and American resistance movements were unable to recognise in art such an instrumental power. The Second World War resistance movements based in the US, such as the Popular Front against Fascism, established in 1935, and the Popular Front against the Spanish Civil War,<sup>55</sup> failed precisely because they did not recognise how crucial a "weapon" culture could be to the inculcation of ideological values. On the contrary, instead of using art to fight the fascists' ideological prescriptions, they left art and culture without any ideological programme to struggle against its political appropriation. Alerted by this fact, after the Second World War the

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<sup>54</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit.

<sup>55</sup> For a complete account on the formation and development of the American Resistance Movements see, "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered", in *Modernism in Dispute - Art Since the Forties*, Wood, Paul et. al. , Yale University Press, New Haven & London, in association with The Open University, London 1993, pp. 170- 257.

intellectual community of the US was strongly determinate not to make the same mistake again.

The politics of the "Cold War" period are generally defined by a structure of oppositions and contrast between the belief systems of the East and West. Concomitant with a belief system organised by opposition and contrasting values is the concept of hegemony. Indeed, the success and impact of a such system based on oppositional notions, such as good and bad, black and white, East and West, Communism and Capitalism, depends on how strongly such values are homogeneously affirmed and canonised. To achieve a fixed place within such a structure, each of the countries involved promoted a hegemonic view of its culture. The more unified and homogeneous culture was, the strongest it could be transformed into a powerful "weapon" to consciousness inculcation. Within such a political and ideological system Greenberg's modernist project, with its selective and academic based aesthetic theory promoting a rhetoric of "purity" and "autonomy", functioned perfectly as a cultural vehicle to legitimate the ideological and political values the US was trying to promote. An art that was free from "Kitsch" was thus free from the "culture of the masses"<sup>56</sup> characteristic of the communist world. Furthermore, an art that was autonomous from its political and social world and internationally recognised, was the perfect cultural symbol of the "free" and democratic America "standing up against the threat of the Soviet Union to the Western capitalistic democracies".<sup>57</sup>

Seen as a powerful ideological "weapon" Greenberg's modernist project was to ramify rapidly far beyond the discursive limits of art history and art criticism. Art criticism was normalised as a professional activity and its ideals institutionalised and made official. By the beginning of the sixties Greenberg's modernism included "almost the whole of what is alive in our culture".<sup>58</sup> However, to include the whole of what is culturally alive while at the same time projecting an hegemonic view of culture means to reorganise the cultural process as a cultural system.

As pointed out by Raymond Williams,<sup>59</sup> one of the major characteristics of culture understood and organised as a unified system is its "residual" character. A culturally unified system, or using Williams' words a "dominant cultural tradition",<sup>60</sup> is

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<sup>56</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Avant Garde and Kitsch", Op. Cit., p. 536.

<sup>57</sup> Harris, Jonathan, Op. Cit., p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 754.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, "Dominant, Residual and Emergent", Op. Cit. p. 980.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.981.

“residual“ because in order to maintain its unity and hegemony it must not be influenced by outside realities. As such, it must relate only to itself. This means that it must only accept one level of discourse: its own. Within a system that is closed, the so far idealistic and thus subjective Greenbergian aesthetic project was to be shaped as dominant, absolute and objective. Consequently, its concepts became laws and its definitions became rules. Shaped by a dominant theory and closed to external influences the “whole“ was normalised and the different cultural institutions became increasingly similar.

Certainly if the art world is characterised by “similar others“<sup>61</sup> there is no place for conflicts of difference to emerge and the hegemony of culture is not threatened. However, as a consequence of this similarity, the art world institutions were to change dramatically. Recomposed under the influence of an hegemonic view of culture art's institutions were to lose their hierarchical structure and were transformed into what Lawrence Alloway called a “network“.<sup>62</sup> A modernist “network“ of different practices working under the influence of a single theory : modernism. Within such a cultural “network“ the meaning of the different practices derives from the meaning of the dominant part. That is why one can talk about “a modernist gallery or exhibition, a modernist curator or art historian, a modernist monograph or review, and in none of these cases we would have in mind the explicit formulation of a theoretical position“.<sup>63</sup>

This unified cultural system was to provide the museum with an “alibi for ignoring the ideological aspects of the artwork and the equally ideological implications of the way those works are presented to the public“.<sup>64</sup> Acting accordingly to the modernist cultural “network“ the selective role of the modernist museum was not seen as problematic. On the contrary, its selective role was the visible symbol of cultural hegemony. It was a modernist architectonic space, conceived for a modernist art, organised by modernist curators and art critics for the purpose of educating the people by showing them a selection of the “best artworks“ of a certain art historical period.

Influenced by a political system that was promoting a specific aesthetic project in detriment to others, together with Greenberg's argument that aesthetic judgement can be objective and that art must deny any kind of social action to sustain the level of quality required for a “high“ status, the selective role of the museum was not seen as

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<sup>61</sup>. Alloway, Lawrence, " Network : The Artworld Described as a System", in *Artforum*, Vol. 11, nr. 1, September, 1972, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup>. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>64</sup>. Haacke, Hans, " Museums, Managers of Consciousness", in *Artforum*, Vol. 22, February 1984, p. 13.

problematic. On the contrary, it was as a genuine need. It is not (as it has always been) the function of the art museum to select and exhibit the greatness of great art? It is not its primary mission to protect art for future generations and thus to present its space as a "shelter" for irreplaceable objects?

However, in the early sixties such a museological system was to be deeply questioned and challenged.

With the advent of the Vietnam War, in 1965, the American hegemonic culture began to break up. In the first twelve months of the War more than ten thousand American soldiers died in Vietnam. By the end of 1968 this number had trebled. The government was spending more than 30,000 million dollars per year on the War while, at the same time, one in seven US citizens officially existed below the line of poverty. From 1965 until 1969 a series of drastic events was to show a completely different social scenario from the one promoted so far by the American political system of the "Cold War" period. The assassination of the African-American leaders, Malcom X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968, was to show, a completely different reality. The "free" and democratic America that the US government was trying to promote was in reality, a violent, racist and ideologically corrupted country. Through the media coverage, of the atrocities perpetuated by American troops, the image of democratic freedom of the US started to lose national and international credibility.

A whole traditional ideology of social and political representation entered a deep crisis. Without moral credibility to promote its beliefs the state started to lose its political and ideological monopoly. Consequently, the global political system fragmented. The political fragmentation was followed by a deconstruction of the social world. Fragmented and thus unable to promote an hegemonic social belief, the social space was to acquire a totally new configuration. The increasing public indignation with what was happening in Vietnam, together with the fragmentation of the global political system, opened the way for counter-public movements and groups to emerge and to occupy a privileged position within society. These movements included mainly anti-war, women's and human rights groups. The effects of such groups upon an indignant and discontented society were to be enormous. Extremely cohesive and well organised they will function as the only ideological shelters for a society which had been abruptly confronted with a totally different country from the one it had so far idealised.

The emergence of a counter-public sphere opened the way to counter-cultural movements to be established. If the principal aim of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam

movements was to question the state and its militarist and racist rhetoric, the purpose of the counter-cultural groups was to question the American cultural system. Particularly, to question the specific ways through which the modernist discourse was propagated, used and controlled by the state to serve as a vehicle to promote the government belief system. For them, if Greenberg's modernism was considered the symbol of the "liberal" culture of America, then it was as racist and ideologically ruined as America itself. In fact, seen from the viewpoint of the social minorities, Greenberg's aesthetic project was a very racist and corrupted one indeed. In its trajectory, since the end of the Second World War, it had ignored completely that other alternatives to white, middle class and male art could exist. Therefore, what was supposed to be a "universal" aesthetic theory was nonetheless a theory that was built around the assumption that alternatives to its beliefs simply do not exist. Through the work and activism of the counter-cultural groups the artistic community became uncomfortably aware of this fact.

However, to entertain such questions was not simply to be faced with the selective role of the modernist project; it was also to realise that to question modernism presupposes to question an entire concept of culture. Furthermore, that this culture was not something that was to be understood as the symbol of the American "free way of live",<sup>65</sup> but instead as a highly specialised and elitist one.

Alerted by the increasing public manifestations of the counter-public movements the almost apolitical artistic community became aware of the way in which the institutionalised power was using the symbol of "artistic freedom". Principally, the way the modern art museum was promoting its rationale of artistic autonomy. Seen from a political perspective, the modern art museum was not the innocent and apolitical institution, devoted to a "disinterested" protection of the "greatness of great art", that modernist culture was trying to promote. Although apparently "neutral" it was deeply politically compromised. It pretended to be an apolitical institution, while at the same time, as Carl André observes, its board of trustees was constituted "exactly by the same people who devised the American foreign policy over the last twenty-five years". The same people who "devised the war in the first place", the same who "wish to see the war continued, indefinitely".<sup>66</sup> The museum Carl André was referring to was undoubtedly the MoMA. MoMA's political propaganda functions, in particular, and of the modern art

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<sup>65</sup> Williams, Raymond, "The Analysis of Culture", in *Art in Theory -1900-1990- An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford et.al.. 1992, p.712.

<sup>66</sup> André, Carl, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium", in *Artforum*, September 1970, p.37.

museum in general were now difficult to hide from an increasingly politically aware artistic community. In fact, after the Second World War, almost all of MoMA's founders and directors were connected, although in different ways, with Government Cultural Agencies. Furthermore, they were even connected with the US pantheon of censorship and state control : the CIA.<sup>67</sup>

Confronted with this new reality the artist faith in and respect for the modern art museum collapsed. The effect of a museological system based on modernist premises was to generate, within the artistic community, a sense of inevitability to all that is done to art in the name of Greenberg's "high culture". The "neutral" and "universal" status of the modern art museum became a fallacy. To acknowledge its selective role was not just to raise questions of sex and race discrimination. It was also to acknowledge that, through a powerful "selective tradition", the modernist museological field imbued with a particular ideological value the objects it displayed. So powerfully that it could even threaten the artwork to declare itself ideologically. In the mid-sixties the word art museum was synonymous with anti-ideological freedom and thus anti-artistic freedom.

The position which Greenberg's modernism and the modern art museum formerly occupied was already ideologically being strongly questioned by the counter-cultural groups, however the structural or physical implications of such a doctrine seemed not to be a matter of dispute. Because it inflected a certain ideology upon the artwork, the museological space the modernist museum offered was now seen as one capable of limiting ideologically art's possibilities. Although the museum was now understood as being a "closed entity", its structural format was not seen as problematic. The preconception that the "white cube" space of the modernist gallery was a structurally "neutral" field and thus one that was not physically obstructive to the art work, was still prevailing among many artists. Although "ruined", "corrupted" and highly "selective", the museum was still seen as the only possible place for art. Indifferent to representation and presentation debates, the formal organisation of the museum, stood firm and steady.

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<sup>67</sup>For a more detailed information on MoMA's involvement with the CIA, see Cockroft, Eva, "Abstract Expressionism Weapon of the Cold War", in *Art in Modern Culture - An Anthology of Critical Texts*, Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (eds.), Phaidon Press Limited, London 1992, pp. 82-90.

### “Specific Objects “

A distinct challenge to the ideological authority of the Greenbergian version of modernism and to the modernist museum's role in determining what is art from what is not, was offered in the mid sixties by a group of American artists who came to be labelled as Minimalists.

Minimalism began to consolidate as a “movement“ between 1965 and 1967. Although with a stylistic history that can be traced back to 1959, when Frank Stella and Yves Klein showed their monochromatic paintings in the exhibition “Sixteen Americans“ organised by MoMA, it was just after the publication of what is today considered this “movement“ key note essays, Donald Judd's "Specific Objects"<sup>68</sup> published in 1965, and Robert Morris' "Notes on Sculpture I-III"<sup>69</sup> published in 1966 and 1967, that Minimalism achieved a definitive position as an art “style“. Formally characterised as an abstract and geometric art that promotes the supremacy of painting over a sculpture organised with a minimum of incidents and compositional details, the principal aim of the Minimalists was to reduce the art object to its most pure format. In order to do that, the artwork was manufactured with common industrial materials, such as stainless steel, aluminium and Plexiglas, and its forms reduced to the most simplistic and universal ones : the cube and the rectangle. Hence, promoting a discourse of art's reduction to its most universal format in order to provide an unadulterated visual experience “minus symbolism, minus messages and minus personal exhibitionism“,<sup>70</sup> Minimal art can be read primarily as a continuation of Greenberg's modernist aesthetic project. Although this minimisation of material incidents and compositional detail is normally understood as a formal reaction towards the gestural excesses of Abstract Expressionism, Minimal art, if not truly modernist could be construed as a kind of ultimate modernism.

In "Modernist Painting"<sup>71</sup> Greenberg argued that just concentrating on “the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself“<sup>72</sup> art could be “authentic“. <sup>73</sup> He goes on arguing that in order to be “authentic“ art must be “pure“. However, to achieve “purity“ art must confine

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<sup>68</sup>. Judd, Op. Cit.

<sup>69</sup>. Morris, Op.Cit.

<sup>70</sup>. Goosen, Eugene. This quotation is taken from Chave, Anna, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", in *Art in Modern Culture - An Anthology of Critical Texts*, Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (eds.), Phaidon Press, London 1992, p. 266.

<sup>71</sup>. Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Art", Op. Cit., p.755.

<sup>72</sup>. Ibid., p. 755.

<sup>73</sup>. Ibid., p. 755.

itself to its own "limitations - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment".<sup>74</sup> This means that art must accept only what it is given by its traditional media and reject "illusionism". Greenberg defined "illusionism", as any formal or ideological reference to external realities. Therefore, in order to reject ideological interferences art should exist away from its social and political spheres. In order to reject formal interferences art must confine itself to the two-dimensional and rectangular surface of the canvas, minus illusory "space", minus "objectual representation" and minus "symbolism". In short, just overcoming "illusionist" practices art could be formally understood as "good" art and not as "Kitsch".

In this system of ideas, Minimal art with its geometric uniformity, its flat surfaces and classic composition could be understood as a non-illusionist art in the sense in which Greenberg defined it. However, for Greenberg Minimal art, although fascinating, was "banal", "empty" and "unchallenging to taste".<sup>75</sup> Although fascinating its fascination was not "owed to the quality of the art", instead it was owed to "its very lack of quality".<sup>76</sup> Put differently, Minimal art was for Greenberg "bad" art. The question here is : why Greenberg could not embrace Minimal art as a "truly" modernist art?

The answer can be found, partially, in Greenberg's concept of art's "literal presence".<sup>77</sup> Greenberg believed that in order to overcome "illusionism" and thus achieve "purity" art must confine itself to its "literal" presence. To confine itself to its "literal" presence means that art must not just accept what is given by its traditional media but also to accept the physical limits of those media. This means that art should accept its physical boundaries and reject that those limits could be contingent upon the contextual space in which they developed. Art should be self-referential and negate any form of non-aesthetic or aesthetic contextual influences. Therefore, for Greenberg "pure" art was not just the one that could reject any kind of influence from the political and social world, that could present its content as non-representational and non-illusionist, but also the one that could reject any structural interference from the context in which it was exhibited.

The Minimalists believed in Greenberg's rhetoric of art's neutrality from its social and political contexts. Although, emerging as a definitive "style" precisely in the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 755.

<sup>75</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Counter Avant-Garde", in *Art International*, vol. 15, May 1971, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p.755.

politically agitated year of 1965, the minimalists' discourse does not portray art as a social or political instrument. On the contrary, their political position was very pragmatic. Contrary to the new social movement's belief that an art politically compromised could change the political exercise of power, the minimalists believed that "art may change a little, but not much".<sup>78</sup> As such, an art politically committed was not necessary, from the point of view of the Minimalists. They believed that the artist should concentrate only on his/her own work and negate any form of political and social interference. When asked what was his position regarding the kinds of political action that should be taken by artists,<sup>79</sup> Judd wrote that his work had "nothing to do with the society, the institutions and the grand theories. It was one person's work and interests"; its main conclusion, negative but basic, was that "anyone shouldn't serve any of these things" and that an art politically committed should be considered "very sceptically and practically".<sup>80</sup>

The Minimalists also believed in art's "literal" presence in the sense that Greenberg used the term. However, in order to achieve a "literal" presence they believed that art's contextual influence could not be neutralised as Greenberg was proposing. If the art context was neutralised then what was perceived was not a "literal" object but something that could acquire new formal configurations from the structural context in which it existed.

The major problem facing contemporary art was, from Judd's point of view, a reliance on what he called "the space in between", which he felt interfered with a definitive comprehension of art. As he points out "if two objects are close together they define the space in between".<sup>81</sup> This means that a third reality is involved and consequently, art is not able to defeat "illusionism" completely. If a new reality emerges new associations between the artwork and the context in which it exists will correspondingly appear and thus art's formal unity is not achieved. Instead of ignoring its surrounding space, art must include it so that the "relation between" the discrete parts or art's physical context do not interfere with the fullest comprehension of the work. Just doing this, art's "literal presence" was not threatened.

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<sup>78</sup> Judd, Donald, "The Artist and Politics : A Symposium", Op. Cit., p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> In 1970, *Artforum*, then the leading American Art magazine circulated this question to a number of artists. Twelve replies were published in the same magazine in September of the same year.

<sup>80</sup> Judd, Donald, "The Artist and Politics : A Symposium", Op. Cit., p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> Judd, Donald, "Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular", in *Artforum*, Vol. XXXII, nr. 10, Summer 1994, p. 72.



In his essay "Specific Objects" Donald Judd pronounced painting and sculpture finished and proposed in their place a range of "three-dimensional work". As Greenberg, he believed that modernism in the visual arts should be thought of as one project aimed at the production of "definitive" works. However, from Judd's perspective Greenberg's modernist project was misguided precisely in that point. Although modernist artworks could be considered objective works of art they could not defeat totally "illusionism". If in order to defeat illusionism modernist art must reject external influences there was one that was still problematic : "the space in between" the works or what Judd called "real space". Judd believed that if phenomenologically modernist art could achieve a "literal" presence and thus reject "illusionism", empirically it failed. This means that, although Greenberg's modernist art was non-illusionist in content, contextually "illusionism" was still problematic, because by being limited to what is given by its traditional media art was not able to defeat one external reality : its own.

What was at stake from Judd's point of view was not what was presented as content inside art's flat surface but instead the flat surface itself as a physical entity. Judd believed that the flat surface of modernist painting had a life of its own capable of determining physically the limits and rearrangements of the content. Thus, if the content of art was subordinate to the physical limits of its surface what was presented as an autonomous art was not as externally autonomous as Greenberg was trying to defend. Instead, it was externally depending on the boundaries set by its own physical surface. Greenberg believed that the physical limit of the flat surface was a determinant factor in determining what is "good" art and what is not. As he wrote in an article published in 1967 entitled "The Recentness of Sculpture" : "(...) flatness that could be seen as limited in extension and different from a wall henceforth automatically declared itself to be a picture, to be art."<sup>82</sup>

However, everything that has a physical limitation and is defined through physical boundaries, although it can be primarily understood as an autonomous entity, it is not autonomous from its "real space", or the space in which it exists. Any two-dimensional surface has a space behind and beyond. Thus, it is spatial because it presupposes an order of perception; one thing after another. However, in order to be able to include "real space" and thus defeat completely "illusionism" art could no longer be confined to the imperatives of painting and sculpture. Instead, those traditional media should be

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<sup>82</sup>Greenberg, Clement, "The Recentness of Sculpture", O'Brian, Op. Cit., p. 251.

abandoned and substituted by more convincing formally unitarian objects that were neither painting or sculpture but what Donald Judd called "three-dimensional work".

"Three-dimensional works" were objects, more resembling sculpture than painting, which aimed to defeat completely "illusionism" by including as an integral element the space that existed between the objects. The formal use of "three-dimensionally" was not a movement, a school, or a style and by the time Judd wrote "Specific Objects", "there hasn't been enough time and work to see limits",<sup>83</sup> and thus to develop constant stylistic characteristics. However, this lack of stylistic characteristics was not, from Judd's point of view, problematic. What was crucial was to defeat definitely the problem of art's "illusionism" and this could only be achieved if art's physical limits imposed by its traditional practices were abolished. Just overcoming those limits would the result be a "specific object".

Robert Morris was to entrench more firmly the concept of "three-dimensional work." As Judd, he believed that the problem with modernist art was to defeat "illusionism" effectively. Furthermore, he also believed that modernist art, as Greenberg defined it, was not able to defeat effectively certain illusionist implications because of the physical limitations of its support. That is why, although the abstract content of modernist art was one able to counteract external ideological interferences, there was an illusory discourse between the work and its surrounding space. Therefore, illusory relations could be established between the work and any other work displayed or existing in the same place. As Judd, Morris believed that in order to defeat "illusionism" art should be "three-dimensional". However, from his perspective to be three-dimensional in format was not enough a condition for art to achieve a definitive "non-illusory" status. Art had also to be large in scale, "monumental". Just being large in scale and three-dimensional in format art could apprehend its surrounding space and thus, defeat any illusory discourse. As Morris argued, just being "monumental" in scale the work does not allow for "specific elements to separate from the whole" and set up illusory "relationships within the work".<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, being large in scale, then all detail, all possible influences of the object parts are not perceived and thus, the object emerge as "specific".

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<sup>83</sup>Judd, Donald, "Specific Objects", Op. Cit., p. 813.

<sup>84</sup>Morris, Op. Cit., p. 818.

*The Modernists conventions of Spectatorship and Michael Fried's notion of "Theatricality"*

The question - why Greenberg could not consider Minimal art a "truly" modernist art - is however, a much more complex one and the answer goes far beyond the formal reformations proposed by Judd and Morris.

Greenberg accepted that the Minimalists work was a fascinating art. Furthermore, the Minimalists "Specific Objects" could be seen, ideologically, as a Greenbergian art "carried to its extremes".<sup>84</sup> If the genealogy of Minimalism can be easily read as an attempt to entrench empirically art's "literal" presence and thus, provide art with more instrumental tools to defeat "illusionism", the excessive attacks against Minimal art made by Greenberg remain without a convincing explanation or are normally explained as Greenberg's "failure of nerve in face of the logic of his own position".<sup>85</sup> However, if ideologically Minimal art could be understood as an art which re-invoked Greenberg's modernist project in order to entrench it more firmly, the effect of Judd's "Specific Objects" and Morris' "monumentality" upon the context in which they were exhibited was challenging one of Greenberg's most successful myths : the modernists conventions of spectatorship and consequently the whole structural organisation of the modernist museum.

In his defence of modernism Greenberg not just assisted modernist art with a supportive and descriptive aesthetic theory but he also provided the art museum with a set of conventions and models. In "Modernist Painting"<sup>86</sup> Greenberg argued that "good" art was the one that could call attention to itself. In order to be able to do that art should be "pure". Just being "pure", art could demonstrate that the kind of experience it provides is a "valuable" one and thus, one deserving the spectator attention. However, to achieve "purity" and therefore provide a "valuable" experience art should confine itself to its own area of competence and not refer to outside realities. To use illusion means to use a three-dimensional space or to use a third, and thus an external reality. It also means that attention is not called to the painting itself but instead to what is in the painting, to the

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<sup>84</sup>Chave, Op. Cit., p. 266.

<sup>85</sup>Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, in *Art Theory -1900-1990- An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford et.al., 1992, p. 798.

<sup>86</sup>Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 755.

painting content. For Greenberg art was "good" art when it could be two-dimensional and thus, when it could reject any three-dimensional entities. The third-dimension was for Greenberg "(...) a coordinate that art has to share with non-art."<sup>88</sup>

However, all entities including art exist in a three-dimensional space. If a two-dimensional space was the only guarantee of art's independence as art, how could art exist in the three-dimensional space of the art museum?

The solution for Greenberg was simple because he believed that a three-dimensional space only exists if a "recognisable physical entity"<sup>89</sup> moves into it. Therefore, if that "recognisable physical entity" is ignored then the problem is solved. This "recognisable physical entity" that Greenberg is referring to is undoubtedly the human body. From Greenberg's point of view a three-dimensional space is just three-dimensional if the "fragmentary silhouette of the human presence calls up associations of that kind".<sup>90</sup> To be experienced as art, the artwork must be perceived by the spectator two-dimensionally.

In "Modernist Painting" he wrote: "Where the old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a modernist is one which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye".<sup>91</sup> Therefore, for Greenberg the aesthetic experience must be reduced to the encounter of a disembodied "eye" with the painting's "literal" presence. He goes on arguing that in order to experience art's "literal" presence the "eye" must be distanced from the work and the individual aesthetic experience must not persist in time. It must be distanced from the work because it is precisely the distance between the work and the spectator that makes this one a "subject and the piece in question an object".<sup>92</sup> It must not persist in time because if it persists then the spectator is tempted to see behind the painting and consequently art becomes "illusionist".

Inside the modern art museum the spectator has to behave as if he does not have a body. As pointed out by Brian O'Doherty the modernist gallery space must be organised in such a way that the spectator feels that "while eyes and mind are welcome, space occupying bodies are not."<sup>93</sup> Strongly kept under observation the spectator feels that he

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<sup>88</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "The Recentness of Sculpture", O'Brian John, Op. Cit., p. 252.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 756.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 756.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 758.

<sup>92</sup> Fried, Op. Cit., p. 826.

<sup>93</sup> O'Doherty, Op. Cit., p.26.

does not belong to the place. Inside the modernist gallery the spectator is reduced to his eyes and the aesthetic experience reduced to a succession of "instantaneous" moments.

As Michael Compton correctly observes :

*"What we do is to present art in such a way that, you'll notice if you watch people going around the museum they will look at each painting for an average of 1.6 seconds. I think when they see a painting, they can hardly be thinking anything but : ah, that's an example of Cubism; an example of Pre-Raphaelism; what a nice Mondrian; and so on. They never actually confront the individual painting".<sup>94</sup>*

Inside the modern art museum the aesthetic experience must be, as Fried argued, "a kind of instantaneous"<sup>95</sup> encounter with the art object. It must be what Greenberg's denominated a "detached contemplativeness".<sup>96</sup> If art was "good" then that "infinitely brief instant" was "long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness and to be forever convinced by it".<sup>97</sup> This is how, inside the modern art museum "modernist art" must be perceived in order to defeat "theatre".

"Theatrical" was the term used by Michael Fried to describe and attack Minimal art. In his essay "Art and Objecthood"<sup>98</sup>, published in June 1967, Fried argues that art degenerates as it approaches the conditions of "theatre". Fried's article was the first riposte from modernist art critics to the claims of Judd and Morris. By that time, Michael Fried, one of Greenberg's disciples, had gained a substantial critical reputation as a "modernist" art critic with a series of articles deeply indebted to Greenberg's critical theory. As Greenberg he believed that art should be self-referential and that its "concepts of quality and value", were "meaningful or wholly meaningful within the individual arts, what lies between the arts is theatre".<sup>99</sup>

The term "theatre" is used by Fried to refer to Judd's concept of "real space". For Fried "real space" was the problem with Minimal art. Donald Judd's "specific objects" and Robert Morris' "monumental" pieces could not be considered a "truly" modernist art because by including "real space" they had also included the spectator. Therefore, their

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<sup>94</sup> This quotation is taken from Duncan, Carol and Wallach, Alan, Op. Cit., p. 53.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>96</sup> O'Brian, Op. Cit., p. 82.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>98</sup> Fried, Michael, Op. Cit.

<sup>99</sup> Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 755.

art could not be experienced as a “truly“ modernist and consequently could not be exhibited inside a modern art museum. As Fried said “the whole category of theatricality that I use is all about a problematic of the spectator“.<sup>100</sup> In order to defeat “theatre“ art must “have the right relation to the spectator“.<sup>101</sup> This means that the spectator must be distanced from the work and his/her aesthetic experience must not persist in time. If this does not happen then the whole situation is invested with drama in the sense that the spectator is forced to experience the object and not just to perceived it instantaneously.

Against Greenberg's conventions of spectatorship Judd and Morris included the spectator. From their point of view if the spectator existed externally to the piece he was interfering with the immediate comprehension of the piece. Consequently, art could not defeat totally “illusionism“. Just coexisting with the piece, the possibility of any illusory relationships between the spectator and the work is totally eliminated. As argued by Morris, just coexisting with a monumental piece the viewer is “eliminated“ to the degree that the piece “pulls him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists“.<sup>102</sup> The fullest comprehension of the work required the presence of the spectator. Not just as a passive receiver but as an active participant in the art process. The more monumental the pieces were the more effectively the spectator coexists with them and the more effectively art was perceived as “definitive“.

However, as pointed out by Fried “the larger the object is the more we are forced to keep our distance from it“,<sup>103</sup> until the spectator is outside the museum. Consequently, the spectator and the artwork could no longer coexist in the space the museum offered. Instead of being defined ideologically by the space in which it was exhibited, Minimal art by the very nature of its formal appearance, was defining the gallery space. As argued by O'Doherty “[s]pace now is not just where things happen, things make space happen“.<sup>104</sup> By the very nature of its architecture, the museum becomes a structurally closed entity.

For the counter-cultural movements what was at stake was to acknowledge the importance of the modern art museum in determining and reinforcing ideologically the artists position within the art world. Therefore, their principal aim was to demonstrate that the modernist museum was no longer ideologically possible. However, Minimal art

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<sup>100</sup> Fried, Michael. This quotation is taken from Colpitt, Frances, *Minimal Art :The Critical Perspective*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1990, p. 89.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>102</sup> Morris, Op. Cit., p. 818.

<sup>103</sup> Fried, Op. Cit., p. 825.

<sup>104</sup> O'Doherty, Op. Cit., p. 27.

was to demonstrate that the modern art museum was also structurally a closed entity. In the name of an "intimate" and "private" art that "never intended to be collective", that was "better shown in a small apartment or studio",<sup>105</sup> and that should be perceived in a "brief instantaneous moment", the modernist museum not just restricted itself to certain forms of ideological representation but it also restricted its exhibition space to certain structural formats.

Confronted with this situation the modernist art museum underwent a crisis. Today this "crisis" is widely recognised, documented and accepted. It is normally argued that this "crisis" was an economic one. However, the explanations to such "crisis" atmosphere within the museum world are incomplete if we restrict ourselves to financial determinants and arguments. Why was there a reappearance of art museums precisely in the eighties, a decade that is artistically characterised by a return to traditional and conventional art's practices? Was it just because of economic determinants? Or was it because with the re-emergence of a contextually "autonomous" art the art museum recovered structurally its role as "treasure house"?

Unable to exhibit any other art besides the one it was built for, the great era of the art museum in the US was clearly over by the end of the sixties. Without financial resources the museum's programme could not develop independently from the pressures exerted by corporate and governmental funding. Although, this situation is determinant when an explanation of the "crisis" atmosphere in the museum world of the sixties is made, the factors that contributed to such atmosphere were also of programmatic and structural nature.

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<sup>105</sup> Ricciotti, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57.

## CHAPTER THREE “Alternative Spaces“ Re-Viewed

### The Art Museum 's “Boom“ in the Sixties

*“By the unification of architecture, painting and sculpture a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects but will aid the creation of a surrounding environment not merely utilitarian and rational but also pure and complete in its beauty.”*

*Piet Mondrian*

The sixties American belief system was losing national and international credibility. At the same time the counter ideology formations removed from American culture any remaining sign of the utopian cultural ideals set after the Second World War. However, the US art's institutions seemed to be indifferent to such “crisis“ atmosphere. The weak and confused picture offered by the America of the sixties in its political, economic and social aspects might lead one to think that culture was suffering the repercussions and was thus in crisis; however, the extraordinary “boom“ in the development of American art's institutions in the late sixties not only contradicts this idea as it leads one to believe that no counter cultural system or artistic crisis existed.

As Meyer observes:

*“Between 1955 and 1970, 123 art museums and visual art centres were built or enlarged in the United States of America. By the end of the seventies 10.2 million square feet of total space was dedicated to Art; more than one third of that (3.5 million square feet) comprised gallery space. Taking the figure of 750,000 square feet for the total size of the Louvre, one can calculate that the total square footage is the equivalent of 13.6*

*Louvres or, to make a more parochial comparison, the equivalent of 1,643.7 football fields*".<sup>105</sup>

Never before, at times of socio-political instability and reformation was such a development of art's institutions achieved. It is normally argued that the stimulus for museum's growth is external and its reformations concomitant with "economic, governmental and political changes nation-wide and abroad".<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, it is also widely argued that only political and social reformations are "determinants that can affect the museum development".<sup>107</sup> However, if we restrict ourselves to this dialectical explanatory system, the museum's "boom" phenomenon in the late sixties and seventies remains without a convincing explanation. Obviously the question here is : how could a country be losing total control over its political and social discourses and at the same time be promoting such an optimistic outgrowth of art's institutions?

Again the answer can be found intrinsically in Greenberg's criticism and his version of modern art. Epitomised in the beginning of the sixties, with "Modernist Painting", Greenberg's modernism not only provided the art of a decade with instrumental solutions but also, once extended to the realms of museum architecture, it also provided architecture with ideological tools to solve one of its major disillusion and dismay : its conceptual submission to a utilitarian format.

### *From Greenberg's Modernism to the "Sculptural Museum"*

Architecture was a relatively independent and isolated field within the American art world of the fifties and sixties. It was philosophically rooted on Hegel's "Aesthetic Theory" where he divided art's disciplines into five categories and gave them an order: architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry. The history of architecture has always been extremely influenced by Hegelian conventions and by the paradoxical condition that it occupies within Hegel's conventional order. From a philosophical and historical

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<sup>105</sup> Meyer, K.E., *The Art Museum : Power, Money, Ethics*, William Morrow and Company, New York 1979. The quotation used in this paper is taken from Francis Francina, "The Politics of Representation", in *Modernism in Dispute - Art since the Forties*, Wood, Paul, et.al., Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, London 1993, p.127.

<sup>106</sup> Darragh, Joan and Snyder, James S., *Museum Design - Planning and Building for Art*, Oxford University Press in association with The American Federation of Arts and The National Endowment for the Arts, Oxford et.al. 1993, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

perspective architecture could be considered conventionally the "first" art. However, conceptually it could not, because it could not present itself as a totally independent artistic discipline.

Architecture depends on a complex intersection of extra-artistic disciplines to find its meaning and justification. As such, it is formally attached to the realms of socio-political praxis and its final product appears structurally dependent on socio-economic developments. Architecture was something that could not be considered ideologically pure art in essence and thus it remained without a formal argument to Hegel's statement that it was the first art in his conventional order. The question - where does the influence of external praxis end and architecture as pure art in essence begin - remained as disturbing and problematic as it had been for centuries of architectural theory.

Hegel recognised this problem and provided the solution for such a paradoxical condition to be resolved. In "Aesthetic Theory" he states that architecture was "whatever in the building did not point to utility". It was "a sort of supplement added to the simple building".<sup>108</sup>

Architects did not have problems in radicalising Hegel's statement if the questions raised by the constant subordination of architecture to exterior needs could be empirically solved and thus, buildings with no other purpose besides architectural ones could emerge as a reality and not just as something that only architecture's theory could "materialise". Therefore, the question - how could a building emerge as art without withdrawing itself from its external reality and thus from the material world without which it would fall completely into the realm of abstract concepts - remained formally unsolved. The history of architecture seemed to be forever linked in parallel with the history of socio-political praxis and thus, a building projecting no other discourse besides an architectural one seemed to be forever a utopian dream.

Since its inception, in the eighteenth century, museum architecture has always been obedient, although in different ways, to the socio-political discourse prevailing at the time of its foundation. Product of its time, nevertheless, the museum building remained formally and ideologically attached to its classical precedents. Although the primary aim of the architect was to build for art and to present the museum's internal and external space ideologically as a "shelter" for irreplaceable objects the design process was always limited and dependent on a complex set of external relationships. However, in

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<sup>108</sup>The quotations from Hegel's "Aesthetic Theory" used in this paper are taken from Tschumi, B., Op. Cit.

spite of reflecting externally the belief system prevailing at the time of its formation there was a consensus about the function of the building.

Recalling the forms of temples and pantheons the first examples of museum architecture were designed exclusively to serve art. Their most common interior format was restricted formally to straightforward containers of art, composed usually of rectangular top-lighted rooms where the public was reduced to a limited elite. Built primarily to serve art and not its public architecture could emerge, at least in the interior of the building, as an independent agent. However, as pointed out by Thomas Fisher "the sheer number of artworks hung floor to ceiling on the walls of those structures almost forced the architecture to take a back seat".<sup>109</sup>

In the twentieth century the subordination of museum architecture to external influences was to become more acute and even dramatic from the point of view of the architect. The inclusion of works by living artists in the museum opened its exhibition space to a broader public. The presence of an increasing public required a widest variety of spaces. Restaurants and other amenities areas opened inside the museum. As a consequence, museum architecture became more than ever before deeply limited by human needs.

The application of Greenberg's modernism to the domain of museum architecture was to remove from the design process all the utilitarian preconceptions to which museum architecture had so far been deeply attached to. Greenberg stated that to defeat "illusion" and thus, achieve the condition of "literal" presence art must submit itself to a series of exclusions, from its social and political world, from the ideological imperatives set by its content and from its own spectator and spatial context. The same exclusion system applied to the domains of architecture was to result in a similar condition: the museum building as "literal" presence. Put differently, the museum building as a modernist artwork in itself.

Like Greenberg's modernist art the modern art museum was to achieve its "literal" presence by radicalising in formal terms Greenberg's dicta.

If in order to be modernist art must withdraw itself from the external world then the museum must be windowless, not just in order to protect art from the outside world but also to exhibit art only with artificial light. As observed by Rudi Fuchs, "[n]atural light might give the work a decent shadow which articulates it as a serious object,

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<sup>109</sup> Fisher, Thomas, "Museum: Form and Function", in *New Museums*, Papadakis, A. (ed.), Academy Group, London 1991, p. 6.

whereas artificial light, (...) makes the object into some kind of appearance, which, like an actor came and goes before you could really see it in detail".<sup>110</sup> Natural light enhances the pleasure of walking slowly through the space, of meditating and talking, and thus it enhances the interference of the external world.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, just within an intimate and artificial atmosphere the modernists conventions of spectatorship were not threatened and Fried's "brief instant" achieved. If modern art must be perceived by a disembodied eye, then the design process does not have to take human needs into deep consideration. These conditionings applied to the museological field opened the way for the museum to emerge externally as an architectural volume projecting nothing else besides its architecture. It becomes an object, a sculptural object. A "modernist" monumental sculpture as "pure" in essence as modernist art.

Free from its social world, modernist museum architecture comes to be seen as a self-fulfilling destination for an art that, because of its ideological emptiness, was offering itself as an autonomous transportable entity physically subservient to its exhibition space. As a consequence of this subservience of art, the architect and the curator become the only mediators in the museum design process. The American modern art museums of the sixties and seventies reflected such a situation. Strictly depending on the desires and personal beliefs of the architect and the curator their external and internal space reflected mainly solutions to the problems inherent in their professional practices.

The architect utopian dream becomes reality. If architecture was whatever was added as a supplement to the building then the more that was added the more architectural the building could be. This means that, if the architect could radicalise to extremes Hegel's statement then an architecture as a pure art in essence could emerge. If before, buildings designed just to serve architecture seemed to be a utopia, now such a dream was incredibly real. The moderate "International Style" of MoMA's building was then supplanted by complex sculptural buildings. MoMA as the paradigmatic modern art museum was supplanted by Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum (see Appendix fig. 6). If the principal aim of MoMA's building was primarily to serve art, the priority of the Guggenheim Museum was to serve architecture by building "an architectural monument whatever the cost".<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Lecuw, reit and Beer, Evelyn, Op. Cit., p. 312.

<sup>111</sup> Davis, Douglas, Op. Cit., p. 76.

<sup>112</sup> Goldberger, Op. Cit., p. 34.

Modernist architecture brought the museum back to its urban role as monument. In the sixties and seventies, as a consequence of its autonomy and monumental connotations, museum's building becomes the major phenomenon in American architecture. Understood not as a building subservient to art and thus, to culture, but instead as a monument existing aloof from any socio-political or cultural struggles, its perception by and positioning within society was to change dramatically. As pointed out by Philip Johnson, once "you could tell a lot about a community by its church, (...) the place that the city took pride in. Now it is the cultural centre, the Museum(...)".<sup>113</sup> The "utopian" idea of the museum as an open and receptive building projecting externally an ideal democratic culture that seemed, with the 1939 building of MoMA, to be the one that was to triumph in the idealistic and confident atmosphere of post-war America, was supplanted, ironically, by the idea of a museum as a sanctified sculptural monument.

### "Alternative Spaces" Re-viewed

Greenberg's "art's for art's sake" ideology left art in a vacuum of content that was now understood as limiting the artist to say "anything whatsoever".<sup>114</sup> By reducing art to "all that was unique to the nature of its medium",<sup>115</sup> Greenberg not just restricted art, ideologically and formally, to an abstract representation of its traditional techniques. By proclaiming art's independence from its social sphere, it also left artists without any possible social and political role and thus reduced to the condition of alienated professionals. This ideological condition of art and the selective role of the modernist museum was strongly felt by artists. By rejecting society the modernist art world not only left art in an ideological vacuum but as Ian Burn argues, it also denied artists the right to be "social beings".<sup>116</sup> Burn goes on arguing that if the artist is alienated from society then he is also "alienated" from what he produces. As he wrote "myself-as-an-artist has become a stranger to me, a figure over whom I have little power or control".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> Burn, Ian, "The Art Market : Affluence and Degradation", in *Art in Theory -1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford et.al. 1992, p.909.

<sup>115</sup> Greenberg, in "Modernist Painting", Op. Cit., p. 755.

<sup>116</sup> Burn, Op. Cit., p. 909.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 909.

It was as a result of this awareness that "Alternative Spaces" developed and achieved the status of "official" opposition to the ideological limits that the modern art museum was imposing upon what was exhibited under its auspices.

The use by artists of "Alternative Spaces" began to appear in New York in the late sixties. Frustrated by the selection exerted by modern art museums and their attachment to Greenberg's modernism, many artists began creating their own exhibition spaces in stores-fronts, abandoned factories, studios and lofts in downtown Manhattan. Established and managed exclusively by artists, sharing costs and responsibilities, the principal aim of the "Alternative Spaces" was to recover the artist control over what he produced. Inside the "Alternative Spaces" the artist was free from the modernist aesthetic conventions and version of art history. Free to show whatever he wanted to and how he wanted to. Initially established by groups of artists, politically committed or excluded by the dominant cultural system because of their race or sex, the function of "Alternative Spaces" was to ramify rapidly to promote a more aesthetically committed art.

In the beginning of the seventies "Alternative Spaces" such as Self Help Graphics, promoting Mexican artists, The Guy Miller, promoting the black community of artists or The Lesbian Art Project (LAP), just to name a few, offers a picture of the "Alternative Spaces" as anti-museums that would last "only as long as they could serve their original impetus".<sup>118</sup> An impetus that was primarily utopian but that was to be, ironically, appropriated by the political world to serve the cultural ideology of the State. As Timothy Luke observes "[w]hen the many different movements for civil rights, ethnic pride, women's liberation and antiwar resistance confronted the American State in 1960 and 1970 with new claims about popular needs, the state's leadership quickly put the tools of symbolic politics into action."<sup>119</sup> In reaction to the popular protest a new "network" of cultural organisations was established with financial support from governmental institutions. The principal aim of those "unofficial" organisations was to demonstrate that a governmental response to the mass demands was given. Appropriated by the political system the "Alternative Space" lost its ideological freedom.

In 1978, the artist Rudolf Baranik, on behalf of the art magazine *Studio International*, required a number of artists replies to the following questions : "Are alternatives in the showing of art significant in art as a statement, or merely a reformist

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<sup>118</sup> Murphy, Bernice, "Alternative Spaces - Alternative Government and Alternative Cultural Future", in *Studio International*, vol. 196, October 1983, p. 18.

<sup>119</sup> Luke, Timothy, *Shows of Force - Power, Politics and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 1992, p. 178.

procedure?; How do alternate<sup>120</sup> spaces relate to/oppose elitism?" The discontentment of the artists is clear. Negative statements such as "Alternative Spaces" are merely "alternative routes for success within the art establishment"<sup>121</sup>, they "emulate the power hierarchy of traditional leadership and curation"<sup>122</sup>, and are "just as elitist as any commercial space or museum",<sup>123</sup> predominate in the artists answers.

Although new categories of art, such as "graffiti art", "barrio art" or "ghetto art", were created as a direct consequence of the establishment of "Alternative Spaces", the importance of these spaces in the American art world of the seventies was relative. Undoubtedly, emerging primarily in opposition to the dominant cultural and political discourses their importance and relevance would last as long as the particular set of circumstances within which they were established remain unchanged.

However, by the mid-sixties the role and position of "Alternative Spaces" within the American art world was to change dramatically.

In 1976, with the establishment of four "Alternative Spaces" more oriented towards a less politically committed and "art for art's sake" discourse, the Clocktower, the Ideahouse, the Sculpture Factory and Project Studio 1 (P.S. 1), a new phase in the development of the "Alternative Spaces" can be found. The principal activator of this new phase was P.S.1. Established on 9th of June of 1976 in an abandoned public school, transformed into a central large exhibition area surrounded by 35 low-cost studios with financial help from New York City Council, the incredible success of P.S. 1 in the following years was to show that the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon was not something that would last only as long as it could serve its original revolutionary impetus but instead as something that had come to stay. Because the space it promoted was crucial not just to show works by unknown artists but also necessary to exhibit works by prominent and recognised artists.

Hanna Heisse, founder of P.S. 1, stated the aims and function of the "space" as following: "P.S. 1 aims to function as a launching-pad for the non-established and an arena for the established".<sup>124</sup> The success of P.S. 1 opened the way for the growth of a different kind of "Alternative Spaces". After 1976 and deep into the eighties the number of "Alternative Spaces", contradicting the previous belief that although a major

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<sup>120</sup> "Alternate Spaces" rather than "Alternative Spaces" is the habitual term used in the US for these institutions.

<sup>121</sup> Feinberg, Jean, Carl André, et. al., Op. Cit., p.70.

<sup>122</sup> Frank, Peter, Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>123</sup> Attie, Dotty, Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>124</sup> This quotation is taken from Gear, Josephine, Op. Cit., p. 64.

phenomenon in the American art scene it was an ephemeral one, had grown considerably. The importance of P.S. 1 for the seventies American art world became as significant as the most recognised art galleries and contemporary art museums.

By the end of the seventies P.S. 1's list of benefactors and trustees was reassembling the "boards of major museums anywhere, including large corporations as well as state and federal agencies".<sup>125</sup> However, the enormous success of P.S. 1 had nothing to do with revolutionary anti-museum's discourses. Instead, it had to do with the structural format the modernist museum had chosen for its exhibition space. As observed by Douglas Davis, inside P.S. 1 "neither the artist nor the curator nor the architect made the slightest attempt to neutralise the space. Instead the peeling walls, blackboards and stained floorboards were often foreground rather than hidden".<sup>126</sup> Competing now with "official" art institutions at a same level, the non-style of P.S. 1's exhibiton space rapidly became an official unofficial style repeated over and over.

Undoubtedly, the incredible growth of "Alternative Spaces" in the seventies American art scene must be explained as a consequence of the incapability of Greenberg's criticism to accept any form of non-modernist art. Deeply attached to Greenberg's modernism, the ideological and social closure of the modernist museum and consequent revolt of a more socially and politically active artistic community were the major determinants in the development of the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies American art scene. However, the artists impatience with the values promoted by the dominant culture does not provide a complete explanation for the growth of "Alternative Spaces" in the seventies or for the success of "spaces" such as the P.S. 1. Although achieving an extraordinary development in the seventies, this phenomenon "grew out of the sixties, which grew out of the fifties,(...)",<sup>127</sup> and was to reach its apogee in the seventies because never before was art's evolution so stagnated and threatened. However, art was not just threatened by the ideological closure of the modernist museum but also by the formal closure imposed by its "sculptural" format.

Although promoting primarily an anti-Greenberg and an anti-museum's discourse and thus, emerging as "alternative" solutions to the institutional and dominant ones, the spaces offered by such unorthodox places to exhibit art were solving another complex

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<sup>125</sup> Davis, Op. Cit., p. 177.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>127</sup> Sischy, Ingrid, "Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?", Carl André et.al., Op. Cit., p. 72.

problem that Minimal art originated : the formal incapacity of the modern art museum to exhibit certain artwork, namely "site specific" art.

### Site Specificity

The "monumental" aspects of Minimal art led to what has come to be known as "site specific" art. Donald Judd and Robert Morris argued that "illusionist" effects could only be defeated if all the contextual parts of the work were taken as integral. This means that the work must deny its internal autonomy and become externally oriented. To be externally oriented means not just to include the spectator as an active element but also to include the spatial context as an integral part of the work. However, because of its external orientation the work ceases to be autonomous from its spatial context. This means that the work could not be transported from one place to another without losing certain characteristics. It is no longer autonomous from the site but instead it belongs to the place in which it is exhibited. However, if art takes its spatial context as a constitutive element of the artwork a dialectical process between the different parts of the art work and the architectural elements of the place in which art is exhibited occurs. Therefore, all the architectural details of the space in which the work is displayed interfere with the work and vice-versa. Doors, walls, columns, stairs or windows are no longer mere practicalities of the museum building but integral parts of the artwork.

This dynamic interrelationship between art's content and the architectural context of the modernist museum was to limit art's possibilities. Because of their monumental proportions the inclusion of Minimal art inside the "intimate" rooms of the modernist museum was problematic. When displayed in a small room, much too small for those pieces to be formally understood as "definitives", in the sense in which Judd uses the term, the art work was not perceived as an "effective work of art".<sup>128</sup> It lacks "expressiveness and feeling".<sup>129</sup> When small in proportions and because it uses all the constitutive parts of the room, walls, ceilings, floors, doors, windows and so on, inside a "labyrinthine" succession of narrow rooms minimal art appeared "as pointless obstacles to circulation".<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, as part of an architectural ensemble, like niche sculpture,

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<sup>128</sup>. Hudson, Andrew, "Scale as Content", in *Artforum*, vol. 6, December 1967, p.47.

<sup>129</sup>. Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>130</sup>. This quotation is taken from, Colpitt, Op. Cit. p. 86.

Judd's "specific objects" could fall into the category of ornamental art. Therefore, it seemed that the only possible place for Minimal art was outside the museum.

However, outside the museum art falls into the category of public or environmental art. Although taking the surrounding environment as an integral part of their work the minimalists always rejected the environmental art category to describe their work. In an unlimited expanded field the relations between the parts become extroverted and not introverted and thus, "illusionism" is not defeated and the result would not be a "specific object". Consequently, it was just in analogy with an architectural space that pure "specific objects" were successfully achieved.

With "site specific" art the function of the "Alternative Space" was to change dramatically. If the modernist museum was declared by the counter-cultural formations as an ideologically limited institution and thus as limiting art's possibilities, with Minimal art the modernist museum was also to be declared a formal closed structure and thus, as one limiting, by the very nature of its structure, certain art's practices. As a consequence, the myth of the museum as the only and eternal "shelter" for art collapse. If the museum could fulfil such a role it was only when art confined itself to certain formal characteristics and ideological parameters. In its pursuit of an essence modernist museum architecture exhausted art's discourses. Coherent formally with just one aesthetic project the museum did not just, because of its selective tradition, defined what art is, but it also defined how art must be if it aspires to perpetuation, conservation, study and a place in art history.

Blindly proud of its "sculptural" building and of its new position within society the museum ignored completely what was happening outside its doors. Emerging initially as opposition to the ideology modernist museums, such as MoMA or the Guggenheim, were promoting the "Alternative Spaces" were to remain, from an institutional point of view, eternally "anti-museums". However, what was at stake with "Alternative Spaces" such as P.S. 1 was not to create a new museological space that was to compete with the existent ones. This situation, instead of solving the art and the museum problems "as best would come down to pushing the problem to one side rather than facing it."<sup>131</sup> Emerging as an "alternative" to the modernist museums and not as opposition to it, the "Alternative Spaces" of the seventies, contrary to the modernist museum, believed that other discourses to the ones it promoted could exist. In this system of ideas even the modernist

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<sup>131</sup> Buren, Daniel, "Notes on work in connection with the space where it is installed, taken between 1967 and 1975", in *Studio International*, vol. 190, nr. 977, September/October 1975, p. 124.

museum space could or should be an "alternative" space to an "Alternative Space". Both promote a belief system and both impose upon the art under their auspices ideological and architectural limits. The refusal of the modern art museum to understand this conditioning was to have drastic consequences for the art world of the seventies. Unable to exhibit any other art besides the one it was built for, by the beginning of the seventies the art museums was not only stagnant but it also ignored one of the most innovative artistic projects of the seventies : Minimal art.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have traced the factors that contributed to the development of the "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies American art scene through a fresh perspective. My aim was to show that this phenomenon evolved and solidified in the seventies, not just because of the ideological closure of the art museum but also because of the structural organisation offered by its exhibition space. My study focused primarily on an analysis of Clement Greenberg's theory as it was presented in three of his most influential articles. Tracing back the history of MoMA, parallel with Greenberg's writing, I have concluded that the structural changes in MoMA's gallery space were closely stimulated by Greenberg's ideas. The open and flexible space MoMA offered at the time its "New Building" opened was, in the beginning of the sixties, at odds with Greenberg's dicta. An art that must reject any kind of external influences and that never intended to be collective needed an intimate space and a well-defined exhibition model. Furthermore, an art that needed to be experienced in an "infinitely brief instant" by a disembodied "eye" in order to defeat "illusionism" and thus emerge as "pure", needed a space that could provide the conditions for such an aesthetic experience to be achieved. MoMA's gallery space was then completely divided into a series of narrow rooms. The museum found the structural model to exhibit Greenberg's modernist art. However, by doing that, it closed its exhibition to any other kind of art. The utopian idea that the moveable walls' system could provide a plurality of models turned out to be spurious. Once articulated to obey to Greenberg's dicta, MoMA's gallery space closed itself structurally to any other re-articulation.

Greenberg's argument that modernist art must be experienced by a disembodied eye was to have far reaching consequences for museum architecture. For the first time in the history of architecture human needs do not have to be taken into deep consideration when a building is designed. Finally, the architect was free to concentrate only on the creative aspects of his art. Consequently, the "Sculptural Museum" emerged. From the

outside the museum became an architectural masterpiece, from the inside a collection of spaces structurally shaped by Greenberg's discourse.

In the mid-late sixties the artist deliberately left the museum to create his own exhibition space. The 1960s saw the collapse of the image of ideological freedom the art museum had so far promoted. Frustrated by its selective role the artist deliberately left the museum to create his own exhibition space. The principal aim of the seventies' "Alternative Spaces" was thus, to offer a place to show an art which in its ideological contents and unique expression was against Greenberg's modernism and the modernist museum. However, if the word "alternative" implies that a critique to the dominant discourse was being made, and that the "Alternative Spaces" were established to promote an anti-museum's discourse, the word "space" implies that other mission was offered by those unorthodox exhibition spaces.

By the end of the sixties Minimal Art had proved that the modern art museum was no longer able structurally to exhibit contemporary art. By including, as a constitutive element of the work, the space in which art was exhibited, Minimal art was to demonstrate that the place for art was not necessarily the museum. By the very nature of its structure Minimal art proved that the museum works as a structurally closed entity.

Therefore, the growth of "Alternative Spaces" phenomenon in the seventies American art scene must not just be understood as a consequence of the ideological closure of the museum, but also as a consequence of the structural limits its exhibition space was imposing upon art under its auspices.

The museum is built today for the art of future. However, it cannot act as a prophetic institution. There will be forms of art that will find its way into the museum, but probably, as Minimal demonstrated in the sixties, there will be other forms of art which by the very nature of their structure will be impossible to exhibit inside the museum walls. If the museum is not able to recognise this condition and thus, to recognise the necessity of the "Alternative Space" as an extension to its museological field but not as a threat to its survival, the museum will become a closed and isolated entity.

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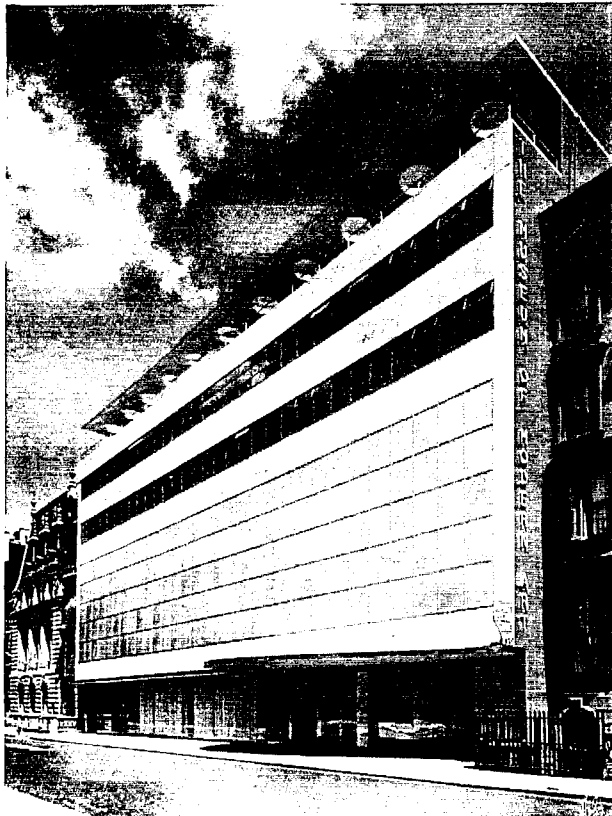
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# APPENDIX

A



B

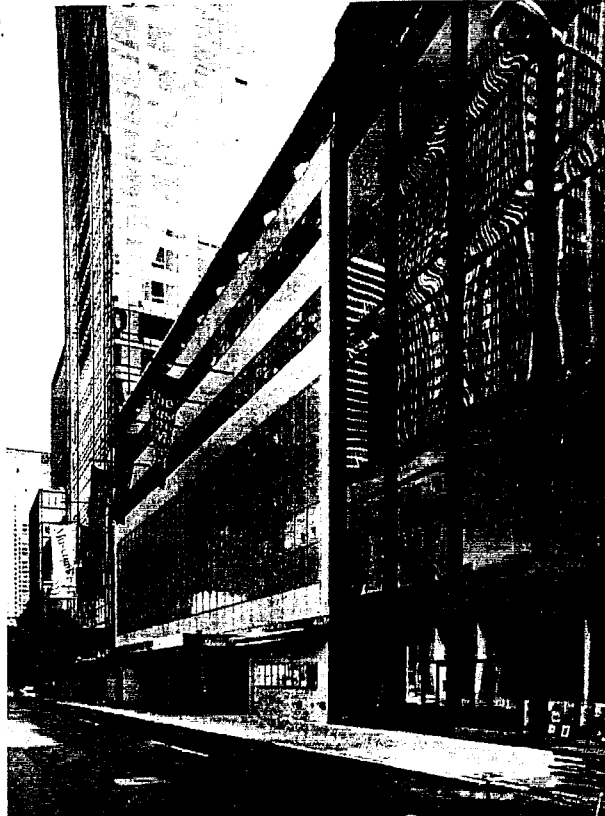
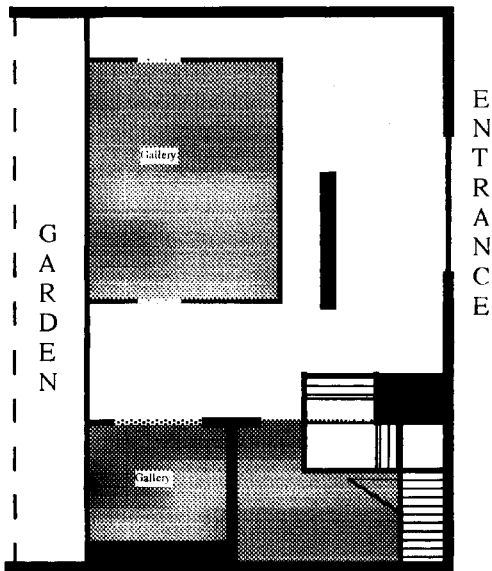


Fig.1

A - MoMA's 1939 building designed by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone.

B - The Museum in 1984, showing, on the left, Cesar Pelli's tower built in 1984 to extend the Museum's curatorial and exhibition space.



Schematic Plan of MoMA's Entrance Floor.

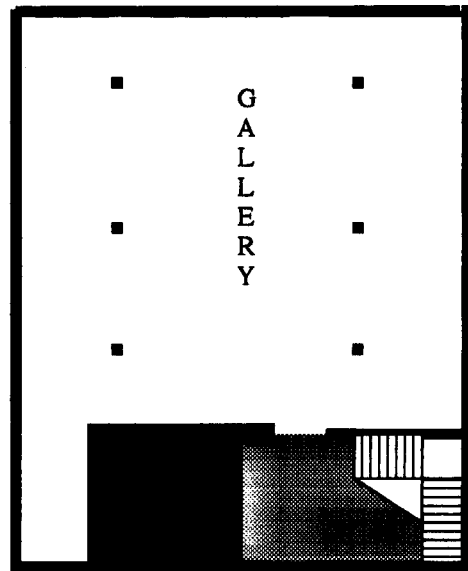


Fig. 2 Schematic Plan of MoMA's First Floor Exhibition Gallery as it was projected in 1939 by Goodwin and Stone.

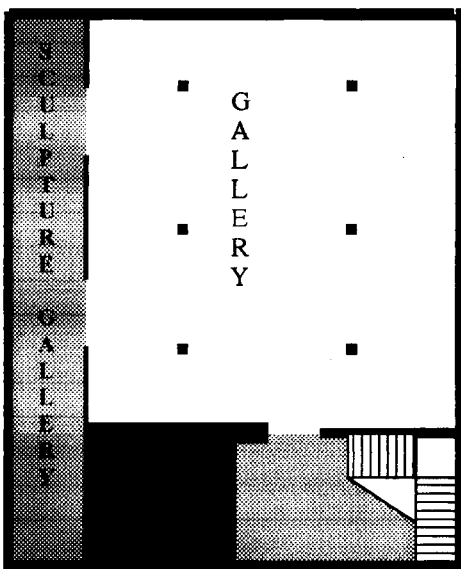


Fig. 3 Schematic Plan of MoMA's Second Floor Exhibition Gallery as it was projected in 1939 by Goodwin and Stone.

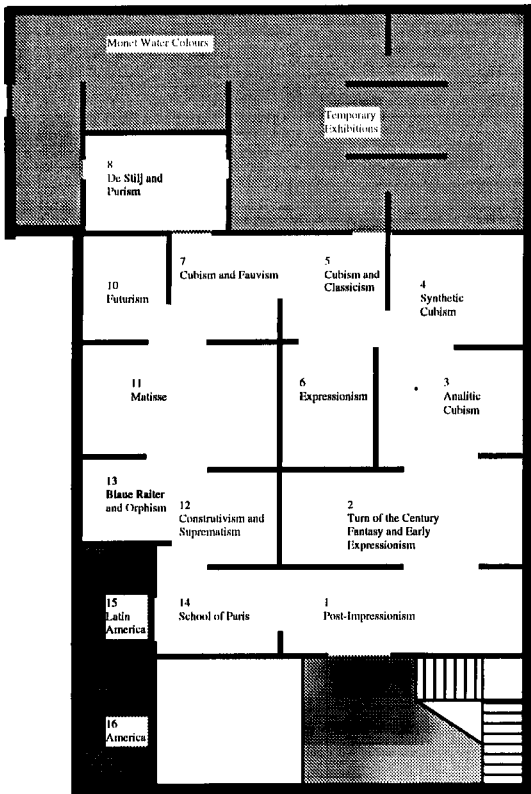


Fig. 4  
 MoMA's 2nd Floor,  
 Permanent Collection. The  
 right side of the diagram  
 corresponds to the 53rd Street  
 facade (The Termolux  
 Window).

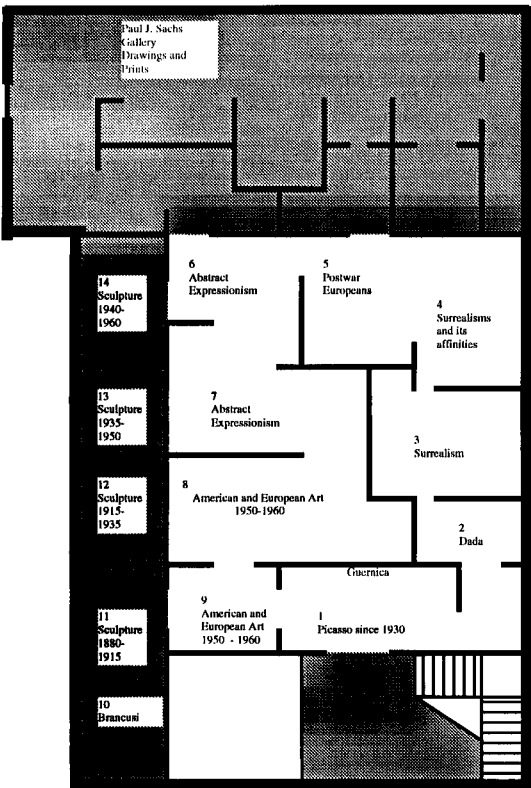


Fig. 5  
 MoMA's 3rd Floor Permanent  
 Collection.

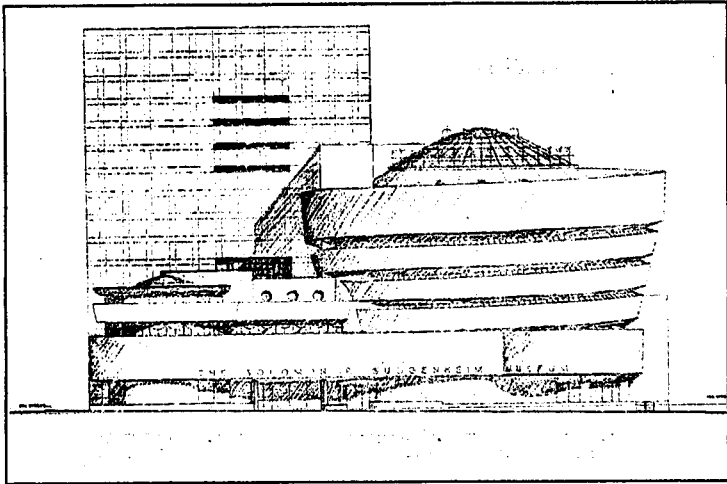


Fig. 6  
 The Solomon R. Guggenheim  
 Museum in New York City,  
 designed by Frank Lloyd Wright  
 in 1959.

