

What Was “Conceptual Writing”?

a review by Richard Kostelanetz (April 2016)

One of the curious cultural phenomena of our time is that radical epithets developed in the rather small audience for visual art acquire a prestige that gives them appeal to other arts with larger audiences. Though “Minimal Art,” coined in the early 1960s, described visual art with remarkably little surface content, often monochromatic for painting or unadorned geometries for sculpture, the epithet minimal was appropriated by music publicists in the 1970s mostly to describe compositions of, say, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley that were less minimal than modular, with motifs or modules repeated in various ways. The most truly minimal composer from that period was La Monte Young, whose work with sustained loud sounds presages more current noise music. For minimalist esthetics the key principle is Less Is More—an epithet commonly credited to the architect Mies van de Rohe. Moving in 1974 to Artists’ SoHo in lower Manhattan, I fell under the spell of minimalist esthetics, which largely originated in my new ‘hood.

So catchy was the epithet minimal that it appeared in fiction chatter in the 1980s to merchandise stories that weren’t really minimal at all—just shorter in word counts. Raymond Carver, working in the tradition of Ernest Hemingway, wrote narratives only a few pages long. Implicitly acknowledging that adjective “minimal” as inappropriate, such short texts are now customarily called “Flash Fiction,” which gains integrity from not appropriating an honorific epithet developed in another art. Indeed, so discredited did “minimal” become in a literary context that I had to use *Micro Stories* (2010) as the title for a collection of 900, each no more than three words long, set one to a page (and thus a hardback a few inches thick). These are, needless to say, far closer to Minimal Art than fiction previously published under that term. *Micro* was meant to be a successor to my much thinner *Minimal Fictions* (1994) that were composed with the same constraint of three words or less, which, all would agree, made them measurably more minimal than, say, Raymond Carver’s.

Oddly, Minimal has rarely been used in poetry criticism, though the epithet

could have characterized the texts of, among others, Robert Lax, who was incidentally a college buddy of Ad Reinhardt, a painter whose virtually monochromatic canvases were a major inspiration for Minimal Art. I've long regarded Reinhardt among the great post-WWII painters (and writers about art) and Lax as a major poet. Both influenced my producing in the past decade a variety of one-word poems, which, all would agree, are measurably minimal. *Three Poems* (2012) is a recent collection.

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