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Extraterrestrial language in the service of minimalism
(or how to master a language by speaking another)

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When we speak about the work of John McCracken, the term "Minimal art" is employed, systematically. There is not a single article, nor essay, which doesn't straightaway address the work of this Californian artist from the standpoint of Minimal art. In general, artists rarely appreciate being typecast, particularly as Minimalists, since that movement regroups a motley crew of trends so disparate that any one definition seems doomed to failure. However, McCracken, contrary to countless peer examples, embraces this "label:" "It [...] roughly identifies a certain type of art and gives people an orientation when they're approaching the work. [...] I don't mind the term Minimalism because much of the work was about minimalizing, reducing and boiling down."[1] It is tempting to see his work through the eyes of an art historian and to note how easily his artworks encourage an analysis based on the elements of language specific to Minimal art (such as, "elementary forms", "the absence of expression", "neutral surfaces", "industrial materials", "repetition", and even elements appropriated from Gestalt theories).

Models

The works of McCracken can even be considered paragons of Minimal art. Let's take his famous series *Planks* for example: wooden boards, in the shape of tall, thin rectangles, are treated with a polyester resin, sandblasted, and meticulously polished, in order to obtain a perfectly smooth surface, devoid of the smallest abrasion that could attract our gaze. These elementary forms are installed in the most simple manner possible: they are propped up against the wall. Innumerable texts have analysed this series, usually focusing on the way in which these *Planks* simultaneously commandeer the floor and appropriate the wall, thereby drawing attention to the permeability of all categories in general and "painting" and "sculpture" in particular: "Too thin to stand solidly upright, these lovingly crafted and highly reflective objects require the wall for support. In one sense this device can be associated with the efforts of other artists in the late 1960s, such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella, to integrate the wall or the contextual situation."[2]

This drive to develop a plastic vocabulary that transcends traditional categories resonates with a number of his peers. Minimal art certainly has contributed to redefining the mode of perception concerning the relationship between a work and its context, as well as the logic system fundamental to this perception. McCracken's work is a perfect example of this. If we reflect on Robert Morris' interest in the influence of the Gestalt on an artwork's composition in his historic text Notes on Sculpture 1-3 ("parts […] bound together in such a way that they create a maximum resistance to

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[1] F. Colpitt, "Between Two Worlds", in *Art in America*, vol. 85, no. 10 (New York, April 1998), 86-93.

[2] M. Wortz, *Spiritual Dimensions in the Art of John McCraken*, in *Heroic Stance. The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965-1986*, exhibition catalogue (Newport Beach: Newport Harbor Art Museum and New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 1987), 22.

perceptual separation"),[3] or to the importance that Donald Judd[4] gives to the "specific object" and "real space" that comprise the three dimensions of all works, it becomes clear that the artworks in such series as *Planks* or *Monoliths*, provide an essential contribution to the questions raised by numerous Minimal artists. What could be more insignificant then a rectangular form – as smooth as a surfboard – propped up against a wall? No snags to catch the spectator's eye, no pattern to interfere with his gaze, which can't help but slide over the work and onto the floor, shifting from the floor to the wall, to the ceiling, to the lighting, and to the other visitors present in the exhibition space.

The famous "window" vision, which shaped our approach to artwork for more than five centuries, is now invalid. The work is no longer an object that can be isolated from its context in order to better analyse it. The artwork has become *transitive*: it is no longer a fixed point in time and space, but instead appears through tangential effects and its capacity to link the different elements available to our perception. It also provokes a transformation of the very logic used to understand the artwork. When face to face with a *Plank*, we cannot return to a system of conventional selective logic (painting or sculpture, artwork or ordinary object, etc.); additional logic must be adopted (this is a painting and a sculpture, an artwork and an ordinary object, etc.).

Speaking of art with a presupposed language

We could continue to tick off the arguments demonstrating the importance of McCracken's work for Minimal art and the appositeness of his proposed forms. This is certainly interesting from the point of view of history, but – let's face it – boring. At this point in the article, I would like to draw attention to the way the artist's work is usually analysed, a way that is based on elements of language specific to art historians. Art historians do develop methods of analysis founded on elements of language formed by the principle players of the art world (art historians, art critics, curators, collectors, artists, etc.). What are the consequences of using a language developed by those who inhabit the art world to speak about this same world? And, furthermore, if we use the language developed by those who are trained to speak about art, how can we innovatively speak about artwork? Today, this last question is inevitable. In the wake of analytic philosophy, intellectuals like John R. Searle, raise such questions as "what is an institution?"[5] and aptly establish that all institutions – whether the domain be economical, artistic or otherwise (and in this sense the art world well and truly constitutes an institution) – define themselves through language. As John C. Welchman reminds us, "Most theories of institutions, and much philosophy until the 20th century – have, [according to Searle], taken language for granted, so that 'of course, if you presuppose language, you have already presupposed institutions'". Searle proposes, therefore, to reverse the terms of these general assumptions, arguing that "instead of presupposing language and analyzing institutions, we have to analyze the role of language in the constitution of institutions".[6]

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[3] Originally published across three issues of *Artforum* in 1966- 1967: "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", in *Artforum*, vol. 4, no. 6 (New York, February 1966), 42-44 ; "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2", in *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 2 (New York, October 1966), 20-23; "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3: Notes and Nonsequiturs," in *Artforum*, vol. 5, n. 10 (New York, June 1967), 24-29.

[4] His seminal essay, "Specific Objects", was published in *Arts Yearbook* no. 8, 1965, 94.

[5] J.R. Searle, "What is an Institution?", in *Journal of Institutional Economics*, vol.1, no.1 (Cambridge, June 2005), pp. 1-22 reprinted in J.C. Welchman ed., *Institutional Critique and After* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 21-51.

[6] J. C. Welchman, *Introduction*, in *Institutional Critique and After*, op. cit.

For this situation, I suggest that, rather than interrogating the elements that form a pertinent analysis of an artwork, we begin with another question, which seems timelier to me: "How can one speak about an artwork" and avoid using the language preformatted by the operators of the art world?
In order to do this, I suggest following the advice Umberto Eco gave to one of his assistants who was anxious about having to teach a discipline as arduous as semiology to first-year students: "Talk about everything but semiology", suggested the master, "and they'll understand semiology". Could the same approach be appropriate for speaking about an artist or his work, or even contemporary art altogether? Might speaking about everything except contemporary art lead eventually to speaking differently about contemporary art? In order to test this hypothesis, we must initially look beyond the art world towards thought systems, narratives, and modes of perception, that imply a certain interpretation of the world and, subsequently, we must transfer the reading practices associated with these interpretations to the art world, in order to see how we might be about to establish a new language game.

A contribution from extraterrestrial

The way McCracken expresses himself regarding his work is helpful in the several respects. As we have discussed, if one looks at his works with the eye of an art historian, it is easy to consider them as models that perfectly fit what the art world has defined as "Minimal art". In this light, the artist's words are troubling. On one hand, he uses the yardstick of minimal art and its criteria for analysis to describe his work. On the other hand, he adopts a position that puts him light-years ahead of the art world and its presupposed language: "I want my sculptures to appear to have been brought from another dimension".[7] In another interview, he builds on this idea: "I do try to make things that look like they come from somewhere else – from a UFO or a futuristic environment or another dimension. That things exist in more than one dimension at one time is something that's more than a fascination for me, it's relevant to the human world. I think that humans exist in more than one dimension at once."[8]
Laying claim to the existence of artworks produced in an exogenous dimension or environment is certainly not a new gesture in the 1960s, but to my knowledge, nobody has gone as far as speaking about it this way and combining art with extraterrestrials: "I became convinced that there really are UFOs and aliens all around us. Aliens are elusive and hard to pin down because of their other-dimensionality; their medium of travel is time, as far-fetched as that seems. I think there are actually thousands of extraterrestrials – and other entities that you wouldn't call extraterrestrials – flying and running around, looking at us, studying us. While they may think we're kind of cool in some ways, even brilliant, I think they wonder how we can be so opaque, why we don't see them more than we do. It's amazing that we don't really see what's going on. But I think we're purposefully 'programmed' in that way. I think there is a reason for our forgetting where we originally came from: so we could focus on things here. But now, I think, there's a reason for us to remember where we came from so we can integrate that with what we've learned since we've been here, so we can get the perspective we badly need. Then we can more effectively set about the business of moving on – and up. The whole thing adds up to a very provocative idea that I think impinges in important ways on humankind's development."[9]

Ontology and science fiction

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[7] M. Wortz, *Spiritual Dimensions in the Art of John McCracken*, op. cit., 26.

[8] D. Blair, "Otherworldly", in *Purple Prose*, no. 13 (Winter 1998).

[9] Idem.

It is interesting to observe that an artist's conviction that extraterrestrials exist, that "they are amongst us", and that they can help us in our personal and collective development, can lead us to reconsider a reoccurring problematic of 20th century art: for example, how does an artist take into account the fourth dimension – time – as well as the other dimensions, which, by the way, sciences like physics came to terms with long ago? Speaking, as McCracken does, about an object that simultaneously exists and is defined in multiple dimensions echoes the question that has obsessed the art world for over a century: how can, in a single moment, an ordinary object be transfigured into an aesthetic object? How can a chair, a functional and ordinary object, suddenly be considered as something else (as a work of art)? How can we speak about an object that transcends its usual definition and implements itself in a new dimension? Philosophers and art critics have racked their brains for decades trying to answer this ontological question about artwork and the countless responses (such as, logical, phenomenological, institutional, performative, etc.) are enough to throw the typical art enthusiast. However, as soon as we leave the field of art and adopt another language, anyone can tell the difference. And the way McCracken expresses himself on extraterrestrials – as bizarre as it might seem at first glance – contributes to a better understanding of what is at stake for contemporary art and, subsequently, in his own work.

Let's switch to science fiction: nothing visually distinguishes a mutant from a human (except for perhaps the stiff little finger of a second-rate Invader or the thick Austrian accent of the Terminator). This holds true for the famous replicants from the film *Blade Runner*, inspired from the novel by Philip K. Dick. From a strictly visual point of view, the replicant is absolutely identical to man. The Blade Runners, whose job it is to hunt down and "retire" replicants, have at their disposition the Voight-Kampff psychological test, named after two doctors who refined a detection system based on the notion of empathy. This test doesn't result in the objective detection of a replicant, but rather reveals the characteristics that enable the Blade Runner to form an opinion and take the required action (usually radical). For example, the Blade Runner demands a suspect to describe a childhood memory including a tortoise. The replicant is troubled and hesitates on a specific element in language (*turtle or tortoise*). The Blade Runner must at this moment interpret the suspect's level of emotional response. Since there is no objective criterion to determine the difference between a human and an android, the only tool available is personal interpretation. But, once the decision is taken to consider the suspect as a "non-human", the process of transfiguration is instantaneous; the suspect conserves his visual qualities that enable him to appear as a human (for instance, he doesn't transform into a slimy monster with tentacles), and instead acquires at that same moment a mutant characteristic. From a strictly visual point of view, the suspect remains human and he becomes a mutant. And what is even more surprising is that everyone watching finds this completely normal...

Multiverse

Even though this additional logic seems difficult to grasp in everyday life (as in the song *Noir c'est noir* performed by Johnny Hallyday), all science fiction fans completely accept that a mutant can exist simultaneously in two worlds. Why can we so easily accept that a human can be transformed into a mutant, but we refuse to accept that a chair can also be considered as a work of art? Why is this ontological question so difficult to resolve, when the transfiguration process is not so different from the one present in science fiction? The mutant evolves concomitantly in the two universes: when understanding this multi-dimensionality, selective logic is useless. Navigating in several dimensions at the same time necessitates the adoption of additional logic. The mutant seems endowed with extraordinary powers, but he only personifies what the sciences discovered long ago.

Let us turn towards other means of interpreting our reality, beyond the realm of the art world, and outside the reformatted language of those who produce and, consequently, speak about artworks.

Quantum physics, for example, reveals that, on a quantum level, parallel universes exist in infinite number. It is no longer a question of whether a universe is more real than another because together in their totality, they bring about the definition of a single and same reality. Similarly, it is no longer important to know which language (that of the art world or that of extraterrestrials) is more adapted to deal with McCracken's work, since the two of them – simultaneously – help to better the understanding of what is at stake for artists. Similarly, it is no longer important to know whether the heroine of *Blade Runner*, Rachel, is more real than other mutants, since she actively participates in the concomitant development of the two universes (that which looks like ours, since she is endowed with empathetic feelings, and that of the mutants, a cold, mechanical universe). Along the same lines, the facetted body structure of the famous stealth bomber, the military plane, deflects radar waves, which can no longer return to their point of origin. For a certain type of gaze – the radar – this plane is invisible and covert. But all we have to do is change our gaze, for example, raise our eyes to the sky, in order to perceive this hyper-spectacular object. The stealth bomber is therefore a paradoxical object, at once stealthy (an absence of visibility) and photogenic (an excess of visibility). Most sciences, ranging from mathematics to philosophy, adopted this additional logic long ago. Amazingly – as McCracken would say – the analysis tools made available by the art world don't always allow us to decode the issues that are continually being raised by certain artists, in the course of their constant reflection.

The way in which McCracken expresses himself regarding his work is salutary for the art world. He authorises a gaze based on a certain type of interpretation, anchored in art history and formed by a presupposed language, all the while calling into question this very language with a somewhat unexpected question: could extraterrestrials help us to understand contemporary art? The act is well known: in order to master a language and appreciate its subtleties, nothing is so effective as speaking another language; in order to master a subject, nothing is as effective as researching, in other domains, a lens of interpretation that allows for the development of a personal vocabulary stripped clean of a presupposed language. Or, to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, in order to talk about lines, study the margins because the margins anchor the lines.