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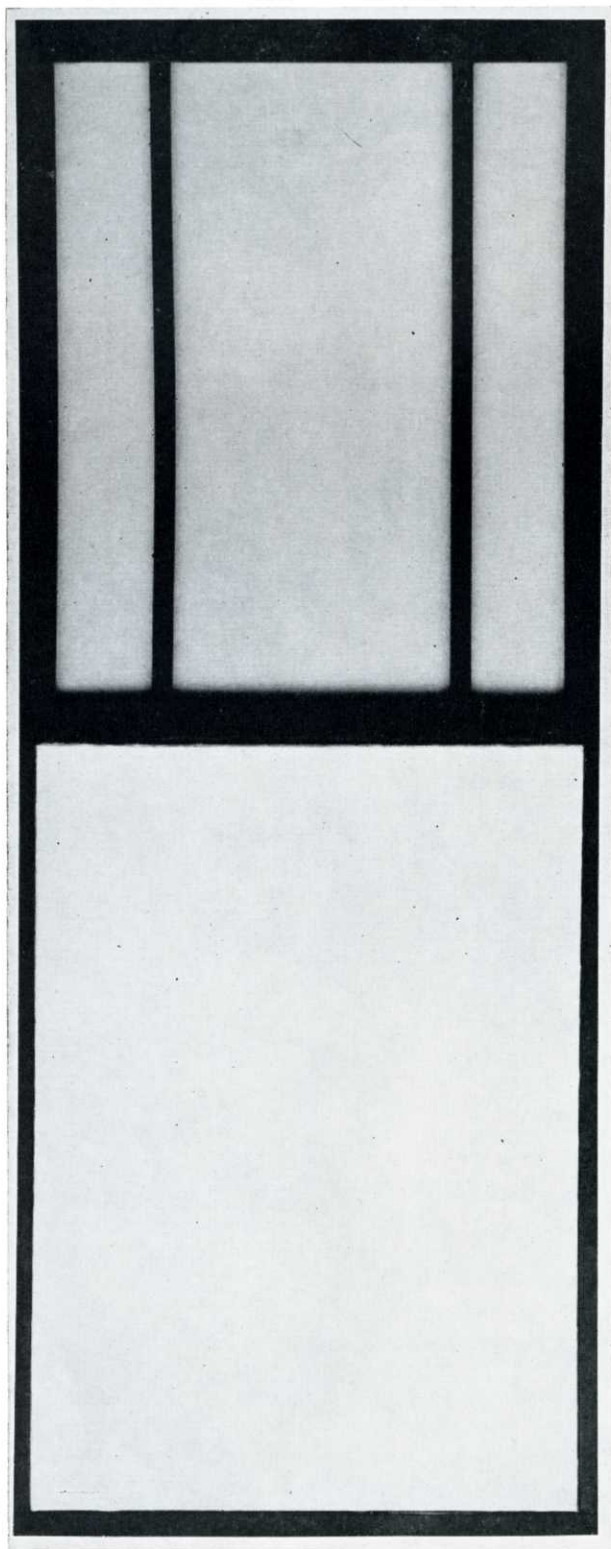


**american figurative tradition at the biennale
maximal & minimal • paris • young italians • feeley**

The Art of the Real

The Development of a Style: 1948-68

Ellsworth Kelly, *Window* (Museum of Modern Art, Paris), (1949).
Owned by the artist.



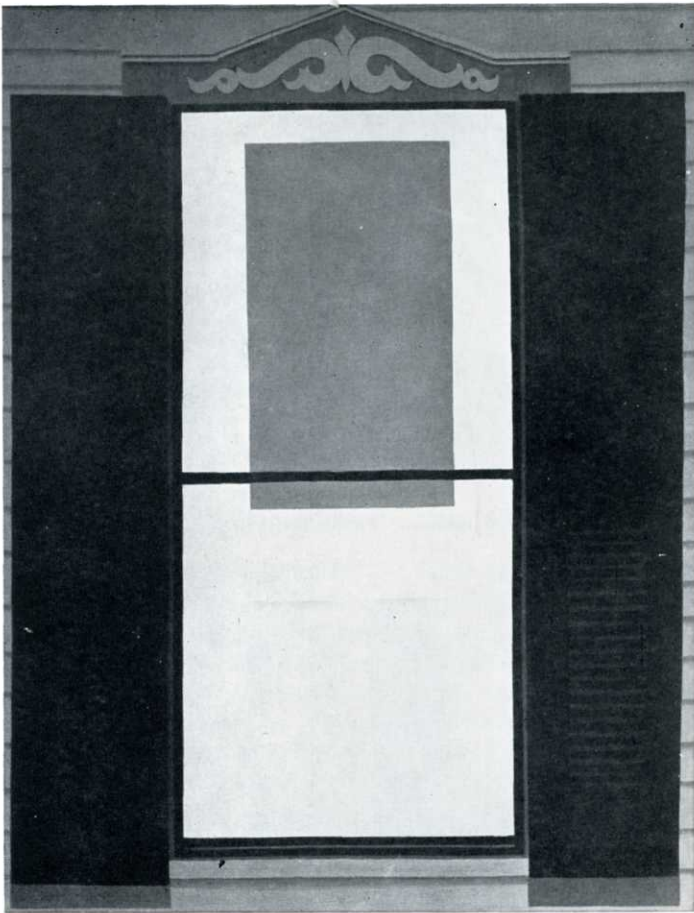
by GREGORY BATTCKOCK

The institutionalism of the art museum today is only slightly less evident than the academicism of the way the art is displayed. One illustration of this can be found in the Preface to the catalog of the Summer Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The Director of the Exhibition, Professor E. C. Goossen, has felt compelled to publicly thank the Curator of the Museum for lending some paintings from the Collection of the Museum to the Museum's summer exhibition. No doubt one of the targets of the protesting students at Columbia University was just this type of bureaucratic excess that is developed within modern institutions in order that they may become free from real responsibility and significant action.

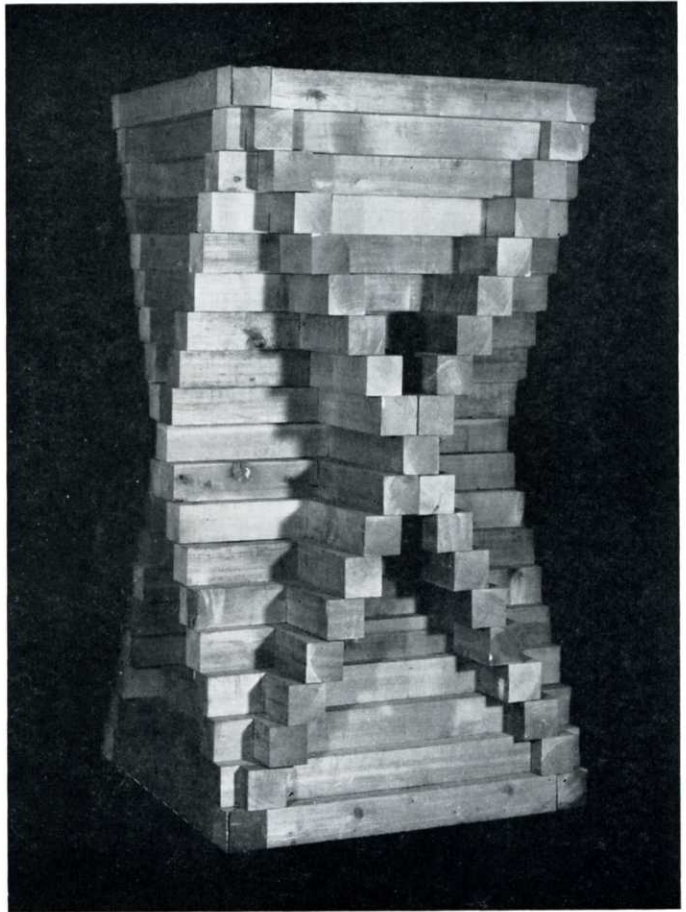
The revolution on the campus is only one of many revolutions that are directed against the obsolete institutions found in the modern world. The museum was relatively safe from this type of dramatic confrontation because it was thought that art itself contained built-in revolution. That art IS revolution—and especially that modern art is never establishment—has been taken for granted. However, one thing is clear from the new exhibition at the Modern Museum. It is that art presented in this particular way is not revolution. It is, or rather becomes, establishment. It is academic. (Curiously, the supporters of this type of academicism will label it *anti-academic*.) What we have is art for the art historians. The museum has become a laboratory for the university and its Department of Art History. Thus, the exhibition and the museum both become identified with the University itself. The art that was thought to be so provocative and considered a positive challenge (in so many ways) to the prevailing and inadequate value structure is now seen in quite a different light.

It may well turn out that "The Art of the Real" will be a landmark in the development of modern art. The modern trend that Prof. Goossen was one of the first to recognize—his word was "Distillation"—may have a purpose that had not been obvious. It is conceivable that the artist was persuaded to remove reference to objects from art, and concentrate on art as its own object because such an approach was necessary in order to prepare the way for a real break with artistic tradition. Otherwise art itself would never become a meaningful arena for significant modern speculation. In this vein it is possible to conclude that this exhibition will be the last that can be logically connected to the period in Western History that begins with the Renaissance. "The Art of the Real" is thus seen as homage to the past and tribute to a tradition that has had the grace to kill itself off.

One characteristic of the works identified by Goossen as "Art of the Real" is an extravagant playing with formal components such as color and space (which allows us to consider the style as "mannered"). Goossen has perceptively acknowledged the urgency of the special excesses inherent in many of the works and has seen to it that, at least in the Modern's version of the show, works are placed in such a way as to pre-



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Lake George Window* (1929). The Museum of Modern Art, Richard D. Brixey Bequest.



Carl Andre, *Cedar Piece* (1960-64), cedar wood, 72" x 36" x 36". Coll. Hollis Frampton, New York.

vent people from getting too far back from a painting. This is a normal tendency and one result is that the scale is reduced to a smaller size and the extravagant and excessive spatial maneuver is denied. Goossen has not given us the opportunity to reduce many of the art statements to realistic size in his exhibition. Therefore, we are forced to experience the full impact of the style; we must respond to the confidence, assurance and dynamism of the art itself.

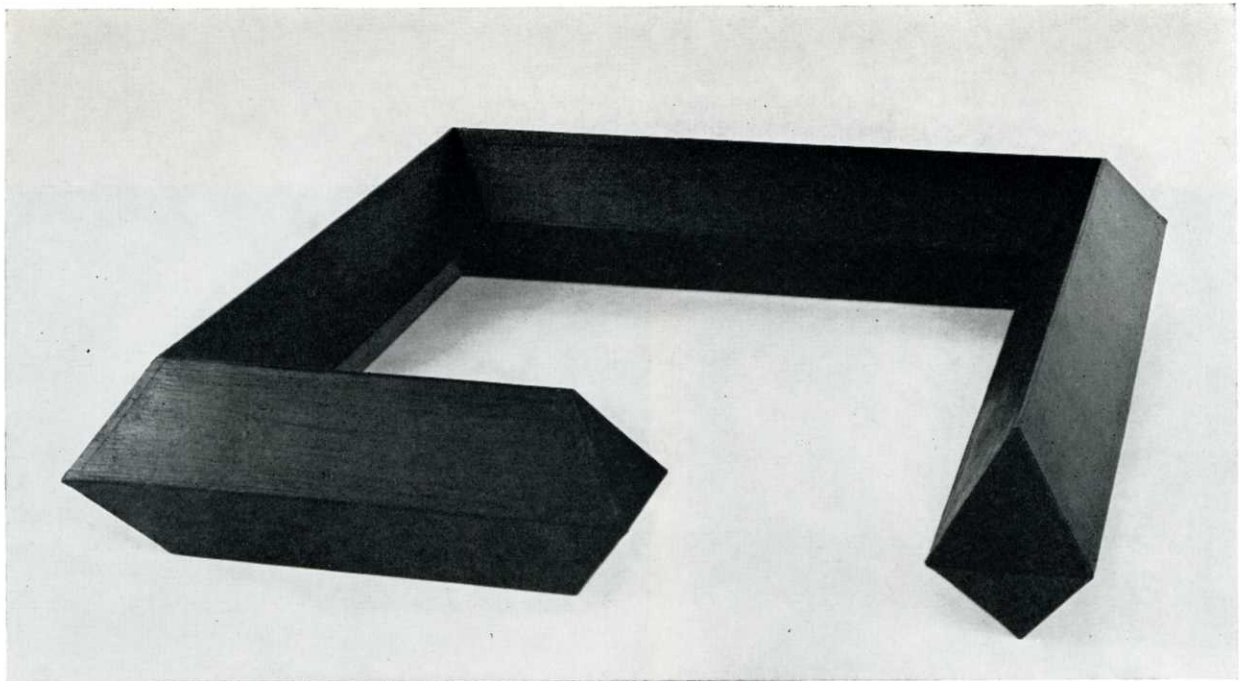
The special problem of color in Minimalist sculpture is also recognized by Goossen. Minimalist sculpture is frequently colored even if the color is only black. True, in some instances—especially pieces by Judd and Morris—the works appear in the natural hue of the material used. In his catalog introduction Goossen remarks: "The problem of color in sculpture may never be resolved satisfactorily since painted sculpture tends to become pictorial . . ." and "As for John McCracken's slabs of sheer color, it is hard to tell whether one is confronting a painting or a sculpture." One might ask, why does it matter? Probably because this important distinction—that of color alone becoming pictorial—appears to be the single major premise of the works by some Minimalists including Ellsworth Kelly as well as McCracken.

In tracing the development of the style, the Director of the Exhibition leaves few of the stones unturned among those found on the official path through the jungle of human failures and wasted efforts. He observes the development with a thoroughness that is both precise and academic.

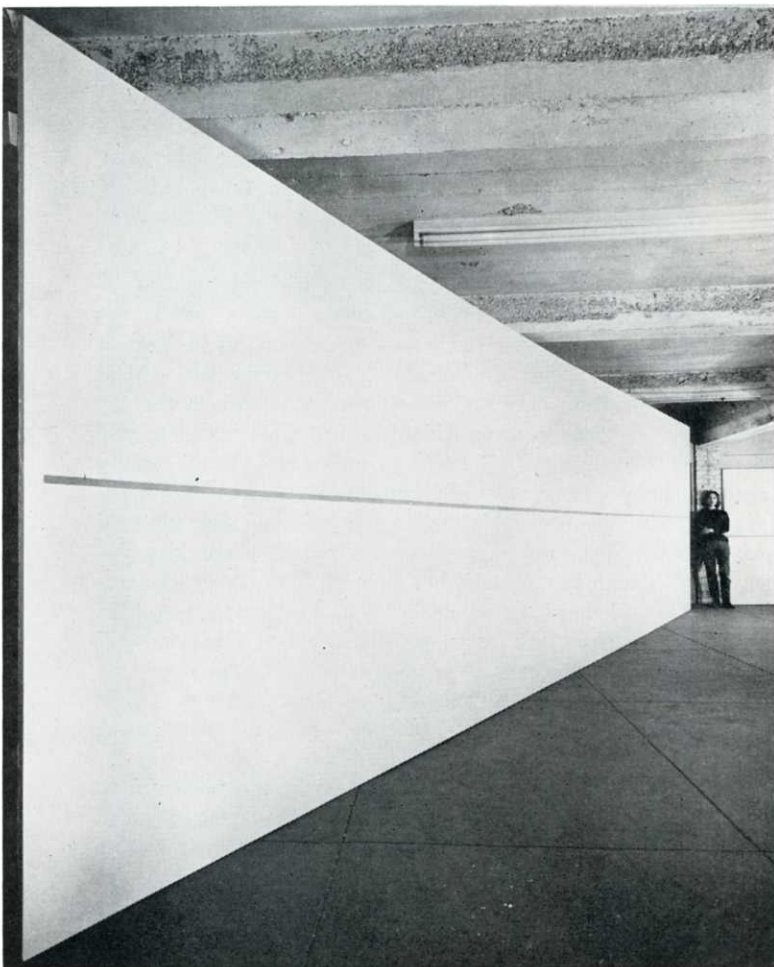
In the exhibitions catalog he goes on to note: "A number of painters during the late 1950's and early 1960's contributed

to the reduction of imagery and incident without quite abandoning expressionism." Goossen refers to Parker and Morris Louis particularly. About Louis' late painting (the *Unfurleds*) Goossen observes that the artist: ". . . pushed the central space between the ribbons of color more widely apart, thereby increasing the distance over which the eye must travel to pull the image together, or, if one's gaze is fixed on the empty center, calling peripheral vision into action. These two ways of seeing such pictures adds to our perception of their physical existence as space-occupying objects." Fine. So where does that leave us? This information, while helpful, is not very shattering. Is that *all* there is to Louis? Again, Goossen has avoided risking a conclusion. Why so safe? So what if history will prove that a more conclusive interpretation turns out to be false? But Goossen is hardly the only historian today who finds a retreat to the cozy security of the Academic preferable to the risk of historical censure.

In his notes for the catalog as well as in the presentation and selection of the pictures themselves, Goossen has avoided the type of interpretation that relates the art to the human condition. His attitude is prevalent in art criticism today. I am not suggesting that our views toward interpretation should be governed by the pragmatic but instead suggest that there should be some reduction of emphasis on the exclusively intellectual and descriptive aspects. Art is not simply polemic—even Minimal art. No doubt this is what Goossen had in mind when he conceived of the exhibition and certainly why he entitled it "The Art of the Real". However, in this way the exhibition ends up contradicting itself, without leaving the

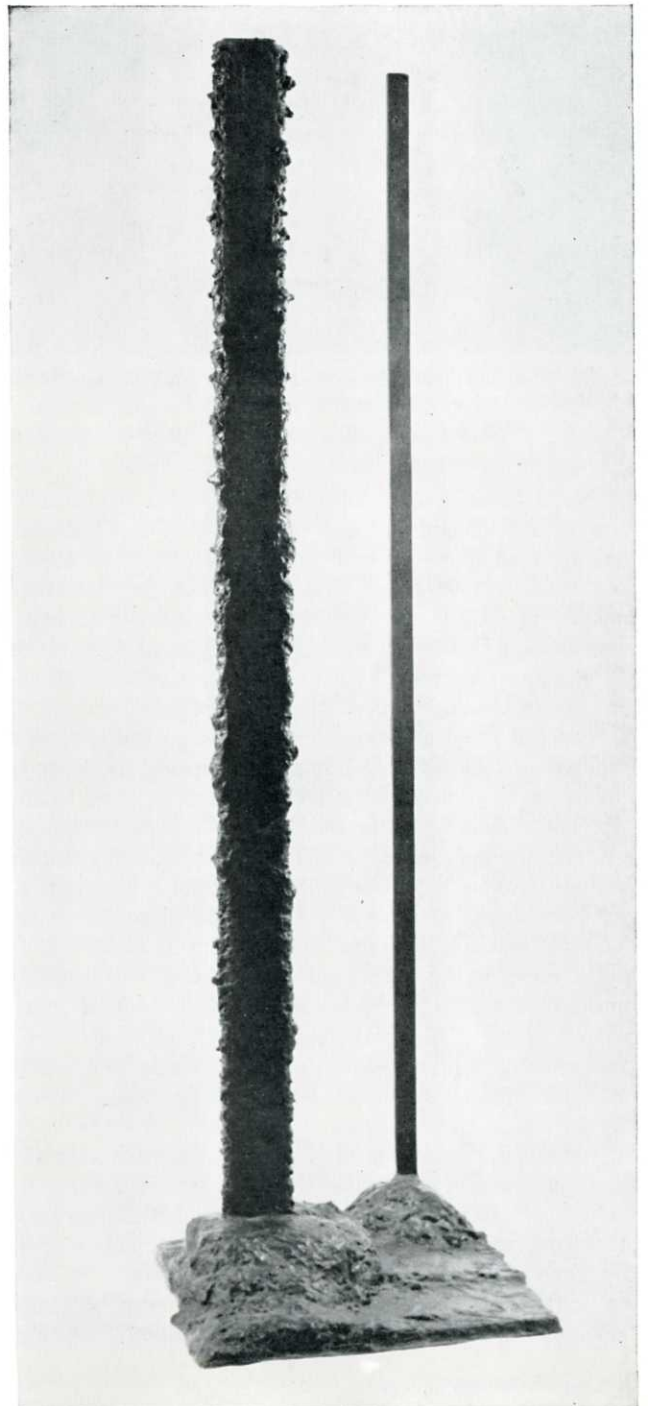


Tony Smith, model for *Stinger* (1967), painted plywood to be made in steel, 6' x 32' x 32', for the exhibition. Fischbach Gallery.

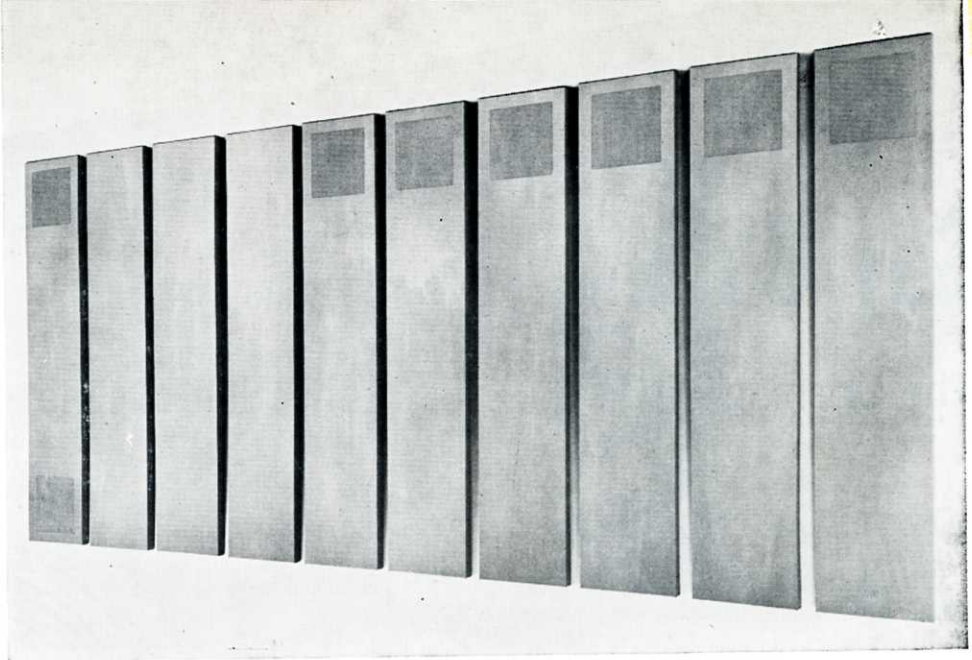


Patricia Johanson, *William Clark* (1967), 8'6" x 28'. Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Right: Barnett Newman, *Here* (1950), 8' high. Coll. Mrs. Barnett Newman.



UPSIDE
DOWN



Doug Ohlson, *Untitled* (1968), 7'6"x17'3"
(ten panels, each 18" wide at 3" inter-
vals.) Fischbach Gallery.

viewer much, if anything interesting of human or artistic to take home.

Of course there are many ways of looking at and criticizing art. The logical positivist will be satisfied to simply experience the work itself. His empirical method leaves little room for any further conclusion. Then there is the historical approach in which art is seen exclusively in historical terms; even new art. Another view greets new art with enthusiasm simply, or perhaps mostly, because it's new. One cannot explain simply, or perhaps mostly, because it's new. One cannot explain the art because one isn't really sure what art is anyway. In this last instance the critic will be faced with the choice of either making mistakes constantly or playing it safe.

It would seem that now is the time for taking chances and making mistakes. We are pretty much fed up with the order, precision and sterility so characteristic of modern institutions. What the Museum of Modern Art does is to take art away from us by putting it into an historical perspective. The dream and mystery of art is erased. The museum insists on teaching us and we have been taught enough. However it is not the didactic approach that we resent but rather the pedantic one. When modern art was new, a little bit of pedantry didn't hurt at all. The academic approach had something to offer. Now that the modern is accepted we find that the best way to ruin it is to academicize it. The art of the real has been put into history. It has been made unreal. The museum must not consider itself immune from the protests and challenges suffered today by the Institutions of Higher Learning. The objections directed toward the obsolete learning process at Berlin, Paris, Nanterre, Columbia and Rome should be warning enough for the trustees and curators at the Louvre, Tate, Modern and Metropolitan.

A regard for the judgement of history is a major concern that dictates the scope and content of modern museum exhibitions. It is essential that history judge favorably. In his book "Manet and His Critics" George Heard Hamilton illustrates the modern fear. We snicker in amazement as we read the carefully documented and picturesquely presented verbiage of Manet's contemporary critics who, for the most part, didn't give a damn for history. Because of this appalling lack of historical perspective on their part, they have been made to appear very foolish indeed. (Of courses many of them may actually have been fools.)

It is difficult to imagine any artist or critic today producing anything of interest if he does not possess a good grasp of the history of Western art. But, because of our belief that unilateral concern for the contemporary condition will almost

inevitably be followed by the censure of history, we respond with a devotion to historical principles and a slavish pre-occupation with historical precedent and license. As a result, the denouement rarely clarifies, or contributes anything to, the contemporary reality.

I do not mean to imply there is anything wrong (i.e. incorrect) with Goossen's view of the Minimalist tradition in modern American art. Though he follows the official line, he has discovered significant connections that can only help clarify our view of Twentieth Century American art. He relates the work of Georgia O'Keefe (*Lake George Window* (1929)) as well as Jasper Johns to the most recent pictorial and dimensional developments in art. While most of the works in the show were made after 1965, Goossen has turned up an early Carl Andre that is not well known in New York and that was last exhibited publicly in 1964 at the Hudson River Museum¹. Among other unexpected works in the new exhibition we find Ellsworth Kelly's important *Window* (*Museum of Modern Art, Paris*) that was made in 1949. Clearly, it is a prophetic work and a brilliant choice for this exhibition. Another early, significant piece in the show is Barnett Newman's statue *Here* of 1950².

Clearly this is a major exhibition. Besides being just the right sort of thing for the summer—brightness openness and spaciousness—it is several notches above the usual run of summer exhibitions. It offers plenty of opportunity for thought. It cannot be missed by anybody interested in the art of our time.

By awarding Minimal art the imprimatur of History, Goossen has taken it away from us. Perhaps this was inevitable; perhaps premature. The Minimal artist has not been able to save his work from becoming maximalized.

¹ The exhibition was called "8 Young Artists" and also was organized by Goossen. The work of several artists was shown there for the first time in New York and included Andre, Bannard, Johanson as well as Douglas Ohlson, Antoni Milkowski and Robert Huot.

² I should like to point out, before anybody else does, that I have not seen this exhibition. I have met with Goossen at the Museum, and he has shown me floor plans for the show. I have read the galleys for the catalog and have them in front of me. I have a final list of the works in the show—all 57 of them. I have been told that, as far as anybody could tell, the listing is complete. I have seen many of the works. Others I have not seen. I have reviewed exhibitions by most of the artists included in the show. Photographs of works by many of the artists have been made available to me.