

I FEEL LIKE I'M DISAPPEARING,
GETTING SMALLER EVERY DAY /
BUT WHEN I LOOK IN THE MIRROR,
I'M BIGGER IN EVERY WAY.

Søren Thilo Funder, Jens Haaning, Lasse Schmidt Hansen,
Marie Kølback Iversen, A Kassen, Leopold Kessler,
Josh Kline, Rasmus Høj Mygind, Torben Ribe
and Hennessy Youngman a.k.a. Jayson Musson



The widespread idea that an artist today can do whatever he or she feels like implies that an artist does not necessarily have to do much or anything, almost. Given the high status of art as well as artists in contemporary society, making and exhibiting little is often considered daring, sometimes provocative or controversial even.¹ If art is special, the artist has to do something extraordinary. Because it is difficult to define what and who the artist is today, the artist has to prove that he or she really is an artist – unless, of course, the artist as often seen leaves the art institution to deal with this problem. However, if the artist's work is close to nothing the public is left with little to cling to in asserting a given work as an artist's art work. This is probably what makes minimal art² so hard for the big public to stomach.

In theory, minimal art making ought to be popular with the big public. Basically, by stripping art of all extravaganza and virtuosity, art gives the impression that it can be made about anything by anyone for anybody such as Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. Great art is no longer synonymous with great effort. In this sense minimal art is democratic. At the same time, insisting that a seeming lack of activity is synonymous with art is also aristocratic. It is only the privilege of the happy few to exclaim such as Algernon in an Oscar Wilde play: 'It's awfully hard work doing nothing.'³ As sociologist Nathalie Heinich has rightly demonstrated the artist is an exception to democratic rule.

Making do with little is not new. Actually, showing restraint was even a virtue among painters such as Apelles in Ancient Greece: 'Xenocrates said that Apelles understood the necessity of taking the hand from a picture at the right time, and Cicero said that Apelles realized the meaning of the word enough.'⁴ However, showing restraint to the point of doing little, is from a Westerner's art historical point of view a recent phenomenon within the visual arts. During the past century this artistic strategy or practice has become all the more prevalent. However, its implications have changed over

¹ Public outcry against art in danger of disappearing have found its rather refined articulations in writings such as Jean Baudrillard's *Le complot de l'art* from 1996 and Yves Michaud's *L'Art à l'état gazeux: essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique* from 2003.

² The term 'minimal art' does in this essay not solely refer to the group of artists controversially designated as 'minimalists'. It simply refers to art that is minimal. Even in the 60s the minimal was not only to be found in 'minimalism', but also to be found, for instance, in Pop art, Fluxus and Arte Povera.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895, Act One

⁴ Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, 1936, p.54

time. To understand the pervasive minimal gesture of contemporary art it is useful to take into consideration its recent history. Though this history is more continuous than the revolutionary rhetoric of art leads us to believe, we will have to focus on three stages, namely the dramatic modernist discovery and conquest of this position, the 60's and 70's cool exploration of and reflection upon this position and finally the contemporary choice of this position as a way of not choosing among all the possible positions.

In one Bertolt Brecht parable on the modernist artist, a gardener gives Mr. Keuner the task of trimming a laurel in the form of a sphere: 'I immediately began to trim off the wild shoots, but no matter how hard I tried to achieve the form of a sphere, I did not succeed for a long time. When the tree had at last become a sphere, the sphere was very small. Disappointed the gardener said: 'Good, that's the sphere, but where's the laurel.'"⁵

Mr. Keuner recalls Mondrian, whose paintings can be seen as developing from cutting off the branches of trees until there is only a grid left. The grid doubles that of the threads in the canvas – recalling also the artistic development of Cézanne, who increasingly economized with adding paint to the extent that painting became more canvas than paint.

Brecht himself introduces the Keuner story as a parable about an artist so concerned with form that the content gets lost. But the story also tells about an artist obsessed by an idea, the idea of trying to materialize geometry. The story is tragic, because in platonic terms a perfect sphere is an idea, whereas the tree is a mere phenomenon. The moment the artist reaches for the idea of a perfectly shaped tree, the tree in front of him gets lost.

Similarly, one current within modern art proceeded by reduction. Back then one might have feared that nothing would be left at the end of this line. When Mondrian arrived at his version of pure painting in the first half of the 20th century it could be experienced as a lack of painting. Art historian Meyer Schapiro, defending Mondrian, gave lectures so as to dispel this confusion and convince the artist's reluctant audience. In order to legitimize Mondrian's development Schapiro tracked it back to the work of precedents such as Degas and Pissaro.⁶

The second half of the 20th century was also marked by minimal undertakings. However, by then, making minimal art no longer meant prolonging a tradition by reducing it to its bare essentials, arriving at its basic structure.

⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Form and content in Stories of Mr. Keuner*, 2001, p.24

⁶ Yves-Alain Bois, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, Artforum, Summer 1995

Artists like Daniel Buren and Sol Lewitt were just as minimal as their predecessors – unlike the predecessors of their predecessors. They might have considered their work as a reduction of their earlier work, but art historically speaking the reduction had already taken place. Brecht's joke on the minimal artist did not work on the new generation of minimal artists, the minimalists and conceptual artists. By the 60's the whoops-I-guess-I-cut-off-too-much was no longer on the agenda.

For the first abstract painters and sculptors their groundbreaking results were the fruit of a rather slow and continuous reduction. Malevich, who proclaimed that he was out to 'reduce everything to nothing', recounted that he did not sleep, drink or eat for an entire week, after he had arrived at his first 'Black Square'. Malevich, similarly to Mondrian, did not know where he was going until he had arrived. The artists of the 60's, however, didn't arrive at a minimal stand by living through all its consecutive stages. They adopted and adapted it. No big drama. Whereas Mondrian proclaimed that he arrived at his grid by his all too human 'intuition', Sol Lewitt bluntly stated 'the idea becomes the machine which makes art.' Whereas Mondrian had to write texts to explain his work, the so-called minimalist and conceptual artists considered writing texts about their work part of the work.

One could say, that minimal art has not gotten more minimal in the course of its history. However, the stakes and its implications have changed.

In the 10's and the 20's minimal art was a discovery of a new terrain – a new terrain which had to be taken over as a territory. In the 60's and 70's it was the exploration of that territory – until it was all exploited and artists such as Buren and Lewitt started to expand and maximize it by creating works of greater complexity and reach. But what about minimal art today?

Today minimal art is still a terrain, but a terrain among other terrains. It can thus be a terrain where an artist lingers or simply passes through. What's special about choosing to make minimal art instead of for instance 'scatter sculpture' or 'installation art' is that it is defined negatively. This position does not simply negate a position held by certain predecessors in the manner of Warhol, Lewitt and others who were making something cool and minimal in opposition to the abnormal pathos of the abstract expressionists. Rather, it is a position which negates or rather renounces on all other positions, on the very multitude of positions. Making something minimal is less about making something minimal than simply doing little,

maybe even letting do. It's a position which is not a position. It can look like installation art before installation or scatter sculpture before being scattered. Minimal art of today might be indebted to and inspired by that of yesterday but it cannot rhetorically be turned into an ism such as 'minimalism' or 'conceptualism'. It might look as something we have seen before, but it might not assume it. The contemporary minimal artist is similar to the depressed individual of today described by sociologist Alain Ehrenberg. But what is depression – and what is it not?

Depression is not melancholia associated with the blissful sadness of exceptional geniuses such as Michelangelo who called melancholia 'my joy'; a mental state, which already in the 16th century became fashionable among self-conscious distinguished gentlemen.⁷ Nor is depression to be confused with the once popular diagnosis neurasthenia of the 19th and early 20th century at a time when it was demanded of the individual to be 'in good shape, as endurable as a machine and as lucid as a philosopher' so as to battle traditions in the name of progress.⁸ Depression is not due to the angst of the nervous individual in quest of emancipation. The diagnosis dear to our time, depression, is rather due to fatigue caused by the freedom of the present day individual.

Earlier, the individual suffered from all that which was suddenly permissible. Today by that which is possible. Now I can do what I want so as to become what I want to be. What I do matters little as long as I do something. Therefore, our time asks for entrepreneurship, initiative and projects. I am responsible for my own life and it is up to me to choose, in particular myself, i.e. my self. The paradoxical imperative of today is: 'Be yourself.' Paradoxical because – as reality TV has taught us – we know how theatrical it looks when we are authentic, i.e. 'true to our selves.'

So, the one we call depressed, is the one who does not live up to the social norms of the day. It is the one who is not up for the big task, for making a choice. The one without initiative, the one who pauses and stops, the one who does not get it done. And the depressed artist is thus the one who does not do abstract expressionism, nor minimalism, nor conceptual art, nor institutional critique, not relational aesthetics and so on. But who in particular? The depressed individual is deprived of initiative and communicative urge, therefore the depressed individual might go unnoticed. The

⁷ Alain Ehrenberg, *Det udmattede selv – depression og samfund* – transl. from *La fatigue d'être soi* (1998), 2010, p.64-65

⁸ Alain Ehrenberg, *Det udmattede selv – depression og samfund* – transl. from *La fatigue d'être soi* (1998), 2010, p.72.

same goes for the depressed artist, which means that the depressed artists we might mention might not be depressed individuals. Or they might simply not be depressed artists, but rather feel an urge to exhibit as depressed artists – hereby playing a role and thus being sure not to assume a position.

One case could be the artist Lasse Schmidt Hansen who might exhibit 'these glass plates for some sculptures that I never finished and some things made of silver which never really turned out the way I had planned.'⁹ Another is Rasmus Høj Mygind who makes monochromes out of pigment smeared upon the canvas only so as to retouch them by use of a vacuum cleaner until the canvas shows through. Or it could be Torben Ribe, who makes an abstract painting which he hides behind a tree, thus making a painting with the purpose of showing the worst 'possible conditions for showing a painting, like in an office space or something.'¹⁰ It could be Leopold Kessler, who makes a video about himself, the renown interventionist artist, who is intervened upon. During one day, his 'lucky day', he films all the gypsies in Paris who trick him over and over again by bending over, pretending to find a golden ring at his feet in the hope of getting something for something.

The seemingly depressed artist might show that nothing is something, thus turning a lack of position into a position. Marie Kølbaek Iversen records an empty white wall which she live feeds back upon the wall, hereby creating a visual feedback by use of video recorder and projector that produces beautiful patterns. He might do as Josh Kline whose hyper hygienic project ends up spoiling water. By boiling water from Duane Reade plastic bottles poured back into ditto bottles, chemicals are emitted and the all too clean water polluted.

The depressed artist might be engaged in political issues, but unwilling to agitate, preferring simply to display. It could be Jens Haaning, who exhibits a minimalist looking neon from an asylum center, or a clock displaying the time in a political hot spot somewhere else in the world. Or Søren Thilo Funder who shows surveillance footage of a detainee at Guantanamo Bay put on pause, leaving it up to a text by Judith Butler reproduced on a wall to explain that a detainee – unlike a prisoner – is without any rights and accordingly 'held in waiting.' The depressed artist might even sympathize with the ignorant disempowerment of the oppressed to the point where art seems emptied of political issues. This is the case with the artist group

⁹ From a mail correspondence with the artist

¹⁰ From a conversation with the artist

A Kassen who make a group of people hold white pieces of cardboard above their heads so as to form a white square on a dark background. Their photo Blank poster is inspired by anecdotes told by workers in Romania about how the Ceausescu regime, without notice, would pull them out of the factories, making them march through the streets with banners, whose content they knew nothing about, leaving them 'blank'.

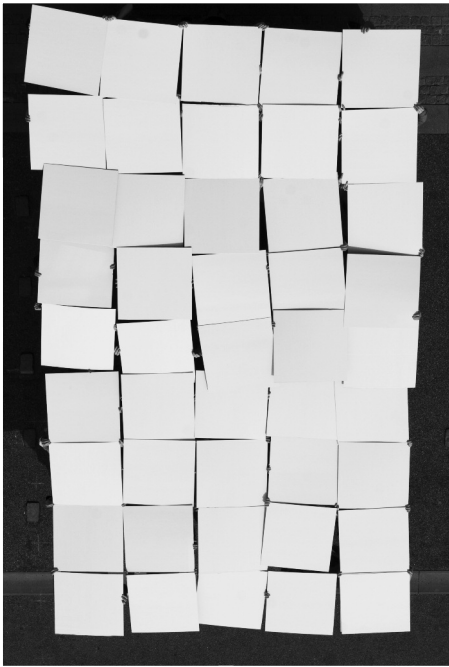
In the artistic domain, which has been avant-garde in matters of self-realization, there is a long tradition for doing your own thing. Therefore, in this domain, ownership is particularly strong. All the possibilities, which have been made available to artists, may be perceived as the exact opposite. The artist Jayson Musson posing as Hennessy Youngman, known for giving advice to young artists on YouTube, illustrates this in a video talk about Bruce Nauman. As he puts it, Nauman took over every territory, he therefore miscellaneously 'owns' water, hands, clowns, torture and even the neon: 'He fucked neon so hard up the ass that his dick came out neon of its mouth.' In this video Hennessy leaves out his most recurrent advice, namely the simple 'Do you!', instead concluding: 'Stop making art – Bruce Nauman did everything you thought of doing... Internet, sorry to depress you today.'

Some artists working today might be designated as depressed, but only in so far as what they are showing, i.e. art, seems done by doing close to nothing. If groups are formed by what the members of a group do together or in a similar manner, the latter contemporary artists mentioned above do not form a group, since they do almost nothing. They display a sort of inactivity in all or certain aspects of their work. Therefore they are like islands unto themselves, illustrating the multitude of art today.

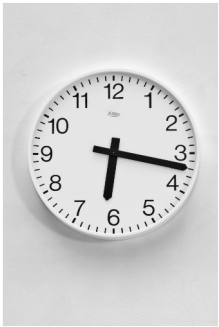
As Alain Ehrenberg has pointed out, depression is melancholia democratized. It is now such a widely used diagnosis or word, that being depressed is no longer synonymous with being sick, given that it is something one has to live with. One might change an individual, but it is a lot more difficult to change society.

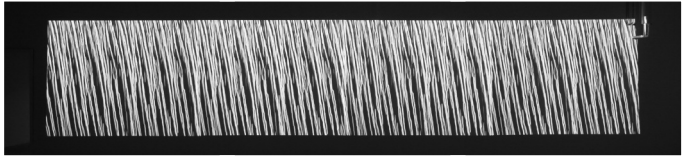
The state of depression is but the other side of contemporary society which cherishes the individual initiative. Therefore, diagnosing an artist as depressed might as well be a way of confusing the diagnosed with its diagnosis.

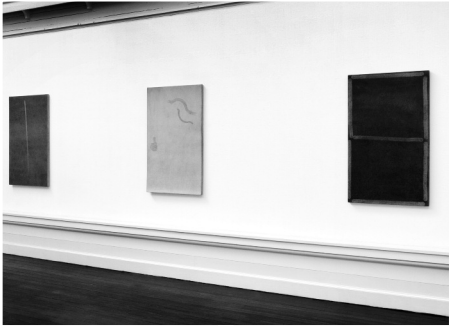












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Most recently he has co-curated the group shows *Womg* and *Pose/Expose* at IMO plus *Right Where* at Art Copenhagen and organized and participated in various symposia and talks in Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris and New York. Previously he has worked as art critic for the financial daily *Dagbladet Børsen* and as columnist and Paris correspondent for the independent daily *Dagbladet Information*. He has studied Art History, Cultural Studies and Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and Université X Nanterre, Paris.

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