THE ARTIST AS MEDIATOR

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by
Linda Carmelita Ringler, B.S.

The Ohio State University
1976

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Us, an organization of professional women in the visual arts, for their support - moral and intellectual.

Christy Park
Mary Beth McPherson
Rosella Sagall
Marcia Armstrong
Edith Dean
Helen Komives
PLATES

Al Held: Clipper / 22
Frank Stella: Sambornville III / 22
Linda Ringler: Triple Helix / 23
Linda Ringler: Geometric Dozen / 24
Robert Morris: Untitled / 25
Donald Judd: Untitled / 25
Tony Smith: Smoke / 26
Linda Ringler: Untitled / 27
Linda Ringler: Untitled / 28
Linda Ringler: Untitled / 28
Linda Ringler: Mantle / 29
Linda Ringler: Extraction / 30
Linda Ringler: Alteration / 30
Linda Ringler: Stratification / 30
Linda Ringler: Emergence / 31
Linda Ringler: Interment / 31
Michael Heizer: Double Negative / 32
Linda Ringler: Containment / 33
Robert Smithson: Tailing Pond / 34
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii

list of Plates iii

Contents iv

Roots: Formalistic 1

Toward the Conceptual 5

Rethink: Art and Technology 9

The Nature of Ideas or Ideas of Nature 11

Roots: Biographical 13

Size / Scale 15

Social Conscience 17

Bibliography 21

Plates 22
Roots: Formalistic

My art making as an undergraduate was firmly entrenched in formalism. My primary concerns were manipulating the surface qualities of color, shape, and form to achieve a well-designed whole. I turned out competent painterly interpretations of form a la Cezanne, and hard-edge paintings in the manner of Vasarely. Yet, despite the somewhat superficial understanding I had of these modes, I soon developed an obsession for the hard-edge, or the masking-tape school of painting. My interest in this work soon lead me to a simplified understanding of its conceptual basis. The work I was most attracted to at the time was that of Al Held and Frank Stella. I enjoyed the economy of form, the flat areas of color, the freedom from brush gesture, and the impact of the size (plates 1 and 2). My paintings consisted of huge forms which stretched across the entire surface of the canvas; there were no subtle nuances, just large flat areas of color absent of gesture and clearly defined. The prob-
lems of composition were minimal; there were no representational counters to interpret; the painting was entirely visual.

My next move was to take the simple shapes off the wall and into free standing minimal sculptures. To restrict the number of variables with which I had to deal, I chose simple geometric forms and worked within a system of modules. The repetitive modules unified the form and included as part of the piece the space between and around the form. Bands of color were used to accentuate and describe the form. These works existed somewhere between the realm of painted sculpture and three dimensional painting. The areas of color were often bounded by the individual modules; the system that organised the form, organised the color as well. The system of unification was inherent in the nature of the form of the repeated units. The shape of the form helped to determine the system of ordering that would relate the parts
into a unified whole. The ordering system was always determined by the form of the modules and the space into which the piece would be placed; it was never random. This imposed systemic order was essential to subordi-nate the artistic ego and bring about a clarity essential to a work that was meant to be purely visual. Accentuation of the visual was also dependent on simplicity and scale. The pieces were made larger than human size and, as a result, had a presence or impact, reinforcing the visibility of the piece (plates 3 and 4).

This work was different from what I had been taught were the traditional concerns of painting, modulation, painterly gesture, interpretation of a form on a two-dimensional plane. It was a way of making art that moved off the wall, and gave me organizational rather than expressionistic control.

A number of concerns that I was exploring in this earlier work are inherent in my work to date. This includes an
economy of means, large scale and an absence of gesture. The antithesis of gesture was inherent in the clean, precise surfaces of the sculpture of Judd, Morris and Tony Smith (plates 5, 6 and 7). The negation of the artist's hand even resulted in pieces made by a factory from the artist's diagram. This supports the notion that art is not dependent on the craftsmanship of the artist, but on his/her idea. It is ironical that an art form based on objectification would impress me for its emphasis on idea. I began to look at art, not as the manipulation of formal qualities, but as the qualitative manifestation of ideas. The minimalist position was one of mediating between the actual physicality of the object and a concern for preconception, systems, ordering and diagrams.¹ Gradually, my concern began to change from the superficial quality of work to a concern for the conceptual.

Working from a minimalist position brought about my first conception of art as idea. The rationale for this has already been stated, but for clarity I will reiterate. The minimalists worked with a concept of art as objectification; inherent is the subjugation of the artistic ego through the negation of gesture. An idea could be conceived and its external embodiment could be provided by a foundry. The manipulation of materials was not intrinsic to the work. Even the arrangement of parts was often provided by imposition of a system. This position was a rejection of many of the accepted elements of Occidental art. This movement from manipulation of materials to an emphasis on ideas which did not have to be manifested by the artist was, for myself, a turning point. Dealing with ideas, however, does not necessarily exclude dealing with objects. In my interpretation, a concept, in order to be shared must be externalized. There are levels of externalization ranging from objectifi-
cation to a written statement of the idea. There are also degrees of pre-conception. Ideas are not always fully crystallized in the mind, but may require development through the manipulation of materials, a process of qualitative thinking. Or an idea may be formulated to the point where the artist is not involved in any actual making process such as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades or Tony Smith's foundry constructed Die. Other ideas have only a process or system predetermined.

Idea art is not something new; it is a change in emphasis. I once heard an instructor ask, what is non-conceptual art? Artists have always been involved in ideas; the distinction is only in the amount of external manipulation of qualities the artist utilizes in the realization of an idea. The conception and the manifestation are not diametrically opposed; they are the extreme ends of a continuum. On one end of the scale is purely conceptual art, on the other is pure objectification; both of the ex-
tremes exist only in theory. In the area between these hypothetical extremes, all works of art can be located; the history of art can be seen as a changing emphasis on object and idea. My own evolution as an artist has been a back-and-forth movement along this scale. I have fluctuated from the object end to the more conceptual; at the time of this writing my work seems to fit somewhere between the middle of the scale and the conceptual extremes.

My development from the somewhat minimalist position I held as an undergraduate to my present concerns has been through a series of realizations — if not revelations. My early sculpture made me aware of how certain external phenomena could alter the perception of a piece, the effects of light, space, scale and movement of the spectator through a work, and the subsequent implication of time. I moved from emphasis on a sculpture that the spectator walked around to one that was walked inside of. Instead of a space defined by a free
standing sculpture, I worked with an enclosed space and the effects of light and scale. My considerations in these pieces bordered on architecture, but with one major distinction, the lack of function. My major concern was to create an experienced space where perception was not focused on an object but on the conditions of the situation. The total enclosure of the space, however, became too burdensome and I found that it was not imperative for realization of the idea (Plate 8). I switched to a modular system of larger-than-life size scale that opened up, yet defined the space, and employed light to relate to this environment. Simple forms altered by external phenomena was a concern I had touched on before, but in these pieces it became a major, rather than secondary, concern (Plates 9 and 10).

Usually the source for my ideas relates to previous work. It can be a further development of an idea, or sometimes a total rejection of an earlier mode, a reaction to a certain direction.
If I were to line up my work in chronological order, it would read as slow, sometimes redundant resolutions followed by radical changes, and huge gaps in the continuum. I go through a constant rethinking process; once I see the exploration of an idea becoming redundant I have no alternative but to change. This sometimes leaves me with a period of time when little is happening in the way of production, but a lot is happening conceptually.

Rethink, Art and Technology:

Technology has given the artist new resources -- and new problems. The artist is free to think in any terms, almost any idea he/she can conceive can find an appropriate means of realization. Traditional media have given way to the materials of industry and the processes of the manufacturer, engineer, scientist and contractor. However, incumbent with the use of newer media is the need to rely on building new skills or hiring the expertise of the technologists in the field. This
presents a practical problem to
the artist who does not have the
skills to resolve the technological
problems for his/her self, or the
funding to hire the experts. Technology
becomes in this case a hindrance rather
than a facilitator. My way of deal-
ing with this problem was to reassert
whether the use of complex resources
was imperative to the realization of my
ideas. If I decided that it was, my
only alternative would have been to de-
velop the skill of grantsmanship. But
it seemed that the medium was taking
over the work and I opted for an economy
of means.

Part of my effort to economize my
means was to do away with crafting slick
surfaces. My frustration with manip-
ulating materials was due in part to
an over-emphasis on objectification. My
aesthetic concerns really had little to
do with polished edges and I began to
sense that my ideas could be realized
in simpler terms; this would allow my
energy to be channeled into qualitative
thought rather than physical labor.

The Nature of Ideas or Ideas of Nature: For some time I had felt that I was forcing a quality on materials that was not intrinsic. The idea of polishing a painted wood service until it looked like steel seemed ludicrous. In a sense I was taking a truth-to-materials stance, and the idea of forcing an order on natural materials manifested itself as a source for exploration in my work. I began to work with the relationships of man to nature, mankind's attempts to impose order and control over the environment and the environment's resistance.

The imposition of a foreign state or quality on a material was once a practical problem but it became a source for an aesthetic concept. I chose to present this dichotomy by forcing order on a natural material in an obvious way. I let the material react to the forming process naturally even if it resisted the imposition. The material also resisted perfection. This resistance of
nature to the order of man is evident on another level where the environment takes back the man made intrusions. The time factor might be immediate or a millenium, but it occurs. Natural phenomena, in time, affect all of civilization's monuments. Robert Morris, when asked about the structural precedents for his sculpture cited the "Egyptian funerary complex of Zoser (2650 B.C.).\(^{2}\) My mentor has been Stonehenge, with its solar order which persists even though some of the elements of that order are missing.

The civilization which constructed this solar computer imposed an order on the environment from natural elements to record and calculate a natural phenomenon. Time and weather have affected it, albeit minimally. It is this strange relationship of man to environment that compels my work.

My art pieces do not claim to make an ecological value judgement. The

relationship of man to nature is both symbiotic and parasitic, but both of these processes are necessary for the maintenance of life. My work is an observation of this relationship, alternating between the two positions. (plates 11 through 16). Man ravages, orders, forces, removes and nourishes; nature resists, repossesses and reclaims.

Rosta: Biographical

The artist is an interpreter of his/her environment. My early environment was the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in Western Maryland. In my home town the primary industry is the rock quarries. To many people the quarries are terrible scars on the mountains; I have to agree. But there is also a certain fascination about them that is apparent at closer inspection. The mountain resists the quarrying. I lived in close proximity to the quarry for twenty years, yet the progress was hardly perceptible. This statement should probably read, rela-
tively imperceptible, because I know that thousands, perhaps millions, of tons of rock have been removed from that mountain. The size of the quarry is vast. There are four levels, or shelves, and from each of these a rock wall rises at least a hundred feet. Up close I was never aware of the devastation done to the mountain; I was just impressed by awe-inspiring size. After working hours the quarry fills with silence accentuated by the enormous size. There is an almost spiritual quality about the place; it has a presence.

The forces which had constructed the mountain millennia ago had been revealed; the rate of replacement could not begin to equal the rate of excavation. The natural process of rebuilding is no match for the technology of man, yet nature would fight back in a more violent way with a rock slide that would bury machinery -- and men. There is one quarry that isn’t worked anymore; gradually the rock is falling in
and erasing some of the signs of man’s presence. The scores in the rock made by the machinery are being eroded away and in time (a few more millennia) the effects of man will be voided.

The irony of this process is that the sand and rock taken from the mountain will be used for building material.

The impact of growing up around a rock quarry is now very apparent in my work. I share with the "Earth" artists, such as Michael Heizer and the late Robert Smithson, a fascination for the environment as subject matter, the earth as medium and the awe-inspiring affects of scale.

Size/Scale:

Q: Why didn’t you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

A: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn’t you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?

A: I was not making an object.

Tony Smith about Die³

Scale is a relative term; its constant is usually the human body. Things that are smaller than life size are more precious and intimate. Those that are larger than us are more public. These characteristics are a function of our ability to exercise control over a situation; smaller objects are within our grasp; larger ones are not. They are also a function of the space commanded by the object. We need more distance to see a large object and so it commands a larger space. The inverse is true for a smaller object.⁴

Size is the concept used when human scale is transcended. In the work of Michael Heizer this is often the case. His pieces, such as Double Negative (plate 17) are so large that the viewer is struck by the sheer size of the work. Man is no longer the measure and therefore the impact of the piece is awesome.⁵

⁴ Ibid., pp. 230-231.

Size is impressive, but scale is the concern in my work. The pieces are meant to relate to human size. The effect of the work is dependent on this relationship. For practical reasons, however, I have been forced to work with models of pieces that are intended to be larger than life size. The models can not substitute for the work because they negate an important element necessary to experience the work. The work needs to have a presence that is realizable only in full scale, where the spectator can respond to the space commanded by the piece (plate 18).

Social Conscience: Before his death, Robert Smithson was negotiating for an opportunity to do aesthetic re claimations of abandoned quarries and strip mines. Smithson's concern was to situate his art as "a resource that mediates between ecology and industry."6 Unfortunately his pro-

posals were not always met with enthusiasm (or financial support) by the mining companies. The Mineral Engineering Company of Denver finally agreed and Smithson was given the opportunity to do Faillees Pond, (plate 19) a work which would utilize the rock washed out during the ore extraction process of the mining. This work would realize Smithson’s contention that the artist can be a positive force in mediating between the effects of technology and the natural landscape. (Smithson was killed in a plane crash before realizing this piece.) His legacy, though, is an inspiration that the artist can perform a viable function in society, making an art that transcends the position of art as commodity to art as social consciousness.

Artists have often embraced the idea of moving art from the arena of elitism and into a realm of viability outside the gallery walls. Art in recent years has protested against consumerism by becoming too large, or too
conceptual or too transient to be a commodity. Still, reaction against consumerism is only a small step in the direction of anti-elitism and does not necessarily take a stance of social responsibility.

The idea of social responsibility can be interpreted on two levels. One level is that art should be commensurate with the masses. This position implies that art must be understood by everyone or it has no value. But art is an intellectual process and as such, requires an active intellectual preparation for dealing with it. It is not a simple case of stimulus-response. The gallery then serves as a showcase for making art available; the journals provide the critical insight for understanding and dealing with art.

The other level of social responsibility for the artist is the improvement of the quality of life through affecting positive change. The artist has a responsibility to function within the society. The artist is a prod-
but of the environment but he/she can also effect change in that environment through his/her unique insights. This new humanism has implications for different facets of society. Some artists see their function in terms of politics or the mass media. The implication for myself is that of environmental aesthetics.

To date, I have not resolved this issue or its implementation. It is worthy of further thought and will be an area of future exploration.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


5' x 6' x 2'. Leo Castelli Gallery, N.Y.

Plate 6 - Donald Judd: Untitled. 1966. 
Each section: 9" x 40" x 31". Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.
Plate 7 - Tony Smith: Jumbo. 1967. 19' x 31' x 46'.

Plate 11 - Linda Minger: Mantle. 1976. 2½" x 4½" x 3¼". Model for environmental piece.

Plate 12 - Linda Minger: Extraction. 1976. 30" x 20" x 4½". Model for environmental piece.

Plate 14 - Linda Ringler: Stratification. 1976. 24" x 15" x 6".
Plate 15 - Linda Kingler: Emergence, 1976. 24" x 30" x 18". Model for environmental piece.

Plate 16 - Linda Kingler: Interment, 1976. 20" x 21" x 1/4". Model for environmental piece.
Plate 17 - Michael Heizer: Double Negative. 1969-70. 1500' x 50' x 30'. Virgin River, Nevada, Nevada.
Plate 18 - Linda Ringer: Containment.
1976. Each tower: 3' x 3' x 14'.