

THE
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MUSEUM
OF ART
B M A

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cover images

Front: Do-Ho Suh, detail, *Soul Home*; L. A. Home;
Backroom, center: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, detail,
"Untitled" (Maur); right: Robert Cober, detail,
above: Sowon Kwon, *Molding* (Snake Slain Rose).

BODYSPACE

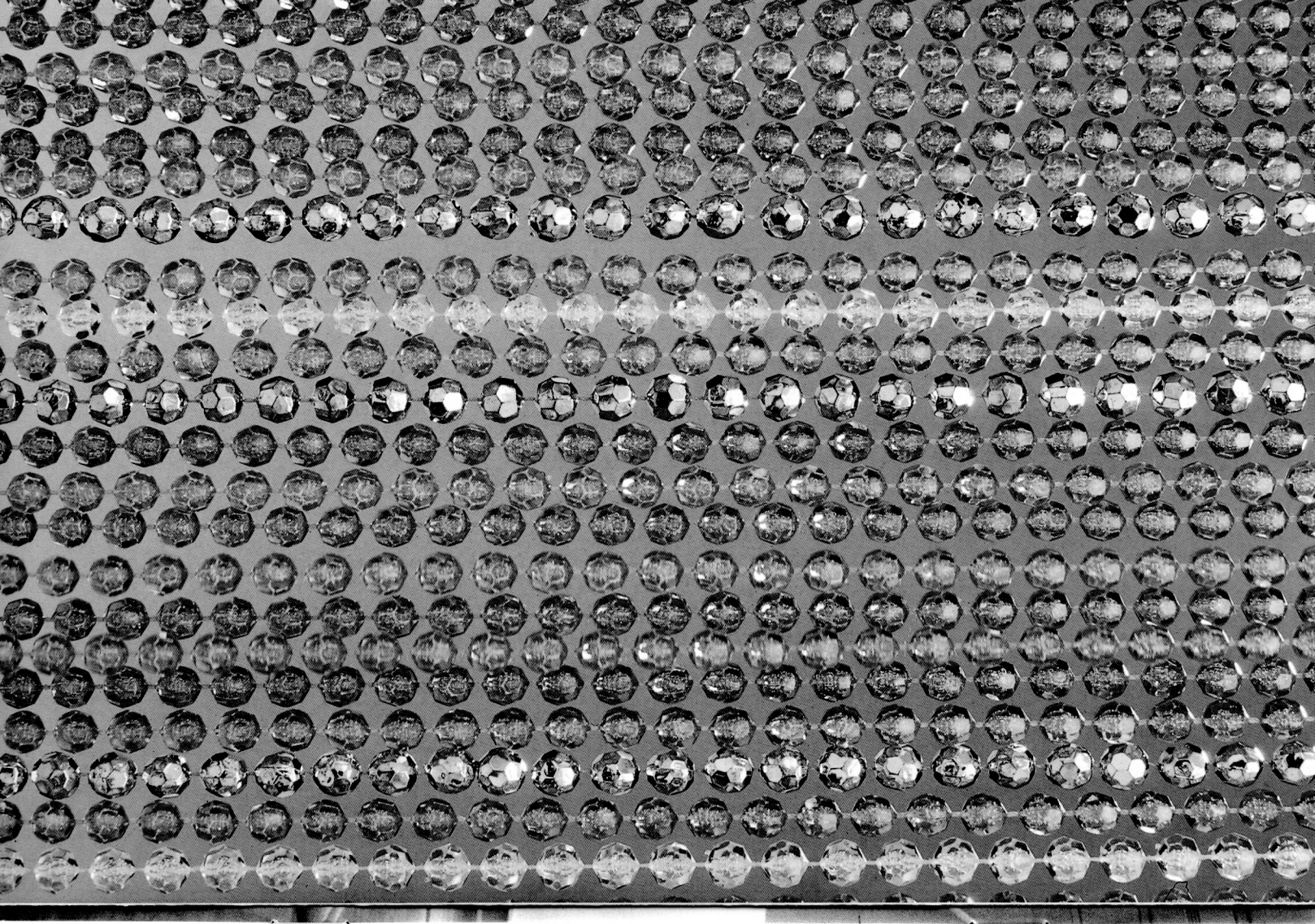
B O D Y S P A C E

In 1964 a person happening upon the exhibition of artist Robert Morris at the Green Gallery in New York would have encountered a series of rectangular and L-shaped beams painted a flat nondescript gray.⁹

Propped against the wall, lying on the floor, and jutting out into the room, the beams present the gallery visitor with a distinct set of problems. What are these objects? Are they "Art"? Are they part of the room or of the building? Are they a newly exposed structural element, or the residue of previous construction? If they are "Art," was one to sit on them, step over them, or walk around them? Yet to even ask such questions is to point to the ways in which these objects refused or challenged traditional notions of art, inasmuch as looking at an art object does not seem to be as important as thinking about and/or walking around it. It was exactly this shift—from looking, deemed an exclusively visual activity, to perceiving, which implies the full range of senses—that was so important for the movement called Minimalism, of which Robert Morris's work is exemplary.

For many contemporary viewers the obstinate cubes and taciturn rectangles, the restricted palette, and the seeming lack of content of so many minimalist sculptures have become a source of frustration, as if the objects themselves refuse to care about the feelings or thoughts of their spectators. This is an ironic turn of events, for minimalist artists, in fact, had other intentions.

By putting acts of physical perception at the center of aesthetic experience, many minimalist artists were experimenting with two important and interrelated ideas. The first was a play with the principles of phenomenology, as most fully elaborated by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). Countering Enlightenment philosophy's reliance upon reason, logic, and the mind—each to the exclusion of the body—phenomenology insists instead on the primacy of the physical sensorium as a means to ascertain and organize knowledge. Hence, many minimalist works played with forms and materials that suggested a continuum between the space of art and the realm of



Robert Morris, *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, 1964. © 2001 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the everyday, and they often engaged in a systematic investigation of the gestalt experience in the spectator's apprehension of three-dimensional forms.

Minimalism's exploration of phenomenology was in part a desire to think through the artists' second concern: How do art objects come to have meaning? Does meaning occur at the level of the mind or the body? And, furthermore, does it happen privately or publicly? For their predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists, the meaning of art was a deeply interior and private affair. Skirting the ability of language to explain it, meaning bordered on the mystical or the purely formal. The common and critical assumption was that the experience of an abstract expressionist painting was largely a disembodied visual endeavor and, furthermore, that the meaning of the work of art was internal to either the artist's intention or the solitary viewer's experience. In contrast, minimalist artists suggested that meaning was established in public. And meaning was deemed to be public, in part, due to the scale of much minimalist sculpture. In the important article "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," Robert Morris wrote: "The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself. . . . The qualities of publicness or privateness are imposed on things."¹

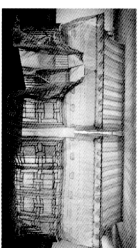
Yet it wasn't only scale that rendered meaning a public affair. The public site of the museum or gallery also helped to make the work of art a more public experience, as did the newfound emphasis on the body of the spectator, for bodies are nothing if not public. Yet to say that the body is *only* public is clearly incorrect. Bodies are also deeply private; they are where we hold the most intimate parts of ourselves. Many minimalist artists and critics, however, did not fully explore this dual nature of the body. For instance, the body imagined by Minimalism is one without race or gender. It is a generic or generalized body; it is an abstraction of sorts. Hence it was easy to imagine the body implied by minimalist sculpture as exclusively public, lacking the specificity that the private nature of the body permits.

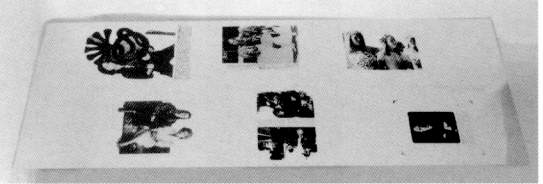
Minimalism provides many of today's most ambitious artists with a rich source of ideas and strategies, making it one of the most productive movements of the postwar period. All of the artists in *BodySpace*,

for instance, take up the problems of perception and the bodily apprehension of space. Yet they do so in ways that complicate Minimalism's too simplified notion of the publicness of bodies. Instead what the artists in this exhibition register again and again is the slippage between the categories of public and private and how the body is one of the primary sites where such blurring occurs.

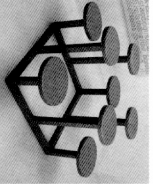
In *Soul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home*,² Do-Ho Suh presents us with a floating image of home, that most personal and private of spaces, in the public language of geography and cities. The work creates a public space, yet the feeling of standing underneath the diaphanous suspended house is also one of intimacy and protection. So too the name of the work changes each time it is exhibited, suggesting the transience of home, and the profound ways in which we carry spaces within our bodies and memories.

A very different version of public space is offered by Josiah McElheny's *Untitled (White)*,³ an impressive white modernist shelving unit that houses an abundant display of hand blown re-creations of the hallmarks of twentieth-century glass. Evoking the glimmering appeal of commodity display, *Untitled (White)* flags the public bustle of the department store, or the chic feel of the luxury goods boutique, as much as it feels appropriate to a museum setting. While the piece blurs the boundaries between the space of commerce and the space of art, it introduces the realm of domestic space through its use of household objects. Furthermore, McElheny has chosen to remake the type of objects that people come in daily bodily contact with, such as glasses, bowls, pitchers, and vases. The stark white geometrical shelving unit evokes Sol LeWitt's endless permutations of airy, open cubes, yet here the logic of repetition is that of the commodity—both the seeming infinity of their production and our desire for them. And although the cool exterior of the work emanates the prohibition "Don't Touch," it also presents the viewer with an incredible tactile allure. This tactile quality is heightened by the fact that these objects—originally meant to be mass-produced—are handmade in the craft tradition of glass blowing. In these sensuous forms there is an almost palpable marriage between bodies (of the maker and the user) and an object, a literal melding of a body with a space.





If, for McElheny, the realms of the commodity and of high art offer a version of the body saturated with potential pleasure, then Cady Noland's *Untitled*⁹ presents the viewer with a more disturbing version of the slippage between public and private. Propped against the wall in a manner that evokes the sculptures of John McCracken, Noland's *Untitled* is explicit in its borrowing of the formal strategies of Minimalism. While Minimalism proposed that the meaning of art was a public matter, Noland makes this proposition emphatic by including silkscreened images and text from the mass media, that most public of information systems. The images are telling as they each pertain to an aspect of the Patty Hearst story: Patty Hearst's great-grandfather, William Randolph Hearst, initiated the exploitative form of journalism that we have come to know so well today. The connection in *Untitled* to William Randolph Hearst is pointed, for what we experience in today's personality driven media is the routine exposure of the "private" aspects of "public" lives. The highly reflective aluminum surface, combined with the over-life-size scale of the work, means that the viewer is confronted with a phantasmatic reflection of themselves. Here concerns with perception are shot through with the complicated ways in which the mass media informs both public discourse and private life. It is implied that one effect of these blurred categories is that the body itself becomes slightly apparitional, a murky reflection of itself located in the ambiguous space between "reality" (the reflection in the metal) and "unreality" (the image in the media).



For David Schafer the body is equally implied but never visualized. In *Stepped Density I*¹⁰ and *Stepped Density II*, Schafer crossed the standard height of a bar stool with that of an outdoor seating unit. Coated in an unnaturally blue paint, these sculptures hum with the tension of the inorganic. How is it that the crossing of two idealized settings, replete with their seemingly perfect averaging out of the human body, can result in such an impossible configuration? In these sculptures Schafer explores the language of public space, exposing it as highly structured by the laws of averages (ergonomics and anthropometry) and profit (fast-food seating is notoriously designed to promote people to leave quickly). These forces act as a form of grammar, establishing the rules for public space and its attendant behavior.

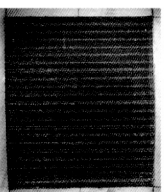
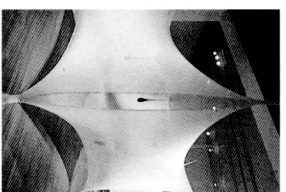


While David Schafer shows us a slightly sinister underside to the planned quality of our public spaces, Ernesto Neto attempts to fashion a utopian public space, where the rules and grammar of behavior are temporarily suspended. There is no rule stronger in the public space of a museum than the prohibition against touching. Neto takes seriously Minimalism's insistence upon acts of bodily perception, and his *Naves*¹¹ (the Portuguese word for vessels) encourage the viewer to enter them, touch them, look at them, and often smell them as well, scented as they are with aromatics such as saffron and cloves. In Neto's work the body is conceived as a vehicle of pleasure, and likewise the public space of art is transformed into a space of play and exploration.

"*Untitled*" (*Water*),¹² by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a shimmering curtain of blue, white, and silver beads, also permits the viewer to touch the work of art, as he or she must pass through this work in order to traverse the gallery space. At once a wall to be looked at and a curtain to be passed through, "*Untitled*" (*Water*) deploys the minimalist strategy of using industrially produced materials to establish a continuum between the space of art and the realm of the everyday. For Gonzalez-Torres, however, these materials are loaded with meaning. Here industrial materials evoke the ocean—and its attendant physical pleasures of sight, tactility, and sound—as well as the beaded curtains that adorn homes while they divide space.

Claudia Matzko's *Salt Wall*¹³ plays with issues of invisibility. Flush against the wall, extending from floor to ceiling, it runs the risk of being overlooked by the viewer, mistaken for a wall as opposed to a work of art. Once seen, it too evokes the spaces of home, as the tiled wall mimics the pristine hygienic surfaces of twentieth-century bathrooms and kitchens. Yet almost immediately one realizes that these tiles are far from smooth and standardized. Rather, each has been made by hand, and each unique tile bears the indelible imprints of the hands that made them. Matzko borrows the logic of the grid and repetition, found in so much minimalist art. But instead of insisting upon the homogenization of industrial production, Matzko opts instead for the infinite variety implied by individual bodily marks.

The slippage between what does and does not "look like" art was a concern of minimalist artists, one continued by several of the artists in





this exhibition. Robert Gober's *Drain*⁹ flirts with its likeness to an actual mass-produced drain, even though all of Gober's work is meticulously handmade. By inserting the drain directly into the wall, Gober dramatically recontextualizes it. Unhooked from its proper plumbing network, we see how a drain is a conduit between the inside and outside of a building—a bridge between public and private space. The eerie beauty of *Drain* is perhaps its implicit evocation of the body, which, as previously stated, is a living conduit between public and private realms. And similar to a drain, it both stores and releases everything, from fluids to perception to memory, each a part of the fabric of identity itself.



Gober's work suggests that a continuity between the realms of public and private happens through both objects and bodies, and he does so in part by suggesting the intimate relations between bodies and things. Nowhere is this reciprocity more in evidence than in Sowon Kwon's *Molding* (*Smoke Stain Rose*)¹⁰. Snaking along a flesh pink wall, a peculiar decorative element repeats itself—not quite wainscoting, not quite a chair rail—it summons the realm of interior design. At once serial and repetitious, like Matzko's *Salt Wall*, each element is built up by hand, pinched, and accumulated into a nipple-like form. Here is an image of a body part literally melding with space, absorbed into the wall, like a woman in a painting by Édouard Vuillard. Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd once quipped that minimalist sculpture was “one thing after another.” We are usually content to think of the mass-produced in these terms, but to apply them to the human form, or more precisely, to a part of the human form, produces an uncanny effect.

In different ways all of the works in *Body/Space* may be seen to revisit concerns put into play in art thirty-five years ago by Minimalism. The strengths of these works lies in the artist's ability to grapple with their recent art historical past. Yet, as much as these works have been enabled by Minimalism, they are some of its most articulate critics as well.

1. Morris, Robert. “Notes on Sculpture: Part II.” In *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000): 218. First published in *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (1966): 20–23.

ROBERT GOBER · American, born 1954

Inverted Basin, 1986. Plaster, expanded steel, wire lath; 22 x 25¼ x 7 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Fanny B. Thalheimer Memorial Fund. BMA 1997.102.

Drain, 1989. Edition of 8 with 2 artist's proofs, AP 2/2. Cast pewter; 3 x 4¼ in. Collection the Artist, New York.

Drains, 1990. Edition of 8 with 2 artist's proofs, AP 1/2. Cast pewter; 1¼ x 3¼ in. Collection the Artist, New York.

Newspaper, 1993. Edition 8/10. Photolithography on Mohawk Superfine paper and twine; 4 x 15¾ x 13 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Contemporary Art Endowment Fund. BMA 2000.153.

Untitled, 2000. Edition: 29/50. Crayon lithograph; sheet: 768 x 1123 mm. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Purchased as the gift of Janet and Edward Dunn, Baltimore. BMA 2000.54.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES · American, born Cuba, 1957–1996

Untitled (Sand), (1993–1994).

Photogravures on Somerset Satin paper; image: 159 x 236 mm. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Print & Drawing Society Fund, with proceeds derived from the 1997 Contemporary Print Fair. BMA 1997.111.1–8.

“Untitled” (Water), (1993). Plastic beads, metal rod; dimensions variable. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Purchase with exchange funds from the Bequest of Saïde A. May. BMA 1995.73.

SOWON KWON · American, born Korea, 1963

Jennifer's Convertible, 1994/2000. Digital print on vinyl; 12 ft. x 11 ft. x 18 in. Collection the Artist, New York.

Molding (*Smoke Stain Rose*), 1996/2000.

Plaster, paint; each block: 2½ x 3½ x ½ in. (cast in 10 block segments). Collection the Artist, New York.

Untitled, 2000. Pen on inkjet prints; 17 x 33 in. Collection the Artist, New York.

CLAUDIA MATZKO · American, born 1956

Salt Wall, 1999. Salt and resin; 15 ft. 10 in. x 23 ft. 6 in. Courtesy the Artist and Angles Gallery, Santa Monica.

JOSIAH McELHENY · American, born 1966

Untitled (White), 2000. Painted wood shelving display with hand blown glass; 8½ x 10 x 11 ft. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

ERNESTO NETO · Brazilian, born 1964

Sister Naves, 1999. Lycra, Styrofoam, sand, and cloves; 9 x 40 x 25 ft. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University, Courtesy Bonakdar Jancon Gallery, New York and Galeria Camargo Vilaga, São Paulo.

CADY NOLAND · American, born 1956

Untitled, (1989). Silkscreen on aluminum; 48 x 120 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Gift of Estelle Schwartz, New York, in Honor of the BMA's West Wing for Modern Art. BMA 1994.149.

DAVID SCHAEFER · American, born 1975

Decor Number One, 1999. Digital C print on Fuji Crystal archive matte paper on aluminum; 45 x 65 in. Collection the Artist, Los Angeles.

Stepped Density with Texts, 1999. Pencil, marker, vellum on inkjet collage; 16½ x 19¼ in. Courtesy Works on Paper, Inc., Los Angeles.

DAVID SCHAFER • Continued

Stepped Text Study, 1999. Inkjet and pencil on vellum on tiled laser print collage; 47¾ x 38½ in. Courtesy Works on Paper, Inc., Los Angeles.

Relational Study, 2000. Pencil, marker on paper. 14 x 16½ in. Collection the Artist, Los Angeles.

Stepped Density I, 2000. Fabricated steel, fiberglass, wood, paint; 30 X 48 X 48 in.
Collection the Artist, Los Angeles.

Stepped Density II. 2000. Fabricated steel, fiberglass, wood, paint; 30 x 48 x 48 in. Collection the Artist, Los Angeles.

Stepped Density with Pinto. 2000. Pencil, marker, inkjet on paper; 14 x 16½ in.
Courtesy Works on Paper, Inc., Los Angeles.

Stepped Density with Text, 2000. Marker on xerox on inkjet; 14 x 11 in. Courtesy Works on Paper, Inc., Los Angeles.

DO-HO SUH · Korean, born 1962

Who Am We?, 1998. Iris print, sheet/image: 560 x 762 mm. The Baltimore Museum of Art; Print and Drawing Society Fund, with proceeds from the 1999 Contemporary Print Fair. BMA 1999-41.

My Country, 1999. Ink on paper; 11 X 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York.

My House. 1999. Ink on paper; 11 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York.

Seoul Home/L.A. Home; Bathroom, 1999. Edition 3/3. Silk; 110 x 76 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York.

Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home, 1999, Silk and metal armatures, 149 x 240 x 240 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Purchased with funds provided by an Anonymous donor and a gift of the artist.

