Between Tension and Tranquility

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Susan York is heir to decades of "post minimalism," but unlike so many of her peers in earlier and later generations, she has found a way to paradoxically revitalize this ongoing "ism." I say "paradoxically" because the original Minimalism, at least in theory, heartily disavowed vitality in favor of stasis. York, on the other hand, subtly and studiously makes her forms just a little bit *off*, while her surfaces are very much *on*. The result is a mesmerizing sense of arrested time. Asymmetry and perfection are two of the many poles between which she works —"tension and tranquility" being the ones she mentions most.

Of course the term Minimalism itself was always something of a misnomer, named as it was not by artist practitioners (most of whom dislike the term) but by an art historian/philosopher. The word does not arise in York's conversations, but for better or worse, she has to live with its history. In addition, it happens to be a narrative I have lived as well, which makes it difficult to banish forty-year-old associations. Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, and Eva Hesse were and are my keystones for the period in the early to mid-l960s when younger artists rebelling against the excesses of Abstract Expressionism were paring things down to a "less is more" esthetic. Yet it is no insult to say that York has learned from LeWitt and Hesse—Malevich being her first guide into this rarified world—because she has made such good use of whatever she has obliquely learned from them.

Nevertheless, art history always has to bow to lived experience. In York's case, she makes it clear that her art education at the University of New Mexico, and later at the Cranbook Academy of Art, was preceded and preempted by being raised in Albuquerque, "growing up in this open space, with the light and the emptiness." (In the 1990s, she knew and loved Florence Pierce's light-filled and light-swallowing resin reliefs, formed by those same elements.) At the same time, York's sculpture, drawings, and installations are the product of an assiduous erasure of everything but the experience at hand. (She has practiced Zen Buddhism since her twenties.) By producing subtle disorientations within a contemplative space, she pulls the viewer into her sphere (or rectangle), hoping we too will "taste the calm and sink into the emptiness . . . lose one's self . . merging with everything, [so that] subject and object vanish." Hers is indeed a "silent art"— not in the sense that it demands we shut up or close down, but in the sense that it demands we open up our senses, as we do when distractions are denied.

In a single wall-mounted graphite column at the Lannan Foundation (*Tilted Column,* 2008), York provides three different perceptual profiles. The glowing black form hovers a barely perceptible couple of inches off the ground. From the front it is clearly asymmetrical, turning in to the right. However, the top edge seems straight, and the two sides provide infinitesimally different views. This is the first time she has scaled a sculpture in reference to her own body measurements (a scale that was somewhat altered when it didn't produce the desired effect). She remarks that the larger the scale, the less intellectual and more "physical" a work becomes. As a viewer around York's height, I related to this piece "face to face"; though it is somewhat taller than I am, I felt curiously comfortable with this imposing black column.

So York's work *looks* like Minimalism more than it *is* like Minimalism. In the almost fifty years that have passed since Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt, among others, began to pare down sculptural tenets and detach certain painting tenets from the wall, the anti-expressionist agenda (at the time, I called it "Third Stream" "Primary Structures," or "Rejective Art") has receded into the past. So has the Process Art that followed it—another factor in York's art, since she transforms change into a formal element, implied rather than stated. The 1960s "process" tendency perversely denied materiality in favor of an obsession with materials. Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Barry LeVa, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and others found ways of fragmenting, puddling, scattering, and spattering volume, inadvertently suggesting the "action painting" they so adamantly rejected. Gravity was a compelling issue, as it is for York, and there seemed no better way to deal with gravity than to take sculpture down to ground/floor level. (Carl Andre famously declared that a road was the ideal sculpture.)

Beginning when York was in graduate school (1993–95), already a mature artist, she made floor pieces of sieved powdered pigment or sweeping compound on the floor and later in the street. (Her blunt friend and mentor, Agnes Martin—another artist whose work was altered to perfection by the

New Mexico light—asked her how she expected to make a living when the sculpture could be swept up and discarded.) Another interest was how to take apart a solid form and render it flat. In 1997, during a ceramics residency in Holland, she worked with porcelain, attracted to the translucency of this elemental form of clay. She also obsessively studied a Rietveld chair at the Stedelijk Museum, then made a piece (and a drawing) that took it apart into two dimensions, reversing Rietveld's process of making a de Stijl painting three-dimensional, and recalling the two/three-dimensional games between painting and sculpture going on in the mid-1960s. (One of LeWitt's first purchases, when his work began to sell, was a Rietveld chair reproduction.) York's "aerial view" of the dismantled chair (in black, white, and gray) became one section of a floor sculpture consisting of four squares on the floor; another section was made of loose broken slices of porcelain, another of granular graphite, and another from the pale dust residue from constructing the chair.

York continued to work for several years with the thinnest slices of usually cream-colored porcelain piled on each other, sometimes gently but precariously hung on the wall on tipped shelves. She experimented with the visual eccentricity that has become a trademark by slightly tilting a wall and leaning three large glass panes against it to titillate the elusive illusion (*Center of Gravity*, 1995). Ready to turn to the "dark side," and having found the soft, dense grays of lead, its "mercurial beauty . . . neither solid nor immaterial" particularly appealing, but too dangerous, she discovered graphite, which has become the bedrock of her most original work. With its pulsating range of grays (she suggests an analogy to physical thickness), graphite both reflects and absorbs light. The material "has a low resonant tone. [It] belongs to the cello," she says—to Bach's *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*. She began by rubbing her sculptures with the granular substance. While the effect might have been almost the same, she found she "hated that they weren't solid graphite" (an echo of the modernist credo, "truth to materials"). This triggered years of experimentation (she even called a pencil factory for advice, but they didn't give up their secrets) and, finally, success in casting graphite.

The preoccupation with this material led to two haunting graphite rooms, each incorporating (very different) sculptures, both titled *Center of Gravity*. The first was at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, 2002, the second at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004, where not only the sculptures and the walls of the 20 x 15-foot room were rubbed with graphite, but also the floor. The installation included a sound installation—six hours of steady, often heavy breathing by New Mexico composer Steve Peters, not as quietly "Zen" as York had expected— but she enjoyed the unexpected as a product of collaboration.

Whether the graphite is applied to a surface or cast, York spends hours and days at a time layering, rubbing, and polishing. "My art practice is based in repetition and labor," she says. This working process inevitably associates her work with a core premise of feminist art. In drawings she looks for "a shape that is symmetrical but slightly skewed," reminding me of Hesse's quest for the off-center, or eccentric, skewing the geometry preferred by her male colleagues. Like LeWitt, York has "created a structure where the primary decisions are already made." But her commitment to repetition is not at all conceptual; it is first and foremost physical and meditative: "I am mesmerized by the movement of my body rocking back and forth. . . . Through this process, thinking becomes impossible . . . my brain becomes equal to the rest of my body."

This nuanced fusion of the intellect and sensual experience is precisely what York achieves. In doing so, she takes Minimalism past the post, and into a realm of her own.

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