



**CARL ANDRE**

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**STEEL  $\Sigma$  16**

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY









## ‘ART EXCLUDES THE UNNECESSARY’<sup>1</sup>

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‘As this was the first-ever exhibition of Minimalist art in Newcastle and the holiday crowds were not used to such Minimalist refinement, the response... was non-comprehending and occasionally hostile... Many visitors objected to what was thought of as ‘waste space’.’<sup>2</sup>

Joanna Mendelssohn, 1978

Carl Andre’s Minimalist sculpture, *Steel Σ 16*, (pronounced *steel sum 16*) 136 hot-rolled steel plates, each 30cm x 30cm x 1cm, was first exhibited at Newcastle Art Gallery in 1978. Few people seem to know, and fewer still remember, that the New York-based pioneer of Minimalist art came to Newcastle to work on the exhibition with Australian painter, Robert Hunter. And, according to Joanna Mendelssohn’s review in *Art & Australia* at the time, few Novocastrians cared.

Sure enough, to the uninitiated, Minimalist art seems difficult. Unlike most other ‘-isms’ in visual art, it doesn’t seem to want to give its audience much to work with, if anything. It doesn’t respond well to the question, ‘what is it meant to be?’

So, what then is Minimalist art? Where does it fit into the recent past in modern art, and how did it come about? And how can an arrangement of 136 steel plates be one of the most significant works of modern art in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection? To understand Minimalism, we need to understand what exactly it was responding to when it emerged in the United States in the late 1950s.

## LIFE

In November 1959, *Life*, America’s leading lifestyle magazine, ran a two-part feature by Dorothy Seiberling on the ‘giants’ of American art. The first part, titled *Baffling US Art: What It Is About* attempted to explain what the crazy, uncontrolled drips and spatters of American Abstract Expressionism meant. Seiberling explained, ‘Instead of a picture of a man suffering, the abstract expressionist tries to evoke the actual sensation of suffering through the use of foreboding colors, clashing shapes or lines and hurtle restlessly across the canvas.’<sup>3</sup>

When the *Life* article ran – two months before the end of the 1950s – the broader public were beginning to understand that Jackson Pollock’s crazed splats or Willem de Kooning’s heavy brushstrokes were meant to convey the raw emotion and psychic turmoil of the human condition. By the time of *Life*’s feature, Abstract Expressionism had dominated American art for two decades.

Twenty years earlier, the critic Clement Greenberg had lauded Abstract Expressionism as the new avant garde. Because they were not making paintings of recognisable things – landscapes, people, vases of flowers – Greenberg argued they were creating something unique, never before seen. In fact, Greenberg went as far as to say, they were trying ‘in effect to imitate God.’<sup>4</sup> The claims made for Abstract Expressionism were often grandiose and bloated with spiritual importance.

## SIXTEEN AMERICANS

One month after *Life* magazine’s feature, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York opened *Sixteen Americans*.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition was intended to capture the zeitgeist of the turning-of-the-decade from the ‘50s into



'60s – and it included none of the 'celebrated pioneers' of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>6</sup> Instead, curator Dorothy Miller assembled a group of much younger emerging artists.

Some of the works in *Sixteen Americans* were clearly a critical response to the grandiosity of Abstract Expressionism. Frank Stella presented large striped canvases. They may have *looked* like abstract paintings, but something very different was happening – a new idea was emerging. As Carl Andre succinctly explained in the *Sixteen Americans* catalogue text on Stella: 'Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. *There is nothing else in his paintings.*'<sup>7</sup>

Nothing else? What about the profound quasi-religious claims made for Abstract Expressionism? What about evoking man's suffering through crusty stabs of foreboding colour, visceral and clotted, on the surface of a canvas? The Minimalist artists rejected the idea that there could be something weighty and insightful found in a work of art, beyond our direct aesthetic experience of the material right in front of us.

## WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SEE

Similar to Abstract Expressionism, Stella's striped paintings don't *represent* anything; but quite unlike Abstract Expressionism, his paintings were not *about* anything either, other than themselves. Stella puts it concisely: 'I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting – the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up by asserting that there is something there besides the paint on canvas. My painting is based on the fact that what can be seen there is there. It really is an object...what you see is what you see.'<sup>8</sup>

As a young sculptor, Carl Andre understood this idea

at the core of Stella's paintings when he wrote that 'art excludes the unnecessary'<sup>9</sup> because his own work made the same proposition, which is at the very heart of Minimalist art: *what you see is what you see.*

Minimalist art works are *not* metaphors, they are *not* models, they are *not* allegories, they never refer to something that is present elsewhere, whether physical or spiritual, material or conceptual. A square plate of steel in a Carl Andre work is a square plate of steel; but, importantly, it is a square plate of steel that has been placed into the context of 'art'. When it enters the art context, all its functional possibilities are shut down. It is no longer a material *for* something – for building, for becoming part of something else. Minimalist art sought to free objects from their useful significance, to strip away purpose, so that we see the aesthetics of the object without the interference of function. A brick is no longer waiting to become part of a wall or building; instead, with its useful function stripped away, it is a rectangular ceramic block, with weight, texture and colour.

## STEEL $\Sigma$ 16

In 1978, Andre made two works from square plates of steel specifically for the exhibition at Newcastle Art Gallery: *Steel  $\Sigma$  4* and *Steel  $\Sigma$  16*.

In one important respect, the materiality of Andre's *Steel  $\Sigma$  16* is unique across the artist's fifty-year career, and this is particularly important for Newcastle: the material that Andre is drawing our attention to – the steel – was made at the BHP factory in Newcastle, now closed for over a decade.



# Artist aspires to 'fierce calm'

By MERCIA DELPRAT

Minimal artist Carl Andre has brought steel to Newcastle in the form of a one-tonne floor sculpture composed of 136 Australian steel plates each weighing 9kg.

The sculpture sprawls on the cream carpet at Newcastle Region Art Gallery. A smaller version lies nearby.

Mr Andre is not opposed to visitors walking on his sculptures. He said yesterday that the friction of their feet would polish the plates.

The larger work, called Steel Sun, is a triangular arrangement of plates.

Mr Andre's visit to Newcastle was arranged with the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. He will install three works in Australia. He is exhibiting in Newcastle with the Australian painter, Robert Hunter, until September 17.

Mr Andre has held one-man exhibitions in Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, Britain and the United States.

He was born in Massachusetts, served in the US Army and worked as an editorial assistant to a book publisher, freight brakeman and conductor for Pennsylvania Railroad and in a gear factory.

He described his work as coming from a fundamental and basic urge to create, rather like Stonehenge and the pyramids, which do not need pedestals.

"Minimalists prefer direct cutting rather than modelling," he said.

"Our is a practice of abstraction in art."

He was not "a conceptualist." He needed physical reality and a sensory experience.

"People express themselves in various art forms," he said.



Minimal artist Carl Andre with his floor sculpture at Newcastle Region Art Gallery yesterday.

"I can place my art anywhere, working in wood, steel, aluminium, copper, magnesium, lead, zinc, brick and cement blocks.

The heavier works took some moving but they had an impact on people," he said.

"I taken my work to the Temple Gardens in Japan," he said.

"The gardens are fierce with calm and intensity. I would aspire that my art has the same fierce calm."

People walking on his sculpture would keep it polished and bright. It was rather like a used steel railway.

"See the beautiful colours in the plates," he said. "They have the rich tonings of the earth."

An onlooker remarked they looked rather rusty to him.

Poor carpet.

## Left:

Unknown

Sculptor Carl Andre at the Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 11 August 1978  
Image courtesy The Newcastle Herald

## Centre:

Carl Andre

Steel  $\Sigma$  16 1978 (detail)

136 hot-rolled steel plates

480 x 480 x 1cm

Gift of the artist 2011

Newcastle Art Gallery collection

© Carl Andre/VAGA. Licensed by Viscopy, 2014.

## Right:

Mercia Delprat

'Artist aspires to 'fierce calm'

Newcastle Morning Herald, August 1978

Courtesy The Newcastle Herald

Art critic Joanna Mendelssohn noted in her review of Andre's 1978 Newcastle show, 'Some plates are more rusted than others, some are scratched, there is none of the sameness of specifically manufactured goods.'<sup>10</sup> This is the same in 2014 as it was back then, because the 136 steel plates that make up *Steel  $\Sigma$  16* are the same material – the very same steel plates, in the same building, in the same configuration.

Mendelssohn's review ends with the critic pondering what the artist's work might mean into the future: 'He does not mind that Minimalism is no longer the avant garde,' she says; 'he accepts as inevitable that his art, which enjoyed a brief moment of glory in the 1960s and 1970s, will for some decades be regarded as passé.'<sup>11</sup>

Seven years after his Newcastle show, Andre became one of the most contentious figures in American art, but not for his work. In 1985, his wife, Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, fell to her death from their thirty-fourth floor apartment in Mercer Street, New York. Andre stood trial for her murder. He was acquitted in 1988. Nevertheless, Andre was publicly attacked for Mendieta's death.<sup>12</sup> It led to decades of 'institutional silence' in America, which only recently ended with a major retrospective at the Dia Art Foundation in New York last year.<sup>13</sup>

Now in his late seventies, ill health has drawn a line forever under Carl Andre's career.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that his place in twentieth century art history is secure. The audiences' response to his work can still be non-comprehending and occasionally hostile, which is perhaps proof enough that his work has never become *passé*.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carl Andre, "Preface to Stripe Painting (Frank Stella)," in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. The Museum of Modern Art (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959) p76.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, "Andre/Hunter Joint Exhibition," *Art & Australia*, March 1979 p225.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Seiberling, "Baffling U.S. Art: What It Is About," *Life*, 9 November 1959 p68-77.

<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 Fall (1939) p36.

<sup>5</sup> The artists in *Sixteen Artists* were Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, James Jarvaise, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Alfred Leslie, Landes Lewitin, Richard Lytle, Robert Mallary, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Julius Schmidt, Richard Stankiewicz, Frank Stella, Albert Urban and Jack Youngerman.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Seiberling, "The Varied Art of Four Pioneers," *Life* 9 November 1959 p74.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Andre, op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Stella quoted in Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998) p112.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Andre, op cit.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, op cit p226.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: The Materialist," *The New Yorker*, 5 December 2011 p66.

<sup>13</sup> "Dia Art Foundation to Present *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place 1958–2010*, May 5, 2014 – March 2, 2015," *Dia Art Foundation*, [http://www.diaart.org/press\\_releases/main/239](http://www.diaart.org/press_releases/main/239)

<sup>14</sup> Calvin Tomkins, op cit.

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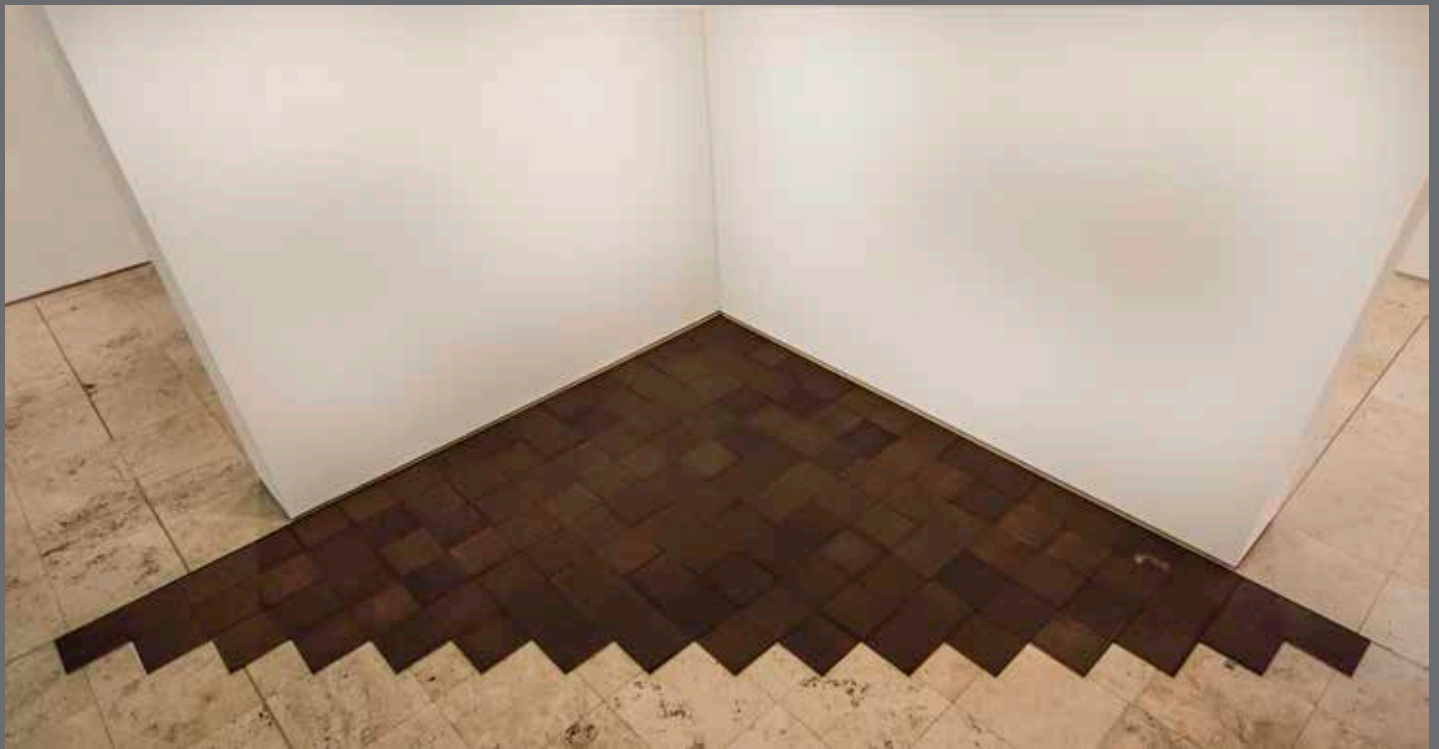
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Tomkins, Calvin. "Profiles: The Materialist." *The New Yorker*, 5 December 2011, 64.



**Above:**  
 Carl Andre  
*Steel Σ 16* 1978  
 136 hot-rolled steel plates  
 480 x 480 x 1cm  
 Gift of the artist 2011  
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection  
 © Carl Andre/VAGA. Licensed by Viscopy, 2014.

**Cover image and inside cover image:**  
 Carl Andre  
*Steel Σ 16* 1978 (detail)  
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 Gift of the artist 2011  
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