



Smithsonian American Art Museum

West Coast Minimalism: Art in Southern California, Art in New York, and the Nature of Visual Perception in Modern Artistic Practice, 1958–72

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This project aims to examine and contextualize the development of West Coast Minimalism, a body of artwork comprising abstract paintings, sculptures, and installations created in and around Los Angeles in the 1960s. Several artists from Southern California—such as Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Frederick Eversley, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, Maria Nordman, Helen Pashgian, DeWain Valentine, and Norman Zammitt—experimented with new materials, new handling techniques, and new modes of hypersensitive seeing. These shared interests distinguish their practices from those in New York and demand independent analysis. In redressing biases, inaccuracies, and omissions in present scholarship, I intend to ask and answer (1) how these artists used twentieth-century developments in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience to inform their studies of perception, (2) how their pieces actually looked and why so, (3) whether they achieved what they claimed to achieve (in my and in their own estimation, then and now), (4) what sensory and cognitive effects works had on viewers, (5) why artists moved from painting to making objects to constructing architectural environments, and (6) how their creations relate to prior Abstract Expressionist works, contemporaneous New York Minimalism, and subsequent Conceptual art. The project has three major goals. First, I plan to establish areas of correspondence and contrast among West Coast Minimalists since both analyses are lacking in current scholarship. Second, it will be necessary to evaluate similarities, differences, and distinctions of degree between Minimalism on the West Coast and Minimalism in New York. Third, and most critically, I will use these artworks as a case study in assessing the role of perceptual inquiry in modernist art of the United States.