

HAMISH CONEY



## IS LESS MORE?

Two recent exhibitions reframe minimalism as a live conversation

Back in the 1960s when sculptor Carl Andre first exhibited *Equivalent VIII*, the discussion about what minimalism was, what it did and whether it was baloney rifled about the art world and onto the front pages of the tabloids with gusto. Think punk, without snot but with smarts.

Everyone from professors of semiotics to bricklayers had a crack. The chosen topic: Is this groundbreaking new art, or yet another (cue audible groan) case of the emperor's-new-clothes syndrome gone mad?

For those who are scratching their heads at this point I should point out that Andre's iconic minimal sculpture was a neatly arranged pile of bricks laid on the gallery floor.

Of all the art 'isms' (think impressionism, surrealism and, if you have to, post-modernism) minimalism

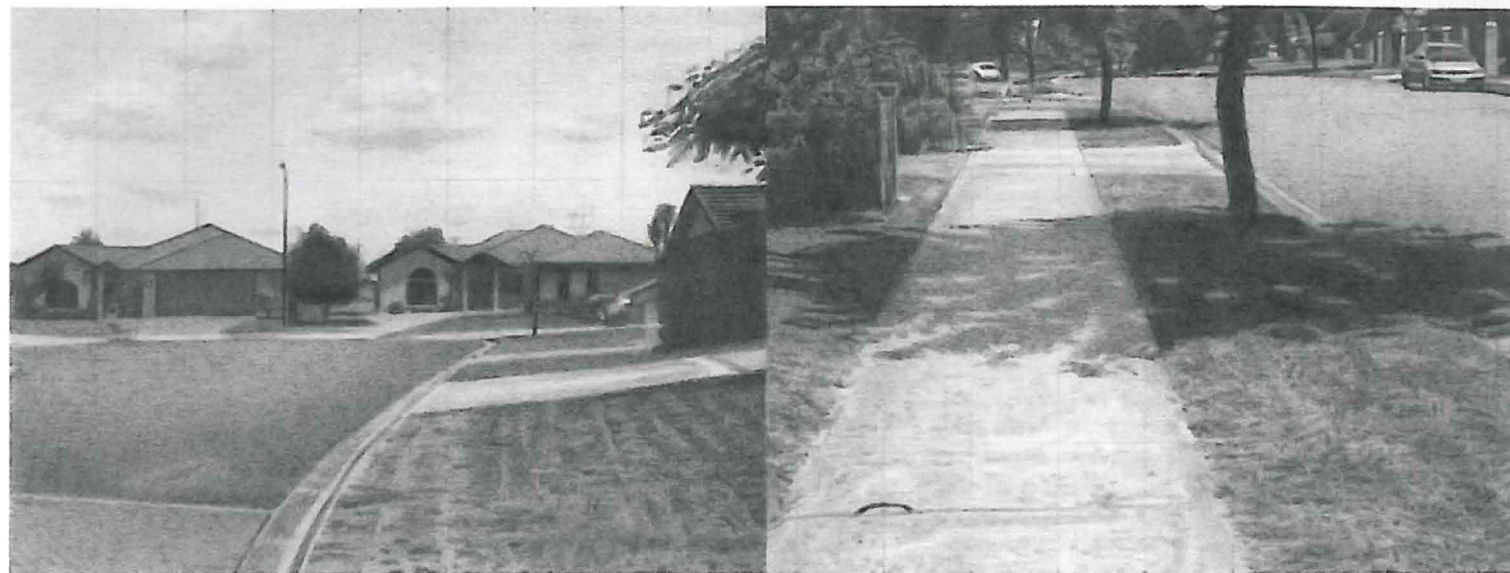
is one of the most difficult to fathom and one of the easiest to deride. That's because it doesn't look like what we usually encounter when hunting for art.

Minimalism is a term more readily applied to architecture and, in short, refers to an object or idea that is stripped back to bare essentials. Another cracking artspeak term used to describe minimalism is that it is disambiguous. In other words, like all good art, minimalism is a search for an elusive truth and can be found via simple raw materials such as stainless steel, stone, light, or a pile of bricks.

If, like many, you didn't mourn its passing as we entered the digital age, hold the press. I think it could be making a comeback and, curiously enough, for some easy-to-comprehend reasons.

If you are bored by the term 'media saturation', that's because you hear it every time you turn on the TV or log onto the net. Minimalism is the perfect tool to hack through the thicket of the cyber-matrix that entangles us as we simply try to find a phone number online or check out the scores in the Bundesliga. Hands up anyone who has ever wanted anything ever offered in any screen pop-up ... I thought not.

Homosapiens' cerebral cortex was already well occupied a few thousand years ago when the average daily stimuli consisted of a run-in with a mastodon, fighting off sandflies and a quiet night in cave-painting. Minimalism takes us back to



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an era when we spent a lot more time staring into space, pondering the universe and our place in it.

Two recent exhibitions in Auckland by Peter Robinson and Ruth Cleland brought home to me the renewed relevance of the minimalist impulse in way I had not thought possible in 2010.

A 2008 Walters Prize winner, Robinson's show *Modern Standards* at Sue Crockford Gallery in late October was a tour de force of the alchemical power of minimal art. Consisting of variously machined, stacked and arranged shapings of polystyrene juxtaposed with elegant genuflections of steel tubing that danced about or supported or in

some cases just sat there, it all combined into a zen art experience.

On a scale rarely found in a commercial gallery, Robinson presented a haiku on simplicity itself. I and plenty of other hushed observers luxuriated in a moment of calm that has lingered long in the memory.

At the other end of the scale, Cleland's miniscule drawings exhibited at Anna Bibby Gallery in the November exhibition *Metroland* eschewed scale for intimacy to remarkable effect. Cleland's drawings are smaller than postcards but her subjects are vast suburban deadspots: mall interiors, carparks and shopping centre lift lobbies.

These fine drawings need the viewer to hover within centimetres to decipher their proposal—the sublime is everywhere. On even closer inspection, she teases out ravishing grids that for all the world could be the DNA helixes of late capitalism.

Here in two exhibitions utilising the sparest of materials was the clarion call of minimalism. The questions of today may be fiendishly complex but in the artwork of Robinson and Cleland, the answers are crystal clear. Less can indeed be more. ■

Hamish Coney is a director of art auction house *Art+Object*



Top: Ruth Cleland, *Cul-de-sac* and *Footpath* (2010). graphite on paper

Above: Peter Robinson, *Modern Standards* (2010) polystyrene, mild steel and plastic