

MAXIMUM
Ghislaine Leung 2014

In his 1986 *New York Times* essay 'A Few Words About Minimalism', the American author John Barth described maximalism by pitting it against a modernist tradition of minimalism. He states: "The medieval Roman Catholic Church recognized two opposite roads to grace: the via negativa of the monk's cell and the hermit's cave, and the via affirmativa of immersion in human affairs, of being in the world whether or not one is of it. Critics have aptly borrowed those terms to characterize the difference between Mr. Beckett, for example, and his erstwhile master James Joyce, himself a maximalist except in his early works. Other than bone-deep disposition, which is no doubt the great determinant, what inclines a writer – sometimes almost a cultural generation of writers – to the Negational Path?"[1]

The desire for the maximum is a desire to transcend limits, transcending therefore even a discourse of and on them. It is the idea of a limitation reached in relation to maximum magnitude that Immanuel Kant associated with the sublime in *The Critique of Judgement*. Using the example of an individual's first encounter with the Pyramids in Egypt and St Peter's Basilica in Rome, he states that there is "the feeling that his whole imagination is inadequate for exhibiting the idea of a whole, [a feeling] in which imagination reaches its maximum, and as it strives to expand that maximum, it sinks back into itself, but consequently comes to feel a liking [that amounts to an] emotion." [2] When attempting to look at something too large to see as a whole, the imagination must attempt to link the partial views to figure the whole. For Kant, in exceeding the finite maximum limit of the imagination, reason points negatively to what is infinite beyond this limit. What he understood as a pleasure in the sublime was therefore not based on the object perceived but the subjective process of apprehension itself. It is a pleasure that relates to the self-reflexive capacity to feel incapacity, an affirmative turn of the negative maximal.

Barth's question about the primacy of negation over affirmation positions maximalism as not only against but also in excess of minimalism. This is to say that maximalism does not just critique the minimalist discourse but adds to it, surpluses it, taking structure and embellishing to the point of transformation. The 'three-eighth-inch novel' that Barth refers to – the epic, the Gesamtkunstwerk and so on – are forms that do not easily align with the hard concision exemplified by Ezra Pound's advice in 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste' that "It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works." [3] Maximalism is not just expanded but made more dense, intensified, lengthened, concentrated and dissipated. At the same time, as in the Kantian analytic, to be excessive perhaps does not quite add up to making a positive affirmation. What enables any affirmation in Kant's configuration of the sublime is the realisation of incapacity in the face of sheer scale. That this incapacity is felt as pleasurable is itself premised on a negative deduction – knowing I don't know. In this sense, maximalism doesn't affirm a cohesive totality but an excessive surplus of partialities.

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* from 1966 argues against Mies van der Rohe's "magnificent paradox" stating that "The doctrine 'less is more' bemoans complexity and justifies exclusion for expressive purposes". Against this, Venturi advocates embracing the "difficult unity of inclusion, rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less", an architecture "for the fragment, for contradiction, for improvisation, and for the tensions these produce".[4] Although against high modernism's simplification, and despite its call for social immersion as opposed to any exclusion or withdrawal, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is not simply an embrace of 'more'. Rather, it is a celebration of the ambiguous, Venturi citing William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* on the imprecision of meaning as the highest poetic virtue.

Maximalism's ambiguity is not just a product of more material but also more removal. The American writer Mary Robison, who studied with John Barth, has often spoken of her rejection of the term 'minimalist' writing: "I detested it. Subtractionist, I preferred. That at least implied a little effort. Minimalists sounded like we had tiny vocabularies and few ways to use the few words we knew. I thought the term was demeaning; reductive, clouded, misleading, lazily borrowed from painting and that it should have been put back where it belonged." Subtraction, as opposed to minimalism, infers an intense editorial process, a maximal subtraction. What is left isn't efficiently compressed but remains resonantly ambiguous, sinister, torn and partial. As Barth said of Robison's writing, it's "more constructed than composed".[5] A shift away from painting that Owen Land (formerly George Landow) analogously pointed out in 1969, "In painting you start with a blank canvas, you start with nothing and you create your image, particle by particle; whereas in film, usually, you just open your lens and you have a vast quantity of objects which become parts of your image. They are opposite processes."[6]

The maximalistic dismissal of minimalism does not go hand in hand with a dismissal of negation since the maximum itself is negatively defined by a limit. This limit is brought into play just as much by what is considered an excess and expansion, as by what is pared down, reduced and subtracted. The maximal is inclusive of the minimal as one part among many excessive flourishes. This is not to say that the maximal approach is an affirmative one: the limited legibility that an excess of information, or removals, induces has the quality of negation – what could be affirmative is our engagement with these limits. The engagement is not with an affirmation that proves or reveals a truth, but one that risks the more vulnerable position of supporting something unknown, non-recoupable and in excess.

Unquoted reference: [0] Land, Owen. *Two Films by Owen Land*, Mark Webber (ed.), LUX, London, 2005. "The period that interests me the most is what came before the after in other words, Prepost".

Quoted references from: [1] Barth, John, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times*, December 28, 1986. Sourced from: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/21/specials/barth-minimalism.html>

[2] Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Judgement*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2008, p. 91.

[3] Pound, Ezra, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry*, Volume 1, March 1, 1913. Sourced from: <http://archive.org/details/jstor-20569730>

[4] Venturi, Robert, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1977, p. 17. Sourced from: https://monoskop.org/images/2/2f/Venturi_Robert_Complexity_and_Contradiction_in_Architecture_2nd_ed.pdf

[5] Robison, Mary, 'Mary Robison by Maureen Murray', conducted by Maureen Murray, BOMB 77, Fall 2001. Sourced from: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mary-robison/>

[6] Land, Owen, 'Interview with George Landow', conducted by P. Adams Sitney, *Film Culture*, No. 47, 1969. Sourced from: <http://making-light-of-it.blogspot.co.uk/2011/07/owen-land-george-landow-interview.html>.