

# Picturesque Minimalism

## Architecture, Visual Experience and Form

JOHN MACARTHUR  
The University of Queensland

In his exegesis of Richard Serra's sculpture *Clara Clara*, the critic Yve-Alain Bois makes a number of interesting claims about the relation of the form of art objects and what we might call the potential for forming visual experience as art.<sup>1</sup> Serra describes architecture as an impoverished rival to sculpture in the art of relating form to experience.<sup>2</sup> He apparently thinks that architecture is limited to a simplistic gestalt account of form by the fact of the experiences of it being pre-conceived. Thus, for Serra, the experience of buildings is typically so much coloring-in of a form that is already known. According to Bois, in Serra's art one is made to own one's experience, as it cannot be reconciled with any concept of the object. Experience is thus made concrete and escapes being merely an effect of the artistic object.

Bois sets out to show that Serra's model of visual experience has a precursor in the theory of landscape design known as the Picturesque. Now, to call Serra's highly reduced and non-representational objects 'Picturesque', in the common usage of that word, might seem a solecism, but Bois makes a technical definition of the Picturesque as a theory of aesthetic experience and then introduces a number of examples of architectural works in which the principles of the Picturesque are applied without any pictures being at stake. Bois draws on the works of Piranesi, the concept of parallax as understood by Soufflot, and the sublime designs of Boullée. His principal example is the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier with its famous architectural promenade. For Bois the Picturesque provides a historical vista spanning the long view of the modern back to 1750, in which the projects of artists such as Serra can be situated. The use of architectural examples is an implied correction of Serra's anti-architectural remarks, but it is also important to Bois in emphasizing the interdisciplinarity of the Picturesque. A painters' genre applied to gardens, developed by architects, taken up by cinematographers,

the Picturesque seems proof that there is indeed a meta-medium of visual experience on which the progressive arts have conducted a mutually beneficial but mildly competitive research program.

At the end of the article Bois reveals that his account of Serra—and, he says, Serra's work itself—is also a rebuttal of Michael Fried's critique of Minimalism as being merely 'theatrical', as argued in Fried's famous essay "Art and Objecthood".<sup>3</sup> Knowing this other aim of the essay on Serra, we can also read two important criticisms of Fried implied in Bois' choice of themes and examples. These are the long historical frame, and the interdisciplinary scope.

For Fried, Minimal art denies the art object in favour of a kind of programming of subjective experience in time. It is theatrical, in the usual pejorative sense of being staged and illusory, but also because it exists for you, and for a time defined by the period in which it is affecting. Fried thinks that the art object must be indifferent to an observer and have a temporality that is contained in the work, not in an observer's perception of it. All this leaves the Minimalist artwork in a paradoxical position which Fried calls the 'look of non-art'. Minimalist works have a tactic—to look like objects in the world rather than the artworks that they are. This pretence and the paradox it opens is supposed to effect a shift of attention to the observing subject, and this movement from object to subject is said to be a work of art.

Fried is also skeptical of cross-disciplinary concepts of art and aesthetic experience. For him painting's history cannot be referenced against a trans-historical aim to make art, nor does the subject construed by painting coincide with the subject of architecture, or sculpture, except empirically. Bois' recuperation of the Picturesque

and architecture as a historical and disciplinary context to Serra's sculpture is thus opposed to Fried by its intention to show that visuality in duration is a proper concern across all the arts and through their history, and one that rides across the materiality of the work and the material history of the art discipline in which it is created.

In this contrasting light we see the strong claim to both explanatory power and actual historical causality that Bois makes for the Picturesque. To take the role that it does in Bois' argument, the Picturesque must be possessed of its own history, its own origin and trajectory, and it must be a force outside of art disciplines, acting on them and strongly influencing their direction. At the same time it must be a trans-historical relation of visual experience and form, available to be articulated differently by art and architecture at different times, and giving us the basis to compare the visual experience of Ste Geneviève and *Clara Clara*.

Now it might sound as if I have set up this précis of Bois and Fried to run in the opposite direction, but I think that Bois is correct and that the great merit of his article is to make this large claim clearly and to show its significance. My own research, inspired in part by Bois, suggests that one can model the Picturesque historiographically in this way.<sup>4</sup> I also think that if such a Picturesque can be admitted it makes problems for Fried's argument in "Art and Objecthood" and it makes Minimalism and that stream of thought in contemporary visual art an interesting thought resource for architects, just as Bois suggests.

This is despite the fact that at many points in the essay Bois is wrong. He exaggerates and anachronizes the subjectivism of the Picturesque, but then, conversely, exaggerates the novelty of Le Corbusier's experientialism. He fails to understand that Fried's criticism of a false art through objecthood bears on the Picturesque as much as it does on Minimalist art. He makes some misleading generalisations from Serra's work about other Minimalist artists; and, most damning, the theory of the relation of object form to experience which he derives from this is contradictory in his essay.

Central to Bois' problems is the difficulty he has in accounting for the geometry in some of Serra's sculpture, as illustrated in his analysis of two of the sculptures:

Even though this sculpture is constructed on a series of similar elements, nothing acts to forewarn the observer that it is, in Serra's words, "a truncated pyramid" delineating an equilateral triangle at its

top. Or again, when Serra, with some reluctance, describes the placing of the three slabs of *Spin Out* in geometric terms, he says nothing about what the spectator's experience will be: he pretends to give the key to that experience, and this key is not the right one: "The plates were laid out at twelve, four and eight o'clock in an elliptical valley, and the space between them forms an isosceles triangle" (p36). I have spent some time surveying *Spin Out*, trying in particular to determine whether some sort of geometry was at work there, and never was I able to come to that conclusion (on the contrary, it seemed to me that any a priori geometry was absent and that the work, like *Shift*, was a function of the topography).<sup>5</sup>

Here Bois denies a geometry which seems self-evident in the photo documentation of the work and which is confirmed in the artist's description of it. This is caused by his overly simplistic opposition between ideation and experience. Following Rosalind Krauss, Bois is committed to a phenomenological account of Serra's sculpture which is rigorously set against formal idealism and zealous of the artistic possibilities of a purely haptic experience to which art would be always contingent but still meaningful.<sup>6</sup>

I agree that it is a heightened but de-sacralized experience with which Serra is concerned. However, Bois has not attended to the possibility implicit in his own experience; that is, the experience of the uselessness of forms as a rhetorical tactic of the artist in foregrounding experiential aspects of the work. As Bois says of Serra's use of geometry: "He pretends to give the key to that experience, and this key is not the right one."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Serra does not pretend to give the key, he does give the key, it is just that it does not unlock a plenitude of experience. One is still left to construct that for oneself in parallel with the artist's geometric construction of the art object. At the end of the article Bois recalls this experience of *Spin Out* slightly differently and says, "The pleasure I felt in walking in *Spin Out* did not occur in spite of my inability to grasp its geometrical form but because of that inability."<sup>8</sup> Precisely so. The geometry did exist; Bois knew this, but he could not experience it. This divergence of his experience from the formal concept of the work nevertheless structures Bois' experience of the work.

When Bois comes to describe *Clara Clara* he writes approvingly of the "strange impression [which an observer has] that one wall goes faster than the other, that the left and right sides of his body are not coordinated."<sup>9</sup> In this description we imagine the sculpture as a device that acts directly on the spatiality

of the human body. That is: the body's uprightness, its frontal dorsal directionality, its lateral symmetry, its experience of gravity, and the relative horizontality of the visual field. But in order for the reader to understand how the sculpture creates these affects, Bois explains that the kissing arcs of steel form an "X" in plan and that they are segments of cones arranged so that one is inverted with regard to the other.<sup>10</sup> Bois claims that it is very difficult to deduce this geometry from visual experience, but I do not believe him. It is rather that if one thinks, as Bois does, that Serra's art touches a spatiality that belongs *only* to the body, then the deduction of its geometric forms is no more relevant than estimating the weight of its steel.

Bois insists that gestalt form is the reason for the failings of architecture, and is the aspect of form that Serra's sculptures rigorously eschew. But he must know, even from Fried's essay, the famous dictum of Minimalist Robert Morris. Morris gives the following reason for his deployment of simple Platonic solids: "[The] characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established, all the information about it, qua gestalt, is exhausted. (One does not for example seek the gestalt of a gestalt.) . . . One is then both free of the shape and bound to it."<sup>11</sup>

However, we must assume that for Bois the differences between *Clara Clara* and *Shift* could only be described in the different corporeal experiences which each generates, and perhaps in the way that each curates its site. Yet *Shift* is unlike *Clara Clara* and *Spin-out* in that it is non-geometrical, in the sense that the objects, while simple solids and planes, are arrayed in an entirely site-specific way.

Now it is exactly these varied strategies of deploying forms and ideas of forms in order to cue phenomenal experience which interest me in Serra's work, and which have lessons for architects and indeed shed some light on the historical Picturesque. What interests me most, and has most to say about current architecture, are the works of the *Clara Clara* family where a strong form is implied but occluded or perhaps negated by the work. What Bois thinks should interest architects is his account of the aformal apparently contingent strategy of the Picturesque stroll.

In fact, he claims that knowledge of this Picturesque experientialism has been collectively repressed by architects, with the exception of Le Corbusier, who was, according to Bois, the first architect since the eighteenth century to understand the perceptual effects of parallax.<sup>12</sup> This is an untrue and a bizarre statement in which architectural history is molded into the shape of Bois' target. Since the eighteenth century, architecture

has largely been about the development of aformal concepts of the plan which can then be determined by specificity to function, construction systems, site, stylistic concepts of building form, or the sheer perception of space. Le Corbusier's villas of the 1920s stand at an apogee of a 150-year development of the plan into a device for forming the phenomenal spatial experience of an observer. This is an aspiration for architectural work so familiar today that it has become hackneyed. What fascinates architects about Serra's work is, on the contrary, its object character, its unidealist formality.

Bois' understanding of form in architecture is strangely anachronistic. His idea that architects conceive of a building as a gestalt, a holistic form to be perceived at once, and that this formal preference is inherent in plan drawings, is roughly correct of the Renaissance. The villas of Palladio are intended to present ideal forms that are already known to the observer, who then recognizes them. One's experience of the building is then conceived to be that of the immanence of abstract ideas in the phenomenal world. One's experience of the building is atemporal and undifferentiated to the extent that the experience is felt to be a continuing revelation of what one already knows. Just as Bois says, the plan is the means by which this immanence of the ideal is effected. The proportions of facades of the building are coordinated with the plan so that, ideally, when the observer walks towards a building with only a partial view of it, and then enters into it and moves through it, that person does indeed already know the building, the elevation having provided a pre-knowledge of the geometry and proportions of the plan. Plan and elevation drawings are composed with the same graphic tools and vocabulary but, moreover, they have the same status epistemologically. Since the Picturesque split the concepts of form and picture it has not been possible to think like this. For architects today the plan and elevation are different kinds of knowledge of the building, the plan being a kind of meta-architecture in which the building is organized, whether that organization pertains to function or to scenography.

About 1800 the theorist Uvedale Price came to consider Picturesque building, and some architects took his remarks as a license for interesting formal experiments.<sup>13</sup> In Price's view, humble buildings are Picturesque in a way that the neo-Palladian architecture of his time is not. There are two reasons for this, both of which can be observed in the irregular form of the plans of vernacular buildings. The first reason is perceptual, and Bois understands this aspect of the Picturesque correctly. Price holds that humble rural buildings possess qualities of 'intricacy' necessary to the Picturesque. Because the buildings are irregular, one has no pre-

conceptions of the other side, or if one does, this is likely to be confounded by some addition or change of materials which could not be predicted from a first view. The second reason is one of genre, and this is where Bois' misunderstandings begin. Because these built objects are intricate and irregular, one knows that they are buildings and not architecture. Architectural works are only appropriate to the beautiful and purely scenic landscape. Ruined architectural works, which once were regular but have become asymmetrical, might be appropriate in wild and sublime settings. However, if one wishes to lay out one's estate like a painting of the rural landscape with crops and workers, that is to say, in a Picturesque manner, then irregular buildings, which do not look like architecture, are specified. What fascinates Price about picturesque cottages is the temporality of one's experience of their intricate irregular form. But this is not a concept of cinematic form before the fact; it is a transcoding of the commonplace temporality of the making of the building. Cottages play the role in Price's aesthetic experience that the low comic sub-plots do in Shakespeare's histories.

In not understanding these aspects of genre, Bois anachronizes the eighteenth-century Picturesque. He thinks that the Picturesque of the eighteenth century was a kind of Modernism operated naively by people as yet unaware that what interested them was the compositional imbrication of the subject and not representation. However, for those who originated the theory, the 'picture' in Picturesque referred less to the compositional aspects of pictorial vision than to the hierarchy of genres in painting, and to a meta-hierarchy of aesthetic experience. I am being slightly pedantic here, but not without reason. Because, while Bois thinks of the Picturesque as the ever-refreshing origin of perceptualist strategies of art-making, there is an equally strong case for seeing it as the origin of the problematic of objecthood. When Fried complains of the Minimalists, or 'Literalists' as he calls them because of this fault, he is criticizing a certain hyper-aestheticism which proceeds by a radical dissolution of the distinction between art objects and objects in the world, a charge which critics from Ruskin to Sontag have laid against the Picturesque.<sup>14</sup>

The architects who followed Price's prescriptions and produced some of the first irregular buildings as architecture, were attacked by their colleagues precisely because the product of their work could not be categorically distinguished from ordinary building.<sup>15</sup> Architecture was constituted in the wealth and power required to conceive of the building as a whole and to build it in one phase. By contrast, humble buildings

were irregular, asymmetrical and rambling because they were built in many stages to a shifting pattern of use and by different hands with differing materials and levels of skill. The conservative architects who criticized the Picturesque thought that its architecture was merely an imitation of this impoverished building process.

But, relatively quickly, architects came to realize that buildings did not have to have a folkish appearance to have these phenomenal effects and that buildings in the academic styles could have an irregular open formal structure. By the mid-nineteenth century the virtuosity of architects was understood to be in an elaborate unfolding of space which cohered scenographically but which was unclosed by any totalizing form. The difference between this and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye is not what Richard Norman Shaw might have learnt from Merleau-Ponty (or Richard Serra), but in the semantic overlay of a national romantic style which somehow remains more distasteful than Le Corbusier's Machine Age aesthetic.

However, there is another side to this story of technical development in architecture. At the same moment that architects discovered asymmetry and unclosed forms, they rediscovered figurative form as a totally new resource. Figured symmetrical form was synonymous with the concept of form itself, but after the advent of broader and more sophisticated concepts of form (as contingent, as additive, as narrative, as scenographic, as the thing appropriated in perception) figurative form is completely changed and refreshed. Thus, some English Picturesque architects began to plan in triangles and polyhedrons or unclassical bipolar symmetries.<sup>16</sup> These are figured closed forms but ones that clearly distance themselves from any self-evidence in the task of building. Bois writes of these aspects of Neoclassicism as the discovery of parallax, or the relativity of viewpoint, and correctly subsumes it to the history of the Picturesque. But he then fails to distinguish the pure contingency of viewpoint in an aformal landscape garden and the relative indeterminacy of viewpoint with regard to a regular column grid, such as Soufflot's Ste Geneviève.

Bois thinks that Serra's work parallels the English Picturesque attack on the formality of French garden design, which he misunderstands as the simple application of plan figures onto terrain. Undoubtedly, this is the operative mode of designers such as Andre le Notré, but the effects of such gardens are based on parallax in the vertical section, just as French Neoclassical architecture is based on a parallax view of the plan. In short, what makes a garden such as Vaux-le-Vicomte work is the changing eye height of the spectator and the interference of the plan and the terrain.<sup>17</sup> The composi-

tional mechanism is the same as in Serra's *Plumb Run* where a regularly dimensioned alignment registers the specificity of the topography and the mutability of perception.

Another Neoclassical architect can help us here. Claude Nicholas Ledoux spent much of his career developing a vocabulary of plan-making which was formally very blunt but experientially highly nuanced. In his designs for a House of Pleasure he draws the central building's plan in the shape of a phallus.<sup>18</sup> In the sections and elevations we see that the building has a simple formulaic Neoclassical expression in which this plan figure is not present nor inferred. One could wander in the House of Pleasure with guidebook in hand; one might cavort with the engraved plan hung on the wall among the other instructional pictures which, according to eighteenth-century libertines, should ornament such institutions, but there is no point at which one's visual experience coincides with the figure. That coincidence is purely erotic.

Le Corbusier knew these different strategies and from the time of Villa Savoye began a series of design experiments on the inverse of the architectural promenade. These include a series of schemes for museums based on a spiral plan where the visitor would wander apparently at their own volition through meandering spaces like the Villa Savoye.<sup>19</sup> In fact, they would be in a spiral labyrinth. One drawing shows a disoriented wanderer in the labyrinth and a plan of the building. It is unclear if the plan is a vignette within the frame of the view, or a representation of a plan hung on the wall of the museum. Is the man consulting a plan of the museum that makes up the informational deficit of his experience? Or is Le Corbusier notating the first drawing with another to explain that, although the man is apparently lost in attention to the museum's artefacts, in fact, his experience has been planned, formed and cued? Le Corbusier's spiral museums are a critique of the necessity of a convergence between the plan and the form of the experience of the building.

So where are we up to? Bois is correct in the thrust of his article that the Picturesque is a historical nexus and an analytic tool that has much to tell us about the relation of object form and experience in the work of Richard Serra and in architecture. But he has misunderstood and simplified his account so that it seems falsely that the Picturesque is a simple increase in experientialism over formalism. We can agree that this simple account is true of Serra's *Shift* and the Villa Savoye, which are like Picturesque landscape parks. They attempt to be explicitly aformal so as to name the particularity of the site and the phenomenal experience

of an observer as the things formed. *Clara Clara*, however, is not like this. Its obvious symmetry and implied geometric form are more like French formal gardening or Neoclassical architecture in which phenomenal experience is registered against a formal concept that is imperceptible. Bois assumes that the recognition of form in a work is an apotheosis of the ideal that ends the self-consciousness of perception. But I hope that I have given sufficient examples to show that the identification of forms can be deployed as a non-idealist form of ideation that intersects and thus sharpens the embodiment of experience.

What lessons do we learn from thus correcting and honing Bois argument? The first lesson is about the terms of Fried's critique of Minimalism, and the second is about how to think about the current so-called Minimalist architecture and the relation of architecture and the 'visual' arts.

I think that Fried could have chosen better terms in his essay "Art and Objecthood". What he thought was wrong with Minimalist art is better named as Picturesqueness than theatricality. The two linked problems, which Fried addresses, are: first, that of the literalness of the art, that is, its refusal of the category of art object; and, second, its being-for-you, the work's self-consciousness of its reception. These problems coincide in the Picturesque in the link between its abject objects and the way that the duration of one's experience of them is reinvested as their temporality. Like Fried's claim that Minimalism attempts to be affecting by presenting objects that have the look of 'non-art', Picturesque architecture was controversial in its time because it was thought to present itself as vulgar building, as 'non-architecture'.

Despite Bois' essay on *Clara Clara* now being 20 years old, it is important in the present, where Bois' and Krauss' line on the Minimalism of the visual arts is regularly used to explain that architectural Minimalism is not about Platonic concepts of formal abstraction, but about a phenomenology of perception in duration.<sup>20</sup> Correcting Bois can allow us to see that this choice between Platonism and phenomenology is a false one. There is a third relation of form and experience, which is their non-relation made palpable. This is the problematic of objecthood, and if we practise the kind of history in which the literalness of Minimal art can be read back to the eighteenth-century Picturesque, we can show that the status of the plan lies at the center of that most famous ur-form of the modern arts of meandering subjective experience.

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- <sup>2</sup> Richard Serra quoted Ibid. 346-7 from various sources collected in Richard Serra, *Richard Serra: Interviews Etc 1970-1980* (Hudson River Museum: 1980).
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.). first published as Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art Forum* 5, no. 10 (1967).
- <sup>4</sup> See John Macarthur, "The Butcher's Shop: Disgust in Picturesque Architecture and Aesthetics," *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no. 30 (1996). John Macarthur, "Brutalism, Ugliness and the Picturesque Object" (paper presented at the Formulation Fabrication papers from the seventeenth annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand, Wellington, 2000). John Macarthur, "The Heartlessness of the Picturesque: Sympathy and Disgust in Ruskin's Aesthetics," *Assemblage: a Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no. 32 (1997).
- <sup>5</sup> Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll." 356.
- <sup>6</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).
- <sup>7</sup> Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll." 356.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 370.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. 359.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. 358.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Morris, *The Writings of Robert Morris*, 7-8. Cited Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*.
- <sup>12</sup> Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll.", 366.
- <sup>13</sup> Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque: As Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful and, on the Use of Studying Pictures for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, 3 vols. (London: J. Mawman, 1810). "Essay on Architecture and Building", vol 2, 171-369 passim. See John Macarthur, "'Architectural Irregularities': Discourse and Technique in a Foucauldian History of the Ornamental Cottage," in *Foucault: The Legacy* (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology Press, 1997).
- <sup>14</sup> John Ruskin, *The Library Edition: The Works of John Ruskin.*, ed. E T Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12). John Ruskin 6:19-20 [*Modern Painters IV*], Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1973). See Macarthur, "The Heartlessness of the Picturesque."
- <sup>15</sup> Significant here is the critique of James Malton by Richard Elsam. See Macarthur, "'Architectural Irregularities': Discourse and Technique in a Foucauldian History of the Ornamental Cottage."
- <sup>16</sup> for example: Joseph Michael Gandy, *Designs for Cottages* (London: 1805), Joseph Michael Gandy, *The Rural Architect* (London: 1806). And Edward Gyfford, *Designs for Small Picturesque Cottages*, (London: 1807).
- <sup>17</sup> Allen S Weiss, *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17th-Century Metaphysics* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).
- <sup>18</sup> Claude Nicolas Ledoux, *Architecture De C.N. Ledoux* (London: Architectural Press, 1983). Plates 238 & 239. Also see Anthony Vidler, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the End of the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1990).
- <sup>19</sup> Antony Moulis, "Figure and Experience: The Labyrinth and Le Corbusier's World Museum," *Interstices*, no. 4 (1996). Antony Moulis, "Drawing Experience: Le Corbusier's Spiral Museum Projects" (The University of Queensland, 2002).
- <sup>20</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Grid, the /Cloud/, and the Detail," in *The Presence of Mies*, ed. Detlef Mertins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara," in *October: The First Decade*, ed. A Michelson et al (Cambridge: MIT, 1987).