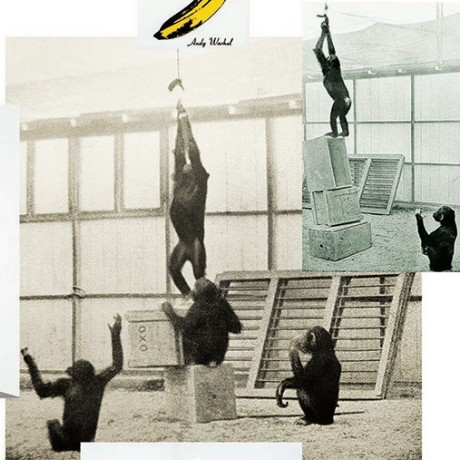


# Why Can't Minimal



Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins

John Baldessari

John Boyle-Singfield

John Marriott

John Wood & Paul Harrison

Jon Sasaki

Ken Nicol

Liza Eurich

Tammi Campbell

## Why Can't Minimal



Jon Sasaki, *A Minimalist Cube Shipped with Minimal Effort and Expense*, 2012. Powder-coated steel cube with shipping labels, 12" x 12" x 12". Collection of the Blackwood Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.

Planning this exhibition started with an accidental realization: *I can't be the only one who thinks minimalism is funny*. That's not to say that perfect white cubes don't grant me as much insight into the essential nature of reality as anyone else, but the premise is admittedly absurd—even celebrated minimalist/"tile-artist" Carl Andre has admitted as much.<sup>1</sup> Like any reasonable being, I do enjoy spending hours in front of a Sol LeWitt sculpture—experiencing the various configurations brought about through the movement of my body in space—but I also laugh when John Marriott's *Hidden in Plain Sight* compares this act of high cognition with chimpanzees puzzling together similarly rectilinear structures of cardboard in an equivalently laborious mental task. Marriott's piece, as well as others in this exhibition, both partakes in and makes light of the seriousness we grant to our intellectual engagement with minimal art. These pieces address minimalist conventions through varying degrees of parody, complicity, criticality, and humanization.

These works are not always what would typically be called funny. Their aim is not necessarily to make the viewer break out laughing; more often it is to illicit a subtle smirk of undefined recognition. This form of humour is executed in a rather abstract sense. "Abstract humour," as defined by critic Robert Garnett, "is not necessarily a laughing matter, it is more like being put in a 'funny' or 'preposterous' situation, like that of a critic encountering a work of art that seems to disable one's prior

Front cover: John Marriott, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 2013. Digital collage on paper, 11" x 8.5". Image courtesy of the artist and MKG 127.

1 Andre, Carl, and Chantal Pontbriand. "Carl Andre: Fourteen Written Responses to Questions." *Parachute* 17 (Winter 1979): 67–68. Print.

criteria for the success or failure of a work of art.”<sup>2</sup> There is a surface reaction, appealing to a form of “immediate intelligence” that quickly “gets it,” which is then followed by a “slow-release joke” that undermines one’s initial comprehension. This form of humour operates on various levels of surface and depth. Liza Eurich’s *Not Quite There*, for example, relies on our initial reading of the work as a minimalist sculptural assemblage. A frame encased in concrete appears to be primarily a formal exploration of material and the location of *image*. But this reading is foiled through the artist’s description of it as a “failed drawing” that has been covered up—“Not Quite There” then takes on a double meaning. Typical of artistic uses of the concept of failure, Liza’s drawing, in the end, is not a failure at all, but is instead repurposed toward an unanticipated end. Both readings play off our formal and conceptual expectations but twist them, using the incongruous blending of success with failure, sculpture with drawing, presence with absence. Through this undermining of expectations, Eurich jokingly implies that other, similar sculptural strategies are also being used to conceal artistic failures. In making light of the import of this form of art-making (a style that she clearly admires), Eurich and the rest of the artists in *Why Can’t Minimal* point toward the inadequacy of purely serious, humourless readings of minimalist works.

A serious reading of John Boyle-Singfield’s *Untitled (Coke Zero)* would most likely involve exploring the implications of the artist adapting Hans Haacke’s proto-minimalist *Condensation Cube* by replacing its water with Coke Zero—a hyper-contemporary and commoditified version of nothingness. A light-hearted viewer, on the other hand, may simply appreciate the novelty of its absurdist form without any discernable thesis. One approach overlooks the surface, the other avoids the depth, but perhaps neither can

2 Garnett, Robert. “Abstract Humour and Humorous Abstraction.” *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*. Ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O’ Sullivan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010. Print.



Liza Eurich, *Not Quite There (no. 2)*, 2010. Concrete, frame, and drawing, 15" x 12".  
Collection of Micah Lexier. Image courtesy of the artist and MKG127.

exist on its own. Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins's *Big Blue* similarly swims with references ready to reward the sharp viewer—Big Blue is also the nickname for IBM. Its form evokes images of Kubrick's monolith or perhaps IBM's intelligent chess computer, "Deep Blue," and it aggressively looms over the viewer like a more intimidating version of a John McCracken sculpture. Marman and



John Boyle-Singfield, *Untitled (Coke Zero)*, 2012. Plexiglas, Coke Zero, white wooden base, 72 cm x 72 cm x 72 cm (28½" x 28½" x 28½").

Borins rely on our tendency to project import and weight onto the blank slate they present to us, but then startle us back to a state of puzzled bemusement when we press *Big Blue's* button and it begins to belt big band music.

These whimsically enigmatic works suggest that the cognitive functions underlying an unforced appreciation (such as that provided through aesthetics, humour, and novelty) is no less



Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins, *Big Blue*, 2007. Painted MDF, speaker, button, electronics, 8' x 4' x 1½'.

valuable, genuine, and requisite than the careful and conscious “reading” of intention and meaning into a coherent message. This more expansive approach to reading minimalism, as well as expressing its vulnerability to failure, humanizes it to a degree. While minimalism is traditionally understood through its phenomenological confrontation of the body of the viewer, it is



Tammi Campbell, *Pre Post-Paintery (After Stella)*, 2014. Acrylic on museum board (one from a series of 14 interlocking panels), 48" x 55".

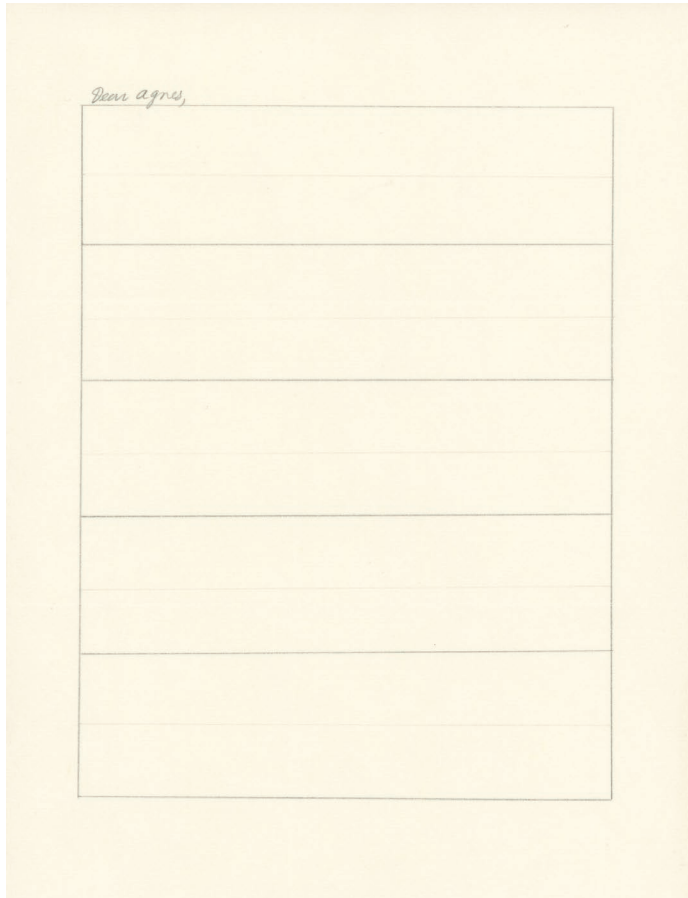
also known for its attempted removal of the artist’s hand and for its anti-humanist, emotionless intellectualism. This anti-humanist view of minimalism is comically performed in *Six Boxes*, where John Wood and Paul Harrison enact the viewer that this bizarre script calls for: a mechanical body interacting with human-scale forms through complementary spatial relationships.

While *Six Boxes* transfigures the human into a machine to relate to minimalist forms, a work like Tammi Campbell’s *Dear Agnes* renders the machinistic and overly intellectual side



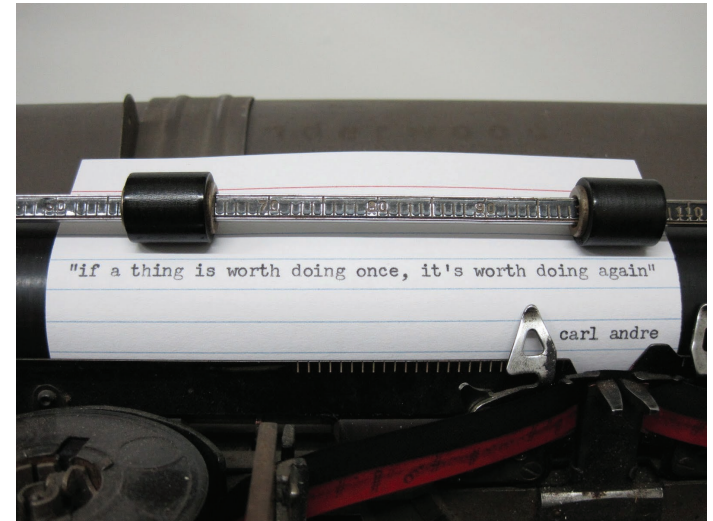
John Wood & Paul Harrison, *Six Boxes*, 1997. 00:04:30, single-channel video. Image copyright the artist, courtesy of LUX.





Tammi Campbell, *Dear Agnes*, 2014. Graphite on Japanese paper, 11" x 8.5".

of geometric abstraction more human through a sympathetic relationship. Campbell's hand-written "letters" to Agnes Martin (which consist of various grids rendered in graphite) suggest both a historical and a personal connection to the other artist. They undermine accounts of minimalism as rational, non-emotional, and divorced from the human hand, while paying homage to one



Ken Nicol, Photograph of one card being prepared for *Carl Andre Drawer Piece*, 2014. Typewritten ink on paper, steel file drawer, 5½" x 6½" x 30".

of the movement's most important figures. Campbell's letters recast the art object from a medium for aesthetic transcendence to a spiritual medium for contacting the dead. This reverence for the spirit of minimalism—coupled with the will to adapt to, and lighten it—can also be seen in Ken Nicol's *Carl Andre Drawer Piece* and Jon Sasaki's open-ended *Slab, Base for a Future Monument* (although Sasaki's comment may have more ironic bite than

the other works). Nicol's obsessive rewriting (retyping?) of Carl Andre's quote "If a thing is worth doing once, it's worth doing again" onto 1611 index cards could operate as an anthem for the exhibition, while Sasaki's cement slab that never sets points toward the next cheeky impression that is always waiting to be written over whatever meaning we project onto minimalism's palimpsest of meaning.

Each of these works—in various ways—uses the conceits of serious minimalism as a licence to circumvent expectations. To borrow a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari, the works "raise the absurd to the highest level of thought."<sup>3</sup> Rather than solely demanding the intelligence of reason, these artists' works also draw on the capability of intuition and the type of "extra-rapid thinking" that Robert Garnett suggests is activated through abstract humour.<sup>4</sup> They draw on humour's ability to confound rationalization even while being reliant on it to function, using this paradoxical proposition to articulate new and playful ways of activating minimal art. Playing with the forms, traditions, and incongruities of multiple levels of minimalism, the presented works point toward the limits of orthodoxy and rational comprehension, repositioning conceptual value to make room for the types of recognition made possible through levity, play, humour, and sentiment.



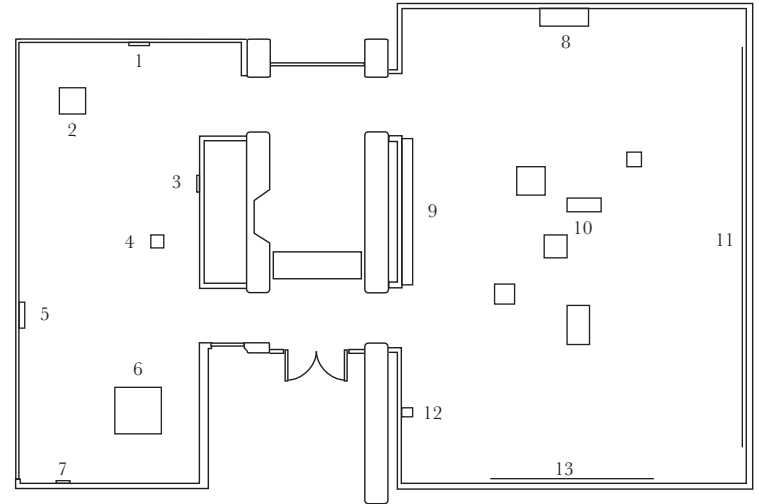
John Baldessari, *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, 1972, 00:12:50, United States, English, B&W, Mono, 4:3, 1/2" open-reel video. Image copyright the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org).

3 Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, 1987. Print.

4 Garnett, Robert. "Abstract Humour and Humorous Abstraction." *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*. Ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O' Sullivan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010. Print.

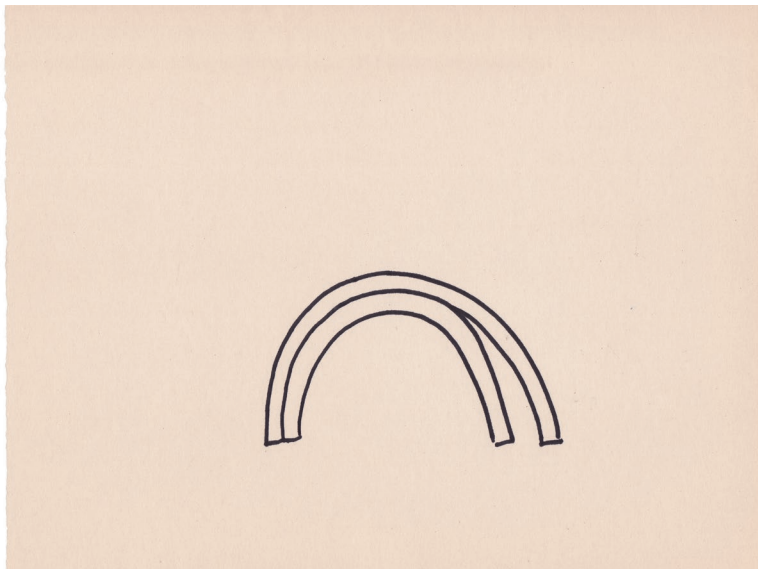
## List of Works

- 1 John Baldessari, *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, 1972.  
00:12:50, United States, English, B&W, Mono, 4:3, 1/2" open-reel video. Courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org).  
Video of John Baldessari singing each of Sol LeWitt's 35 "Sentences on Conceptual Art" to the tunes of popular songs.
- 2 John Boyle-Singfield, *Untitled (Coke Zero)*, 2012.  
Plexiglas, Coke Zero, white wooden base, 72 cm x 72 cm x 72 cm (28 1/2" x 28 1/2" x 28 1/2").  
A Plexiglas cube containing approximately twenty litres of Coke Zero.
- 3 Liza Eurich, *Not Quite There (no. 2)*, 2010.  
Concrete, frame, and drawing, 15" x 12". Collection of Micah Lexier.  
A failed drawing, framed and covered with concrete.
- 4 Jon Sasaki, *A Minimalist Cube Shipped with Minimal Effort and Expense*, 2012. Powder-coated steel cube with shipping labels, 12" x 12" x 12". Collection of the Blackwood Gallery.  
A one-foot cube to be stored uncrated, shipped as cheaply as possible, and installed modestly on whatever surface is available, accruing shipping labels on its surface with each exhibition.
- 5 Ken Nicol, *Carl Andre Drawer Piece*, 2014.  
Typewritten ink on paper, steel file drawer, 5 1/2" x 6 1/2" x 30".  
The second of two steel file drawers filled with 1611 index cards, each typewritten with the same Carl Andre quote: "If a thing is worth doing once, it's worth doing again."
- 6 Jon Sasaki, *Slab, Base for a Future Monument*, 2014.  
Non-drying concrete ingredients, wooden formwork, tarp, 20 cm x 1 m x 1 m (8" x 39" x 39").  
One square metre of concrete modified to never set.
- 7 John Marriott, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 2013.  
Digital collage on paper, 11" x 8.5".  
A digital collage made from images of sculptures by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, Wolfgang Köhler's Gestalt psychological experiments on chimpanzees, and a Velvet Underground album cover by Andy Warhol.
- 8 Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins, *Big Blue*, 2007.  
Painted MDF, speaker, button, electronics, 8' x 4' x 1 1/2'.  
A blue polygonal sculpture with a button that plays a recording of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood."



- 9 Liza Eurich, *Bad Rainbows*, 2010.  
Sharpie on newsprint, 11" x 8.5" each.  
Thirteen drawings of rainbows with various defects.
- 10 John Marriott, *Through New Eyes*, 2013.  
Plinths, glass vitrine, pigeon-proofing spikes, baby-proofing strips.  
Exhibition plinths of various sizes affixed with pigeon-proofing spikes, and one large glass vitrine affixed with baby-proofing strips.
- 11 Tammi Campbell, *Pre Post-Paintery (After Stella)*, 2014.  
Acrylic on museum board, 4' x 46 2/3'.  
Fourteen notched-V trompe-l'œil paintings on museum board.
- 12 Tammi Campbell, *Dear Agnes*, 2014.  
Graphite on Japanese paper, 11" x 8.5".  
One drawing from an ongoing series of more than 1,000 letters written to Agnes Martin daily.
- 13 John Wood & Paul Harrison, *Six Boxes*, 1997.  
00:04:30, single-channel video. Courtesy of LUX.  
Video documenting six different-sized boxes designed for six specific movements.





Liza Eurich, *Bad Rainbows (no. 11)*, 2010. Sharpie on newsprint, 11" x 8.5".  
Image courtesy of the artist and MKG127.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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