

Looking Beyond Vision: On Phenomenology, Minimalism, and the Sculptures of Robert Lazzarini

By Joanna Marsh

Over the past several years, a common theme has emerged in the discussion of Robert Lazzarini's sculptures that centers on the notion of vision. Described as an intense optical experience, Lazzarini's work appears to defy normal vision through its tension between realism and distortion.¹ This is nowhere more evident than in the recent sculpture, *table, notebook and pencil* (2004). Upon first encountering this warped and rippled form, one is faced with a visual paradox. Our eyes register its features – four legs extend from a planar surface, constructed from wood, and supporting a notebook and pencil. However, it is unlike any table we have ever seen. We move in for a closer look, walking in a semi-circle from one side to the other, and peaking underneath in an attempt to align its distorted contours with our mental image of a standard table. But our efforts are thwarted at every turn. The more we bend and contort our bodies, desperately trying to find the correct position from which to view the work, the more it seems to evade visual mastery.

The experience of Lazzarini's work, however, does not end with this rupture in visual perception. Indeed, the very distortions that resist and undermine our ability to see trigger a shift from spectatorial gaze to corporeal encounter. The present essay looks beyond vision as the primary means of reading Lazzarini's objects, and connects them to an related motif in modern philosophy, visual theory and art criticism: the role of the body in perception. While this concept may seem at odds with the general

understanding that the modern era has been dominated by the sense of sight, it is the very supremacy of the eye in science and philosophy (from the Renaissance well into the twentieth century), which gave rise to alternate “scopic models” that privilege the body. Indeed, commentators on visuality contend that the twentieth century has witnessed a profusion of critical discourse in opposition to the prevailing model of vision.² That model, referred to as “Cartesian perspectivalism,” derives from two distinct discoveries -- the Renaissance invention of mathematically exact perspective in the early fifteenth century, and Rene Descartes’s famous philosophical method of doubt put forth in his *Meditations* (1641).

At its most basic, the Renaissance development of linear perspective provided artists with a mathematical technique for rendering representations of three-dimensional space on the two-dimensional surface of a flat canvas. However, perspective not only served as a device for structuring pictures, but also quickly came to be seen as analogous to the structure of human perception. In this more theoretical formulation of perspective, the viewer is conceived as a single and unmoving eye positioned at the apex of a cone of vision. Over time, this idea came to be understood as scientific counterpart to the philosophical theories of Descartes, whose *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), suggests that existence is proven solely through one’s ability to formulate thoughts, rather than through sensory perception of the world. Thus, Descartes’s philosophy of existence is predicated on a separation of mind from body, much like the disembodied eye of one-point perspective.

One contemporary theorist central to dismantling the Cartesian model and introducing an embodied mode of viewing is French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty

(1908-1961). In his most influential work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argued that we come to know ourselves, and the world around us, in relation to our own bodies. As such, he was a constant critic of Cartesian thought, wherein the body of the *cogito* is held at an empirical distance from what it perceives. We cannot understand the complex sense we have of our environment purely through the activity of a disembodied eye, Merleau-Ponty argued. Rather, seeing must be fully integrated within the kinaesthetic and tactile dimensions of experience; “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it...and with it forms a system.”³

Translated from French into English in 1962, *The Phenomenology of Perception* took on pronounced relevance for the artists and critics associated with Minimalism.⁴ In particular, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied viewing offered a strong argument against the prevailing hegemony of Clement Greenberg’s formalism, and the emphasis on purely optical models of viewing art. Within the American art world, several writers seized upon phenomenology to comment on the reconfiguring of sculpture then taking place. Among them, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson and Robert Morris, all published essays citing links between Merleau-Ponty’s ideas and the aims of Minimalist object-makers.⁵ In her 1982 essay, “Richard Serra: A Translation” (written for a French exhibition catalogue), Rosalind Krauss described how *The Phenomenology of Perception* entered the consciousness of American artists and “became...a text that was consistently interpreted in the light of their own ambitions toward meaning within an art that was abstract.”⁶

Robert Lazzarini's own practice is deeply indebted to the legacy of Minimalism, in particular, the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra, all of whom stand out for focusing attention (either deliberately or unintentionally) on the phenomenology of sculptural viewing.⁷ Albeit in very different ways, each of these artists set forth a new conception of sculpture that stressed the actual circumstances in which one encounters a work of art. Their distinctive contributions to issues of staging and viewer response provide several points of departure for considering the phenomenological implications of Lazzarini's own work. Perhaps the most significant link between Lazzarini and the aforementioned sculptors is the sensation of heightened self-awareness that their work elicits from the viewer. In Lazzarini's case, this state of intensified awareness is the result of a succession of perceptual cues—environmental, spatial, kinesthetic and temporal—that together insist on the viewer's recognition of his or her corporeality. The first of these cues is light.

As in Minimal art, the experience of Lazzarini's sculptures depends as much on what Robert Morris called the "expanded situation" of an object in space as on the object itself.⁸ However, where Morris denied that he was creating an "environmental situation," Lazzarini actively engages in shaping the space that surrounds the viewer.⁹ This is achieved in large part through the use of diffused fluorescent lighting, and is most evident in Lazzarini's installation of four *skulls*. Hung on each of four walls in a small gallery, the skulls are lit from above by fluorescent bulbs, which cast a cool, nearly shadow-less glow around the room. Below, neutral gray carpet further reduces the incidence of reflections. As a result, the walls of the gallery become a kind of uninflected visual field against which the form of each object is defined. The reduction

of shadow also serves to minimize the appearance of volumetric form in space, thereby enhancing the image aspect of the *skulls*. Seen from the front, the skulls appear to oscillate somewhere between two and three dimensions. While this experience does not explicitly recall the viewing conditions that Minimalist artists sought for their work, Lazzarini's concern with light does have several noteworthy parallels with Donald Judd's interest in display.

Although Judd rarely commented on how his works were to be experienced, once even telling Barbara Rose, "I don't consider the viewer,"¹⁰ he did speak vehemently on the circumstances in which his objects should be exhibited. Of particular concern to Judd, whose sleek industrial constructions are predicated on an aesthetic of radical reduction, were the poor artificial lighting conditions prevalent in most public galleries. Believing that all of his pieces should be "seen in even or natural light," Judd railed against the use of strong spotlights and the distracting shadows they cast.¹¹ Lazzarini's choice of diffused fluorescent lighting is similarly governed by a desire to provide flat, even illumination that reduces shadows and other irregularities on the surrounding walls. However, where Judd used light to maintain a singular focus on the work as a physical entity, Lazzarini's lighting treatment relates more broadly to the experience of apprehension. By carefully orchestrating the gallery environment, Lazzarini simultaneously draws attention to the object, and makes the spectator aware of him-or herself as a perceiving subject.

Another feature of Lazzarini's work that contributes to an atmosphere of heightened sensory awareness is the spatial arrangement of his sculptures. Using inconspicuous mounting devices, which make the works appear to hover several inches

from the wall, Lazzarini confounds an accurate reading of the work's structure and position. As John Ravenal has observed, "The relative smallness of Lazzarini's works floating on the expanse of wall further focuses attention on the figure/ground relationship. On the other hand, the object's three-dimensional cues prompt the viewer to move around it."¹² Thus, the work's location in space serves to amplify the tension between two- and three-dimensional form, which Lazzarini's choice of lighting initiates. In order to resolve this ambiguity, the viewer must engage in a kinesthetic encounter with the work. As a result "one is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context."¹³

It is interesting to note here the strong affinities between Lazzarini's use of physical (and perceptual) suspension, and the constructional technique of cantilevering that Judd employed throughout his career. Similar to Lazzarini's mounting devices, Judd's system of attachment is always hidden from view, creating the illusion that his objects are floating in front of the wall, rather than held in place against it. As such, they seem to loom precariously outwards, insistently impinging on the viewer's physical space. This is most evidently the case with Judd's series of open-ended wall units. Although Judd conceived of his objects as literal and immediately self-evident, the forms are not as easily *seen* as he would have us believe.¹⁴ In fact, the very elements that Judd considers so literal and "specific"—Plexiglas, shiny metals, bright colors, and wall mounting—all add to the visual complexity of the work. Despite Judd's writing to the contrary, his objects are not merely something to "look at," but rather intended for a mobile, perceiving body. One is clearly encouraged to move around a work like,

Untitled (1968) (fig. 1) and inspect it from either side to get a clearer view of its interior. However, just as with Lazzarini's work, Judd's sculpture provides an inexhaustible supply of visual impressions. Seen from head-on and at a distance, the work appears to consist of discrete, evenly dispersed units. In contrast, a raking view along the façade yields a completely different reading of the structural components as forming a contiguous band.

A similar experience is to be had from Robert Morris's untitled sculpture of 1965 consisting of three L-shaped plywood sculptures (fig. 2). In this work, Morris presents three identical forms that differ only in their orientation in space. One L sits upright, the second lies on its side, and the third is balanced on its two ends. The *L-Beams* are identical in every way; however, they are perceived as different from one another because of their placement in the gallery. "Thus no matter how clearly we might *understand* that the three Ls are identical (in structure and dimension), it is impossible to see them as the same."¹⁵ Indeed, their "sameness" belongs only to an ideal mental image one has of the work's overall form, rather than the perceptible reality. This disconnect between what we see and what we know, is precisely the tension that Lazzarini's objects create, suspended as they are between extreme states of realism and abstraction. Stripped of their functionality and pulled into the realm of sculpture, Lazzarini's distorted simulations persistently confound the conviction that the world is knowable through vision alone. Rather, his sculptures are contingent on and inextricable from the body of the viewer. Like Morris's sculptures, Lazzarini's work invites a continuously shifting pattern of engagement—inspecting from a distance, moving in closer, stepping back and circling around. This experience yields a work that

is neither completely enigmatic nor transparently self-evident. The thing we see changes with every turn, and echoes the circuitous pattern of viewing.

This quality of continually changing perspectives is nowhere more evident in Lazzarini's work than with *payphone*. As the artist's only free-standing piece, *payphone* provides the most complete and acutely kinaesthetic experience of vision. While the ability to circumnavigate this sculpture would seem to allow for a more conventional mode of apprehension, nothing could be farther from the truth. "Each new view provides another confounding and irreconcilable distortion of a familiar urban object as it seems to accelerate and decelerate, expand and contract with the viewer's changing perspective."¹⁶ Lazzarini likens this effect to the type of viewing engendered by Tony Smith's monumental sculpture, *Amaryllis* (fig. 3). Created in 1965, this Cor-Ten steel sculpture is composed of a single geometric shape (a tetrahedron forming a triangular-based pyramid) repeated to create a larger, more irregular configuration. The two forms, identical in size and shape, are joined together so that one piece lies horizontally on the ground, while the other extends vertically at an angle from the top. As a viewer moves around the sculpture, its configuration changes constantly—stretching and contracting, balancing and unbalancing— and stimulates the beholder's awareness of his or her role in knowing the work.

As an artist deeply influenced by the phenomenology of viewing large-scale minimal sculpture, it is not surprising that Lazzarini is especially interested in the work of Richard Serra, whose industrial constructions are based on the notion that sculpture should be understood "immediately [and] physically, by your body."¹⁷ Like Robert Morris, Serra's practice follows the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, wherein the viewer

senses himself situated in the same space as the object, and this results in a more vivid cognition of his body (or being) in the presence of the work. However, this enhanced cognition is not only a function of spatial awareness, but also of movement and duration. Crucial to the viewing of art, as opposed to everyday objects, is the way we linger and become absorbed in the process of looking as it unfolds over time. This state of prolonged observation is further accentuated when taking in sculpture, particularly that of Serra, because it requires time to walk around and through.¹⁸ Take, for instance, Serra's work *Shift* (fig. 4), an immense outdoor sculpture constructed between 1970 and 1972 in rural Canada that spans a distance of nearly 1000 feet. According to the artist, *Shift* "takes at least an hour to see" and establishes a "dialectic of walking and looking into the landscape" wherein the mobile viewer becomes an integral participant in the work, not a passive beholder.¹⁹ Thus, the kinesthetic experience of *Shift* not only stimulates an awareness of one's physicality, but also focuses attention on the time necessary to traverse the field.

While Lazzarini's work shares this temporal dimension, the cognition of time is a twofold process, arising from the activity of viewing and from the object itself. Consider, Lazzarini's collection of *studio objects*, a desk-top rotary phone, an ordinary slatted chair, and a pair of Stanley hammers, each modeled on furniture or tools from the artist's own workplace. In reflecting on the phenomenology of viewing, we have already seen how perception requires the synthesis of the body itself, and that this synthesis involves a spatiality and motility, which necessarily exists in time. This is certainly true of all of Lazzarini's work, however, with the *studio objects*, the process of slow looking reveals a physical manifestation of temporality. Despite their familiar and somewhat

generic appearance, each simulated item is rendered with exacting care in order to faithfully replicate every nuance of the original object. The pursuit of authentic detail even extends to the final finishes, which are meticulously distressed to mimic scuffs, smudges other signs of wear and tear. There is a sense in these worn and weathered surfaces of witnessing the passage of time, as if the lifespan of the object (and its maker) – past present and future – were at once made visible.

It is this notion of temporal layering that links Lazzarini's work most closely with the theories of Merleau-Ponty, for whom temporality is understood as a dynamic union of overlapping dimensions. According to him, perceptual awareness is located in an ever shifting present, where what we see is simultaneously fashioned from what we perceived in the immediate past, and what we are about to perceive in the immediate future. Thus, "within things themselves, the future and the past are in a kind of eternal state of pre-existence and survival."²⁰ This state of simultaneity or suspension is at the heart of Lazzarini's work. Unlike an image, which is fixed, isolated and unchanging, Lazzarini's objects are in a constant state of flux, alternating between realism and abstraction, distortion and resolution, permanence and decay. As such, they cannot be reduced to a single coherent essence, nor seen from just one vantage point. Lazzarini undermines the notion of the eye as a disembodied tool used to collect information, and instead relocates perception in a corporeal self, a mobile, sensate body. By challenging the primacy of vision, Lazzarini draws us into a space of reflection and contemplation, and gently urges us to be alert to our own experience – the means by which we know and make sense of the world.

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¹ John B. Ravenal, “objects slipping toward their own demise,” in *Robert Lazzarini* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2000), p. 47

² For one of the most comprehensive treatments of the history of Western visuality, from the Greeks to the present day, see Martin Jay’s seminal work, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and his essay “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988).

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002/1962), p. 235.

⁴ A number of art historians have recently discussed the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to 1960s art criticism and theory including, Amelia Jones in “Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology in Art History” from *Art and Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); James Meyer in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Alex Potts in *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). See also, Maurice Berger in *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Icon Editions, 1989).

⁵ These include, Michael Fried’s now infamous attack on the “theatricality” of large-scale Minimal works in “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 12-23; Annette Michelson, *Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969); and several key works by Rosalind Krauss noted below.

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Richard Serra: A Translation,” reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 263-4. Over the past twenty-years, Krauss has invoked Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in a number of seminal articles on Minimalist sculpture, including the above noted essay on Serra. Already in 1966, Merleau-Ponty features prominently in the essay “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd,” *Artforum* (May 1966): 24-26, wherein Krauss describes the bodily sensations that are produced in the viewer during the activity of looking at Judd’s work from different perspectives. See also, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post ‘60s Sculpture,” *Artforum* (November 1973): 149-156; and *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

⁷ Robert Morris is of singular importance to any consideration of the phenomenology of viewing sculpture because his own thinking was so deeply indebted to phenomenological analysis. More than any other figure associated with Minimalism, Morris made a serious issue of the fact that three-dimensional sculpture cannot be reduced to conventional modes of visual perception. Inspired by his background in performance, Morris described the experience of his work as a perceptual system inextricably related to the body, the work of art, and the gallery. In doing so, Morris made the act of viewing itself his abiding focus, concentrating on the impact a work has on the viewer sharing its space.

⁸ Morris describes this notion of the “expanded situation” of sculpture in his “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 17. Here he observes, “Some of the new work has expanded the terms of sculpture by a more emphatic focusing on the very conditions under which certain kinds of objects are seen. The object itself is carefully placed in these new conditions to be but one of the terms...”

⁹ Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” p. 17.

¹⁰ Donald Judd, quoted in James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 158.

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- ¹¹ *Don Judd* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971), p. 41.
- ¹² John B. Ravenal, "objects slipping toward their own demise," in *Robert Lazzarini* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2003), p. 35.
- ¹³ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 15.
- ¹⁴ Both Rosalind Krauss and Robert Smithson commented on the visual complexity of Judd's work in the mid-1960s. For Krauss's comments see "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," *Artforum* (May 1966): 26. Smithson's remarks on this topic appear in a catalogue essay (ironically commissioned by Judd himself) for the exhibition *7 Sculptors*. Describing Judd's red Plexiglass and stainless steel box, Smithson observes, "It is impossible to tell what is hanging from what or what is supporting what. Ups are downs and downs are ups. An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure...The concept of "anti-matter" overruns, and fills everything, making these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance." Robert Smithson, "Donald Judd," *7 Sculptors* (Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965), p. 16.
- ¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 266-267.
- ¹⁶ John B. Ravenal, "objects slipping toward their own demise," *Robert Lazzarini* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2003), p. 47.
- ¹⁷ Richard Serra, "Interview by Nicholas Serota and David Sylvester," reprinted in *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 273-4.
- ¹⁸ Michael Fried evoked this insistently temporal dimension of viewing sculpture in "Art and Objecthood," describing the encounter with Minimal works as one of "endlessness, being able to go and on, and even having to go on and on...of time passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding." *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 22.
- ¹⁹ Richard Serra, "Interview with Liza Bear," reprinted in *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 48.
- ²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 478.