An abstract painting featuring a dense, intricate composition of gold leaf, black charcoal-like lines, and vibrant brushstrokes in shades of orange, blue, and yellow. The background is a mix of light and dark tones, creating a complex, layered texture.

A World Created

Naomi Beckwith

1

Conversation with the artist, March 20, 2013.
All subsequent statements by the artist are
taken from this exchange.

“There was a time,” says William J. O’Brien, “when the content of my work was coming from outside sources.”¹ Even though this assessment of his past work is fairly matter-of-fact, any statement at all about content seems odd for an artist whose body of work, though remarkably varied, is dominated by abstract forms. The Chicago-based O’Brien has been working for almost ten years in a broad practice that moves seamlessly among a range of media: from sculpture and ceramics to drawing, textiles, and painting. While many of his early works feature religious iconography and erotic references, during the past five years, he has tended to focus on colors, forms, and geometric shapes.

Recognized mostly for his ceramics, O’Brien is closely associated with a “maker” tendency in contemporary art, in which craft aesthetics, manual labor, and “doing” supersede an approach to making art based on theory or academics. Upon careful consideration of the totality of O’Brien’s practice, however, one discovers a profound engagement with the arc of twentieth-century art movements—from Dada to post-modernism—and an investigation of what cultural and historical baggage comes with specific art forms, whether figurative or abstract. While the artist sets up a contrast between his early and recent work in this essay’s opening statement, O’Brien also implies that content remains a crucial part of his oeuvre, though now internal to the art objects. This shift from external to internal content then leads to questions: What does it mean for abstraction to contain content? How do formal qualities, such as shape, material, and color, hold meaning? In this essay, I explore these questions by examining O’Brien’s artworks—specifically his drawings, ceramics, and metal sculptures—all of which the artist produces with ease while demonstrating an intense physicality.

I. Drawings

No matter the medium, almost all of O’Brien’s objects are remarkably kinetic and bear the marks of his hand. The drawings, in particular, contain many differing shapes and lines, yet all of the works on paper share a distinctive style: a dense, all-over application of myriad vivid candy colors, unbounded by the edge of the paper. The simplest small oil pastel and ink drawings, also known as process drawings, tend to depict broadly circular forms loosely organized in a pattern, or even a crude human figure, with expressive lines drawn or even scribbled over them (plate 1). The larger pastel drawings—often on paper greater in size than O’Brien’s body—are each a palimpsest of spontaneous and continuous lines that amass into a dense soup of intersecting colors. Most colored-pencil drawings are tight expanses of shape, line, and color. O’Brien often builds the drawings up from repeated shapes that cohere



Plate 2
Untitled, 2012

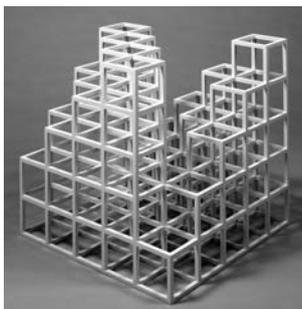


Figure 1
Sol LeWitt, *Cube Structure Based on Five Modules #75*, 1971/1977. Painted wood; 24 1/6 × 24 1/6 × 24 1/6 in. (61.3 × 61.3 × 61.3 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Roger and Neil Barrett, 1994.22.

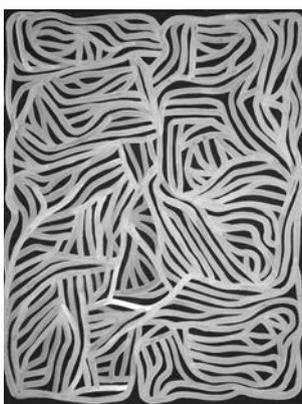


Figure 2
Sol LeWitt, *Irregular Grid*, 2001. Gouache on paper; 29 1/2 × 22 1/2 in. (74.9 × 57.2 cm). Private collection.

Beckwith

Plate 3
Untitled, 2007

into loose patterns. Some of these patterns are psychedelic explosions of concentric circles in the shapes of mandalas or flora (plate 4). The more angular drawings are tessellations of rhomboid shapes, which simultaneously convey a sense of depth and a flattened, frontal perspective. In other words, the drawings suggest rhythmic movements and imply a three-dimensional space without being fully architectonic (plate 2). As O'Brien's works on paper move away from exactitude toward a free-form expressionism, they enact a tension between self-discipline and spontaneity.

That control is evident in some of the drawings' overall sense of direction and movement, giving some structure to the shapes and colors, and creating depth within the scene. The legacy of O'Brien's experience as a graphic designer—his occupation between art degrees—is his tendency to organize shapes and patterns on a plane by subdividing the page into sections, usually on a graph or grid. While his graphic design background may have given him a sense of color, shape, and movement, his drawings also often imply a depth of field, figuring three dimensions onto a flat surface. The process sounds like the Greenbergian narrative of the logic of modernist painting, but may have more to do with an architect's or a designer's sense of space derived from op art or artist Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007), who is most famous for his gridded structures and geometric and architectonic drawings.

LeWitt, significantly, also had experience as a commercial graphic designer, including a stint for architect I. M. Pei in the 1950s. In LeWitt's sculptural works, one sees an isometric logic at play in which the shape of the work seems to shift with the viewer's perspective. The practice mirrors the artist's desire to physically encapsulate multiple perspectival drawings in one object (figure 1). LeWitt is less well known for his series of gouache drawings, in which he often practiced an irregular geometry, creating lines and shapes that both follow and break a geometric logic. The lines look expressive but are carefully controlled by an underlying organization. LeWitt's *Irregular Grid* (2001) (figure 2) stands as a model for O'Brien, who became interested in the grid, like LeWitt, through graphic design.

O'Brien departs from LeWitt, however, as he seeks other organizing factors that function both with and against the grid. He starts his drawings by creating a substructure that organizes the visible, finished image or objects—a structure based more on gesture than form. One of the many methods the artist employs to create an underlying structure for his drawings involves executing a frottage drawing of an object's surface, an impression that guides the pattern of the overdrawing.

2

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) was a French psychoanalyst who, among many other significant contributions to the field, was the first to apply poststructural linguistic models to theories of the unconscious. Structuralism understands that language could be subdivided into two distinct parts: the concrete word/speech and the concept that language attempts to convey. Yet, according to poststructuralism, the relationship between these two components constantly shifts depending on context, the speaker, and the listener, thus there is never a fixed meaning assigned to any word. Lacan argued that, similarly, the human mind is always split between conscious thinking and unconscious drives that motivate conscious thinking, though those drives can never be fully understood. For an introduction to Lacan, his theories, and their impact, see Sean Homer's *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005).

3

Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, trans. Eric von Brockdorff (Heidelberg, Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 12.

Another method is to create a free-form underdrawing whose lines and shape guide the visible drawing. The relationship is not at all visible or apparent: O'Brien calls the underdrawings "a hidden language" whose relationship to the finished work is "more linguistic than architectural."

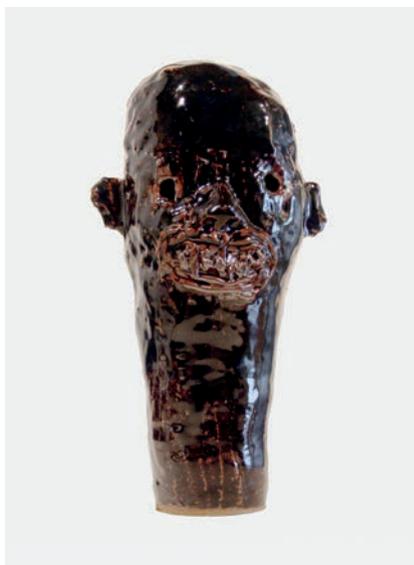
The gestural and linguistic analogies are significant because they hint at a nonstructural relationship between the underside and overside, visible and invisible, interior and exterior, the repressed and the expressed. Jacques Lacan was the first to propose that the human unconscious is structured like a language, and that the unconscious structure can only be accessed via what is consciously expressed or spoken.² O'Brien thinks of the drawings as maps of a psychology.

O'Brien is far from the first artist to express an interest in the relationship between the unconscious and the art object. This connection was the basis of Hans Prinzhorn's influential *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, first published in 1922, in which the German psychiatrist argued that an artwork's highest aesthetic value should not be measured in terms of academic values and ideas of "genius" but according to the work's ability to "actualize the psyche."³ Prinzhorn's publication championed the nonintellectual work of his mental patients and introduced the new field of what is now called outsider art. Prinzhorn was a major influence on surrealists including André Breton (French, 1896–1966), Paul Klee (Swiss, 1879–1940), and other artists, especially Jean Dubuffet (French, 1901–1985), who—first as an outsider art collector, and then as an artist—conceptualized *art brut* based on a long-standing engagement with Prinzhorn's work. O'Brien's exuberant colors and geometric patterning share an affinity with Dubuffet's spontaneous lines and shapes filled in with color and texture, which, in turn, mimic the automatic drawings of the surrealists.

O'Brien considers drawing the foundation for his work in all other media, calling it the "structure of the house." Here the term *structure* describes an approach to art making that distances his drawings from the historical convention of preparatory sketches. O'Brien's drawings create a structure based on an ongoing experiment in maintaining and relinquishing control, and forgiving oneself when that balance is lost. As the artist succinctly puts it: "Drawing is the easiest medium to fail in." O'Brien also appreciates drawing's ability to reveal a narrative. Though his works are far from illustrative or literary, the narrative metaphor invites viewers to "read" them to uncover their structure, movement, and nonlinear development. Thus, O'Brien reveals that drawing, for him, is far from a purely automatic activity, and these improvisatory works map a generic unconscious rather than his own psyche.



From left: **Plate 5** *Untitled*, 2008; **Plate 6** *Untitled*, 2007; **Plate 7** *Untitled*, 2011



4
Zoë Gray, *Making Is Thinking* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2011), 7; online exhibition catalogue, 89.234.34.186/wdw. O'Brien was one of the artists featured in this exhibition.

5
George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 96.

To think of O'Brien's drawings as improvisation invites comparisons to music, especially post-bebop jazz. The artist's creative process, like that of many jazz musicians, tends to be categorized, even celebrated, as "the avoidance of conscious thinking [with an] emphasis on intuition, instinct and tacit knowledge."⁴ As musician and historian George E. Lewis has written, this common sentiment problematically "casts improvisation in general . . . as both lacking in structure and insensitive to historical or formal concerns."⁵ O'Brien's work is clearly process-oriented, physically involved and, at times, deeply psychically invested. Yet the challenge is to discuss the breadth of his practice without falling into anti-intellectual neo-surrealism. If there are intellectual and conceptual concerns in O'Brien's practice, the hope is to make apparent the dialogue between O'Brien's work, and modernism and the art that came after it.

II. Sculptures

As O'Brien moves from two- to three-dimensional work, his sculptural objects maintain a sense of bodily immediacy. His ceramic works, constructions, and metal sculptures all bear evidence of heavy manual labor. Unlike traditional sculpture, O'Brien's objects are not carved from or cast in a material such as stone or brass. They are constructed from multiple pieces or materials, which come together like puzzle pieces—via welding, stitching, wrapping, or suturing—and are then sometimes overpainted or glazed.

Ceramic objects are O'Brien's most celebrated works. Though not as central to his practice as drawing, clay has long been an important material for him. O'Brien's undergraduate study focused on ceramics and he has taught the subject at the university level in Chicago. His ceramic oeuvre, a complex practice unto itself, moves widely across several formal vocabularies, encompassing vessels, portraits, masks, and composite constructions of multiple clay pieces that refuse coherence in any conventional sense. Like his drawings, the ceramic works eschew exactitude in favor of an intentionally naive approach. Their *tachiste* effects include calligraphic marks, mottled texturing, scored patterns, and clay balls adhered to their surfaces like pom-poms, and they are often drizzled with vividly colored glazes.



Figure 3
Lanier Meaders, *Face Jug*, 1987. Glazed low-fired stoneware; 10 in. (25.4 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Ruth and Robert Vogele M2000.84.

6

Claire Tancons, "An Elective Affinity: David Hammons's *Hidden from View* and *Made in the People's Republic of Harlem*," *Third Text* 19, no. 2 (March 2005): 171.



Figure 4

Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991. Dolls and figures, gelatin silver prints, acrylic on paper, folding banquet tables, and folding card tables; dimensions variable. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997.41.



Figure 5

David Smith, *Monday Woman*, c. 1953. Steel and bronze; 21 1/2 × 19 × 8 in. (54.6 × 48.3 × 20.3 cm). Private collection.

O'Brien most readily exhibits specific references and influences on his art in his ceramic works (plate 8). From ritual objects of the ancient past, to folk artist George Ohr's (American, 1857–1918) "crazy" pots, to "face jugs" that date back to the antebellum American South (figure 3), O'Brien appropriates many forms from objects once excluded from the realm of high art. The art world's relatively recent interest in craft traditions has given ceramics, as well as other utilitarian, ethnographic, and decorative objects, what art historian Claire Tancons has termed a "semantic upgrade . . . concurrent with the taxonomic shift they underwent, from artifact to art."⁶ Yet O'Brien's reference to these works should be framed less as patronizing validations of these ceramic practices as fine art, and more as a conscientious decision to rehearse non-art traditions in his own art practice. These rehearsals acknowledge alternate aesthetic models operating in the social world that might wield as much influence as academically validated forms. We see this principle at work in Mike Kelley's (American, 1954–2012) *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991) in which cheap, everyday objects are systematically displayed in a classic museological order (figure 4). While the installation seems to be a tongue-in-cheek take on museological organization and display, it also underscores the way in which class and economic value become conflated with, and in turn assign, aesthetic value.

As O'Brien moves into other sculptural forms, metal—industrial-grade aluminum, to be precise—is his material of choice. Although working in metal necessitates a great amount of energy and labor, O'Brien considers it "more forgiving than ceramics." Metal is harder to manipulate, but it can be melted down and reformed, whereas ceramics assume a final and immutable form. While O'Brien's ceramics are all similar in scale, the metal sculptures vary from the size of a human torso to that of a tall, fully upright body. Their overall forms are mostly abstract, although sometimes schematically and vaguely figurative, and made of toothed shapes that never cohere into a solid form. They are generally composed of die-cut pieces that are welded together, which lends them both an air of collage and places them in a direct lineage with cubist constructions (as opposed to a reduced sculpture) or early metal works by David Smith (American, 1906–1965) in his surrealist phase (figure 5).

With the welding process come textured lines and edges, which, as with O'Brien's work in any medium, bear the evidence of the artist's hand. The final constructions often display a sense of rhythm and movement, drawing strong, complex lines in space while creating forms using both the positive metal shapes and the negative space within and around each piece. If the structural logic of the drawings is based on a



Plate 10 *Untitled* (detail), 2012

relationship of an invisible interior framework to a visible exterior image, then most of the metal works physically embody that relationship of interiority to exteriority. A sleek powder coating smooths over their surfaces, but not necessarily their rough, welded edges (plate 10). Above all, each sculpture becomes a monochromatic painting-as-construction (or vice versa), evenly coated in the sheen of industrially produced colors borrowed from the same palette employed in O'Brien's drawings.

"That Minimalist art bridges between painting and sculpture, indeed, that it necessarily erases the distinction between painting and sculpture, was the message of Donald Judd's [American, 1928–1994] article in the 1965 *Arts Yearbook*," reads the "1965" entry in *Art Since 1900*.⁷ And in Judd's work, we find the closest precedent for O'Brien's metal sculptures (figure 6). First, both establish an inextricable relationship between painting and sculpture (or, more specifically for O'Brien, drawing and sculpture); second, there is a turn to industrial processes and industrial materials—aluminum, commercial paints—for the making of art; and, finally, both Judd and O'Brien articulate a shifting relationship between positive and negative space in the construction of the object and according to the perspective of the viewer. Even with these comparisons, Judd's and O'Brien's works evince important distinctions, both formally and conceptually, which will soon become apparent.

III. Collaboration

O'Brien's two- and three-dimensional works are distinguished by a key factor: his drawings are traditional studio objects made by a single hand, while his sculptures necessitate a community practice. The ceramic works require a kiln and the assistance of others, and the metal works require a workshop and the expertise of die-cutting, welding, and powder-coating specialists. O'Brien states that he maintains relationships with community art centers as part of his work. These

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Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, vol. 2, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 493.



Figure 6
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1985. Enamel on aluminum; 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (30.2 × 60 × 9.8 cm).

8

Jolly was a ceramicist, educator, and activist in the Chicago arts community, and a cofounder of the women's art collective Sapphire and Crystals. She and O'Brien taught ceramics at Chicago State University at the same time.

relationships are not separate from a private/studio practice. Instead, O'Brien's participation in these communities is an essential part of his artistic production.

Herein lies an important ethical stance: The way O'Brien inhabits the world as an artist is as constitutive to the physical being of his artworks as their materials, forms, and gestures. Both objects and lived processes make up his body of work. O'Brien credits a former colleague, the late Marva Lee Pitchford Jolly (American, 1937–2012), with helping him articulate this idea, though it is probably more of an instinctual philosophy.⁸ Jolly “had an admirable way of bridging art and life, bridging the political/cultural self with the artistic self. The work didn't have to be radically political but had to reflect, in a way, how you lived. There was an acceptance and openness to being genuine to your history and psychology—and letting objects reflect that.” If Jolly's life and work provide one model of inhabiting the role of an artist as a community-builder, O'Brien exercises another model at Chicago's Lillstreet Art Center, where he enjoys creating work in an egalitarian setting with professional and amateur artists. Although O'Brien has clearly mastered the ceramic medium—while still creating works that physically replicate the look of nonmastery—he is interested in a nonhierarchical exchange with others working in the medium, no matter how amateur. O'Brien has also worked with artists with developmental disabilities, collaborating with Creativity Explored in San Francisco, a center designed to allow its participants to take part in the contemporary art economy. Even when teaching, O'Brien says he works *with* students, rather than teaching art *to* them. All of these examples instill in O'Brien's work a performative element in which the objects are the sum of material and collaborative efforts.

Collaborative labor can be seen inscribed in O'Brien's three-dimensional work and the artist's hand is manifest in every object. These qualities ally O'Brien to artists who contend that any artwork that blatantly exposes the artist's hand cannot be separated from the subjectivity of that artist. Feminist artists and theorists have best articulated this notion, especially in light of performance works such as Carolee Schneemann's (American, b. 1939) *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973–76) (figure 7), or Shigeko Kubota's (Japanese, b. 1937) *Vagina Painting* (1965). These works demonstrate how even an abstract or gestural mark is never a neutral or purely formal or aesthetic device, and how every mark calls attention to its maker's subjecthood.

While O'Brien's ethical approach to art making stems from performative models, such as those represented by the Schneemann and Kubota works, he never literally performs as an art practice. Instead, he

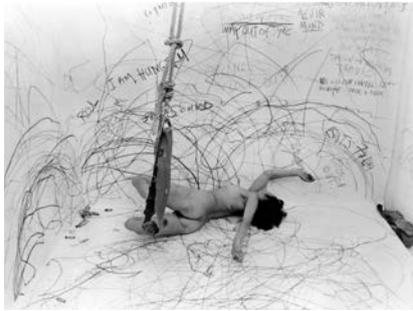


Figure 7
Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1973–76. Performance at the Kitchen, New York.

9
Michael Fried decried minimalism's bodily pretenses, which pull the art object into the realm of theater. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967), 12–23.



Figure 8
Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1974 (poster for Voice). Offset lithograph on paper; 36 3/4 × 23 3/8 × in. (93.4 × 60.6 cm).

seems to limn a dialogue between these performative notions and the objecthood gestalt theory posited by minimalism. If O'Brien's work is such a departure from minimalism, why does he engage with its terms in the first place? The answer is that minimalism became the first art movement to consciously shift away from modernism's idea of the autonomous art object. The minimalists rejected the notion that a work of art is an ahistorical, decontextualized object, created purely for visual and aesthetic contemplation. They understood that an object exists in a real space and time, and that these factors affect how an artwork is perceived: Even light levels and the movement of the sun can alter the object's texture or color. Despite all of minimalism's industrial techniques and disregard for "the hand," its artists shared a concern for the perceiving body of the viewer in the gallery or museum. This "new" viewer was no longer static in the gallery space, staring at a work and contemplating it in a purely cerebral form of aesthetic intake. The minimalists imagined a body whose view of, say, a LeWitt structure would change as the body moved around the object, or, in the case of Carl Andre (American, b. 1935), as a body trampled the work underfoot. It is at this moment in art history that an artwork could be "understood" as more than the sum of its material and labor, and could include a set of conditions and actions, extant to the artist's intent, in its making.⁹

Minimalism's bodily awareness only extended to the viewer and rarely reflected back onto the body of the artist, with the exception, perhaps, of the work of Robert Morris (American, b. 1931). While Morris fully participated in minimalism's gestalt exercises, creating objects that viewers sit on, slide down, and—on at least one occasion—destroy, he also created a series of works in which he interrogated the very conditions of art making, implicating himself and his body as integral to the object's history. *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) laid bare art making as a basic form of labor; the *I-Box* (1962) almost anticipated the feminist critique that the object is informed by its artist. In his sensationalist poster for his 1974 exhibition at Castelli and Sonnabend Galleries (figure 8), Morris appears as a beefcake, "naked to the waist, wearing only a German Army helmet (Nazi vintage), mirrored aviator glasses, steel manacles and a spiked collar."¹⁰ What comes across as tongue-in-cheek, and even homoerotic, exposes a heterosexual machismo underneath the industrial aesthetic of the minimalist movement.¹¹

There is a second issue with minimalism's turn toward the viewer. While the movement engendered a presumably generous, performative relationship with the viewer, this relationship depended on the pretense of universalist claims. Minimalist objects naively elided any form of

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Roberta Smith, "Art or Ad or What? It Caused a Lot of Fuss," *New York Times*, July 24, 2009. The Morris poster was a possible inspiration for Lynda Benglis's (American, b. 1941) equally infamous *Artforum* ad of the same year. As the *Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris, 1973–1974* exhibition of the summer of 2009 at Susan Inglett Gallery illustrated, Benglis and Morris were engaged in a loose collaboration in video and images, and Morris's poster might have responded to a set of exchanges between the two artists.

11

Art historian Anna C. Chave argues that while minimalism may be celebrated for a break with the conventions of modernism, it left intact many modernist assumptions about the traditional function of sculpture, including masculinist tendencies toward strength and power, as well as preserving social structures of privilege, patronage, and nepotism among its artists and their supporters. In her scathing view, minimalist artists intentionally enacted a visual, psychic, and at times, literal violence onto their audiences. In Chave's discussion of Morris's Castelli and Sonnabend Galleries poster, the image is not a self-reflexive parody but a means of "equating the force of art with corporeal force, where what prevails or dominates is generally the greatest violence. (134)" Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," in Holliday T. Day, ed., *Power: Its Myths and Mores in American Art: 1961–1991* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1991), 116–39.

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Ibid., 139.

13

Brian Wallis, "Power, Gender, and Abstraction," in Day, *Power*. 102.

difference among the viewing subjects, and this elision unwittingly replicated the high modernist presumptions of *the viewer*—that any body is interchangeable for another—rather than acknowledging the possibility of a *multitude* of different viewers.

What happens if a viewer's terms of aesthetic engagement don't jibe well with cubes? What happens if the way you inhabit your body involves a different set of movements and postures from the majority of viewing subjects? O'Brien's work engages with the minimalist aesthetic at a moment when the body is implied yet problematically undifferentiated at the same time. O'Brien's investigation confronts minimalism's tropes head-on yet intentionally avoids any art practices that attempt to figure and represent those "differentiated" bodies. These representational practices are now associated with the "identity politics" vein of postmodernism, a practice that itself easily slips into a *mise-en-scène* of perpetual differentiation. O'Brien's work, however, articulates the perceptual confusion engendered by the moment when one is simultaneously and paradoxically called out by a minimalist artwork yet unrecognized. As a result, viewers find themselves in a stunted dialogue—one side does all the talking—in which "Minimalism's denial of subjectivity acts to distance and isolate viewers, rather than integrate them into the cultural . . . system."¹²

O'Brien is thus in a double bind: he is isolated both as a viewer and as a maker. Perhaps attempting to illustrate this, he proposed a thought exercise in one of our conversations, asking me to think about "gay minimalism."

Me: What is gay minimalism?

O'Brien: Well, there you go!

O'Brien's smart way of calling attention to a certain aporia in aesthetic production reinforces curator Brian Wallis's thesis that heteronormative "masculinity has come to be associated with abstraction."¹³ There is, of course, the prominent counterexample presented by Félix González-Torres (American, b. Cuba, 1957–1996), the queer artist who appropriated the visual language of minimalism and emphasized its performative aspects in projects about subjective and affective experience (see figures. 9–10). González-Torres notwithstanding, one cannot deny the tendency to ascribe certain aesthetics to certain social groups. While there were plenty of examples to the contrary, it is significant that the gay contemporaries of minimalist artists, such as Jasper Johns (American, b. 1930), Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925–2008), and Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987), tended to innovate

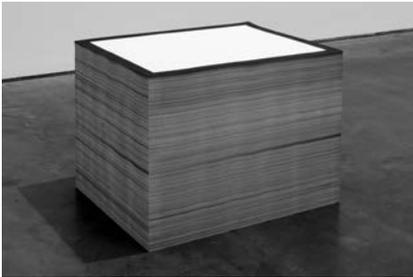


Figure 9
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*The End*), 1990. Print on paper, endless copies. 22 in. at ideal height × 28 × 22 in. (original paper size).



Figure 10
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1988. Wove paper, ink; 17/25, 10 (total); sheet: 23 1/2 × 31 1/2 in. (59.69 × 80.01 cm), framed: 31 1/2 × 39 1/2 × 1 1/2 in. (80.01 × 100.33 × 3.81 cm).

14

In the essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag argues that the valorization of "bad taste" was a strategic choice of many gay men: "Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense (52)." In note 54, she argues: "The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste." Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* XXXI (Fall 1964): 515–30. Reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1986), 291.

in the nascent pop movement, with all of its associations with life outside the gallery system, appropriation from the media, and embrace of questionable "taste."¹⁴

IV. Categorical Distinctions

O'Brien has built an art practice in a dialogue with the span of twentieth-century art movements, hovering at significant points along the trajectory. Those stops are significant: In the three bodies of works discussed here, by no means the full extent of his oeuvre, we have seen the artist engage with that which is often excluded from high or academic art discourse, whether as an object or as audience. O'Brien has unwittingly found a link between two movements that bracket modernism—the *art brut* or outsider art of early modernism, and minimalism, which offered a clean break with modernist art conventions. Both movements devalue the skilled hand of the academically trained artist though they diverge in their treatment of non-normative, or different, bodies. Both outsider art and minimalism relate the art object to difference—on the one hand, by intentionally calling attention to the non-normative status of the object's maker, and on the other, via a tacit refusal to recognize differences among the object's viewers.

Difference is not a static status, however. Throughout history, non-normative categories have both arisen and dissipated, inflecting the reception of cultural works far beyond the moment of their arising.

Wallis, in his essay on late-modernist minimalism and its modes of masculinity, begins his discussion at the earliest stages of modernism: "For instance, the defining of madness in the nineteenth century, through a whole regime of texts and representations, created a situation whereby insane people were treated differently in all contact with society; previously such a position had not existed. This capacity to define new subject positions through the application of such disciplinary measures also holds the promise that old or oppressive positions can be challenged or overturned."¹⁵

Soon after "insane" became a recognizable diagnosis, the art of the insane burgeoned into an aesthetic category of its own, and the art produced by psychiatric subjects in the early modern period stood as a model of avant-garde, anti-academic practice—exemplifying the rejection of academicism, formal training, and even conscious thought. Although other art movements have drawn upon a notion of unconscious creativity, most famously abstract expressionism, O'Brien has distanced himself from that mode of creation with its macho connotations and mythologies of freedom. Rather than ally himself with American expressionists—although there are some formal and technical affinities in

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Wallis, "Power, Gender, and Abstraction,"
100–01.



Plate 13
Untitled, 2011



Plate 14
Untitled, 2010

some of the works—O'Brien chooses to return, full circle, to early modern notions of anticerebral, expressionist art, again evidenced by his work with the developmentally disabled.

Similarly, in ceramics, O'Brien incorporates a model of difference by creating artworks whose most immediate references, when apparent, have historically been excluded from the realm of high art—namely ceramic vessels and other utilitarian objects, as well as "ethnographic" and ornamental objects. O'Brien underscores how the relegation of these often anonymous objects to the realm of craft excludes the makers, as well as the objects, from serious participation in the realm of visual art production. Although these forms may exercise some influence on high-art practice and many have been redeemed as "art," the authors of utilitarian and ornamental objects—mostly women and people of color—are rarely acknowledged individually in the history of modern aesthetics.

As the modern period ended in the 1960s, minimalism ushered in the "specific object" in place of the "autonomous art object." Although this important aesthetic shift was a break with modernism, minimalism's expulsion of ornament and decoration, and mimicking of industrial production, became equated with the inhuman. O'Brien's metal sculptures at once take up the formal elements of minimalism—reduction, repetition, modular application of color—and abandon its signature grid, refusing to be contained by its normalizing and flattening boundaries. Instead, his sculptures bear all-too-human welding marks and organize the modular forms in ways that mimic movement and kineticism. They offer the audience a view through and around them, underscoring the interiority of the object and, by implication, the interiority of the viewer (in other words, the things that make each viewer distinct). In O'Brien's work, difference in modular repetition replaces repetitive sameness. The hand replaces the machine; movement replaces immobility.

"Happiness for me is when the body is moving," says O'Brien, citing both the necessity of composing art objects with his body and the idea that art for him is also an emotive process, a path toward emotional fulfillment, which he also describes as a spiritual quest. Art for O'Brien then is both an aesthetic and kinesthetic exercise whose function is not necessarily to produce beauty but to help maintain balance in one's inner life—the art objects then become metaphysical markers whose physical and formal structures evince that important relationship between external art output and internal equilibrium. Just as the metal sculptures create interior and exterior spaces through positive and negative shapes, the ceramics equally exhibit interiority and

Plate 15
Untitled, 2008



exteriority—sometimes due to their collage-like construction, often by simply being modeled after vessels—and even his drawings depend structurally upon an underside or interior that is invisible.

Thus, the very construction of O'Brien's objects, their rhythmic gestural immediacy and meditative repetition, illustrate their functionality as an exercise in care for oneself and the liberation of the will. The transcendental element of his work avoids notions of the sublime, as well as symbolism and iconography, where the burden of spiritual content generally lies. This is one of O'Brien's major innovations:

to imbue a body of mostly abstract work with a sense of metaphysics without resorting to cliché. The metaphysical content is mostly imparted by his working process—one in which the elements of his objects come together via incantatory bodily gestures.

The repetitive gestures also suture the multiple elements that compose an O'Brien art object. This is best seen in a body of work not yet mentioned in this essay: O'Brien's monochrome paintings, which generally are less paintings per se and more assemblages coated in a thick varnish of one color, or of color and glitter. These assemblages often consist of multiple objects, such as strips of cardboard that are dipped in paint and/or wrapped in string—again in a repetitive, almost mummifying gesture—and then adhered to the canvas. The entire arrangement is then overpainted in a unifying way so that the texture of the objects remains visible, although the types of objects are not always recognizable. The altar-like installation *Untitled* (2008) (plate 15) is a tour de force of this technique, incorporating drawings, ceramics, and found objects in a work that exists as a monochrome yet demonstrates formal and gestural excess. In this, and other similar works, O'Brien absorbs disparate elements into the language of painting, achieving an inclusive, democratic state in which there are no hierarchies of objects or forms. *Untitled* exists somewhere between art object and spiritual site.

Though O'Brien succeeded in creating a democratic artwork he continues to produce at an incredibly fecund pace. Perhaps it's because all of his art objects, no matter how pedestrian or craft-like, become de facto "art" in the space of the museum or gallery. Thus the inclusive gesture that O'Brien enacts in bringing the objects together is negated in their sublimation into the art world, where they are separated from their humble roots. But there is one egalitarian space left where the objects are both art and cathectic objects. "The studio is the place where a world is created," says the artist. In the studio, he can labor under the premise of equal access to objects and a harmonious transformation of all materials. Again, when O'Brien must create work outside his studio, he does so in places where there are no skill barriers and anyone can make any kind of work of art. These modes of working belie an instinctive resistance to modernism's insistence on the autonomous object—one removed from the social world in production and in experience. Thus, although O'Brien's work harkens back to the modernist grid or the unconscious gesture, the terms are decidedly post-modern, rejecting modernism's historical associations with masculine and Eurocentric privilege, whether true or not. In other words, O'Brien's practice of inclusivity produces a democracy every day. ■