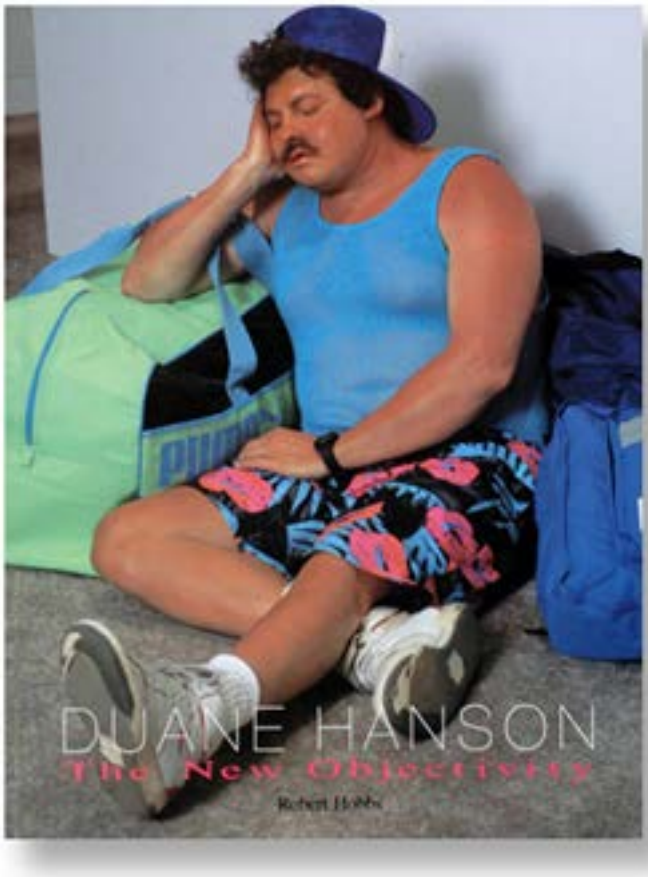



*Duane Hanson: The New Objectivity*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Gallery & Museum, 1991 [Distributed by University of Washington Press]; pp. 5-15+52.

# DUANE HANSON
## The New Objectivity

Robert Hobbs

It has been common critical and art historical practice to view Duane Hanson's sculpture as part of a reactionary realist wave that appeared in the late 1960s. Although critic Joseph Masheck in his essay "Verist Sculpture: Hanson and De Andrea" found that "Neo- or New Realism touches on Pop concerns but has a blunter, more brutal thrust,"[1] he describes this movement as basically diverging from the then-current dogma concerning abstract avant garde art: "Confidently anti-intellectual, even populist, it sees abstract art and the criticism that serves it as a sort of . . . folly. Abstraction has been attacked many times before, but never as comprehensively." Similarly art historian Martin Bush characterizes Hanson as an artist who goes outside the strictures of the avant garde in order to appeal to life itself:

> Hanson developed his new approach during the mid-sixties when he tired of high art and sought a new way for contemporary artists to capture the public's imagination, just as artists had done during the Renaissance when crowds gathered to see a new Michelangelo or Raphael.[2]

Although both Masheck and Bush hope to create a proper setting for New Realist art in general and Duane Hanson in particular, they do not need to take him outside the realm of the avant garde.

Differing from Masheck and Bush, Gregory Battcock, who became known for a series of critical anthologies that include *Minimal Art* (1968) and *Super Realism* (1975), suggests that New Realism may not be simply a refutation of avant garde principles but in fact may continue to explore aspects of it.[3] His firm grounding in Minimalism led him to posit a basis for New Realism in E.C. Goossen's 1968 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "The Art of the Real" which featured Minimalists Carl Andre and Ellsworth Kelly as well as the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman. Battcock notes that Goossen's "The Art of the Real" had to do with "the verifiable, physical properties of art objects . . . with realistic, as opposed to illusionistic *properties*."[4] He almost enigmatically suggests that just as Minimalism created a "crisis in criticism" by avoiding content so "the new Super Realist movement will not automatically result in a return to a criticism of interpretation, although [he admits] such a step within the field of criticism and aesthetics seems inevitable."[5] In this passage Battcock

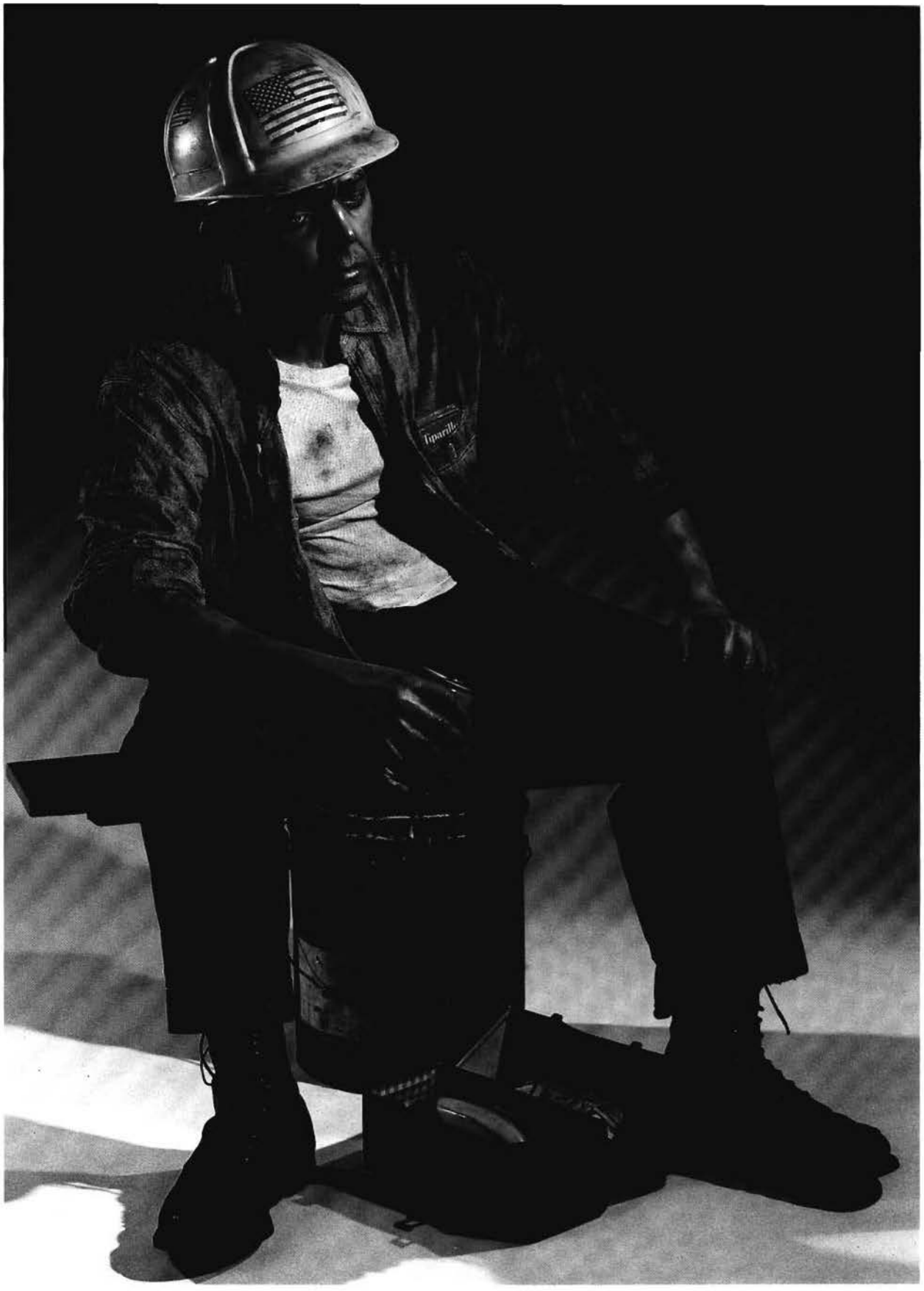
Duane Hanson, *Self-Portrait with Model*, 1979, lifesized polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories. (Photo Credit: D. James Dee)

first implies a greater critical role for New Realism as an inversion of Minimalism and then partially withdraws the claim that this art is truly radical by pointing out that it ultimately will result in the old hegemony of a content based art. Battcock's tentative step toward an understanding of the radical nature of New Realism is significant because it indicates that the supposed death of the avant garde signified by this style may actually constitute a misunderstanding of historical events as well as a failure to comprehend the radical nature of the new illusionist art.

Sometimes a severe critique of a style can provide important insights to its special character. Such is the case with Michael Fried's analysis of Minimalism, which he regards as little more than a surrogate form of realism, a type of theatrical experience inimical to High Modernist art. When Fried wrote "Art and Objecthood" which was first published in 1967 in the June issue of *Artforum* and later reprinted in Battcock's *Minimal Art*, he was intent on pointing out the inherent contradictions in Minimalism or "literalist art," as he termed it, which threatened the High Modernist pretentions of Color Field painting. Fried championed this latter trend as a qualitative endeavor in which the essence of art is conceived as a virtual surface so that "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest."[6] In his effort to denigrate Minimalism as mere theater, Fried pointed out that the viewing of this art involves a period of duration during which the observer becomes part of an interactive process in which the art, a mere stage prop, becomes a surrogate being. "I am suggesting, then," Fried wrote, "that the kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice."[7] He regards this interactive process as a theatrical effect and refers to the stage presence of the literalist objects created by the Minimalists. The space created is the actual space of everyday life and not the virtual space of the High Modernist painting he wished to uphold. He regarded Minimalist art as little more than a vanguard aberration because it did not attain the virtual, idealistic, almost sacred space of High Modernist painting and instead accorded art no more privileged a status than an inert object. While High Modernism is an elitist vanguard, Minimalism is a democratic one in its disregard of art's privileged position. Although Fried does not pursue in this essay the anthropomorphic aspect of Minimalism beyond indicating his belief that it is a regressive tendency that Minimalists have not yet expunged from their work, his critique has important ramifications for understanding the actual space of some New Realist sculpture and in particular Duane Hanson's art which is involved with a stage presence and actual space similar to Minimalist art. The only Realist who has heretofore been associated with

COLORPLATES ARE PRESENTED IN CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE.

Duane Hanson, *Hard Hat*, 1970, lifesized polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Collection: Sydney and Frances Lewis, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



Minimalism is Chuck Close who makes portraits of enlarged snapshots, and not of people per se, and emphasizes the actual space of the photograph over the virtual presence of Modernist painting. Similar to the Minimalists, Close perpetuates a residual anthropomorphism.

While Fried thought the Minimalists' relationship to human beings was a regressive tendency that caused their art to be no more than statuary, residual anthropomorphism was apparently not disdained by Minimalists Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith who were all concerned with the scale of the people looking at their work. Morris and Smith even made the quality of the anthropomorphic other a *modus operandi* of the human scale and of the hollow forms making up *Column* and *Die* respectively.[8] When *Column* was first shown, it was actually a stage prop. Morris stood upright in it for 3 minutes and 30 seconds before tipping it on its side where he remained in it for another 3 minutes and 30 seconds before the curtain came down on this brief performance. Tony Smith's *Die*, a six foot cube, confronts viewers with a hollow box of human height that is slightly wider than a figure with outstretched arms. It effectively obstructs one's view over it, and its hollowness makes it appear a mysterious other, a repository of the unknown.

Also included in Battcock's anthology *Minimalism* is Barbara Rose's article "ABC Art" which was originally published in 1965 in *Art in America*. This essay serves more than any other piece to canonize Minimalism. An analysis of its approach to Minimalism is an important and necessary step in our discussion of the connections between Minimalism and the New Realism of Duane Hanson. Since Barbara Rose was then married to the painter Frank Stella who was himself sympathetic to the Minimalist sensibility and friendly with important sculptors working in this vein, including Carl Andre and Robert Morris, she was in an excellent position to describe this style from the artists' point of view. Minimalism, which refers primarily to abstract sculpture made after 1960, is notable for its emphasis on geometry, a lack of detail, an industrial look, and blurred distinctions between art and non-art. Since Rose was privy to studio conversations, she was familiar with the rhetoric of the Minimalists, particularly their sincere interest in considering the traditional pejoratives blank, vacant, hollow, boring, and inert as approbations. At the beginning of her essay, she noted:

> Today we are feeling the impact of their [Kasimir Malevich's and Marcel Duchamp's] decisions in an art whose blank, neutral, mechanical impersonality contrasts so violently with the romantic, biographical Abstract Expressionist style which preceded it that spectators are chilled by its apparent lack of feeling or content.[9]

Duane Hanson, *Young Shopper*, 1973, lifesized polyester and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Private Collection.

The Minimalists embraced a style of "blank, neutral, mechanical impersonality" because it challenged the traditional limits of sculpture by making it resemble inert objects.

In "ABC Art" Rose draws an intriguing parallel between Minimalism and the French objective New Novel, a parallel that will have an important bearing on our understanding of Hanson's sources, as we shall see later in the essay. As an epigram to the section entitled "Art as Concrete Object," she includes Alain Robbe-Grillet's Zen-like testimony on the primacy of being:

> Now the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. It simply is. In place of this universe of "meanings" (psychological, social, functional), one should try to construct a more solid, more immediate world. So that first of all it will be through their presence that objects and gestures will impose themselves, and so that this presence continues thereafter to dominate, beyond any theory of explication that might attempt to enclose them in any sort of sentimental, sociological, Freudian, metaphysical, or any other system of reference.[10]

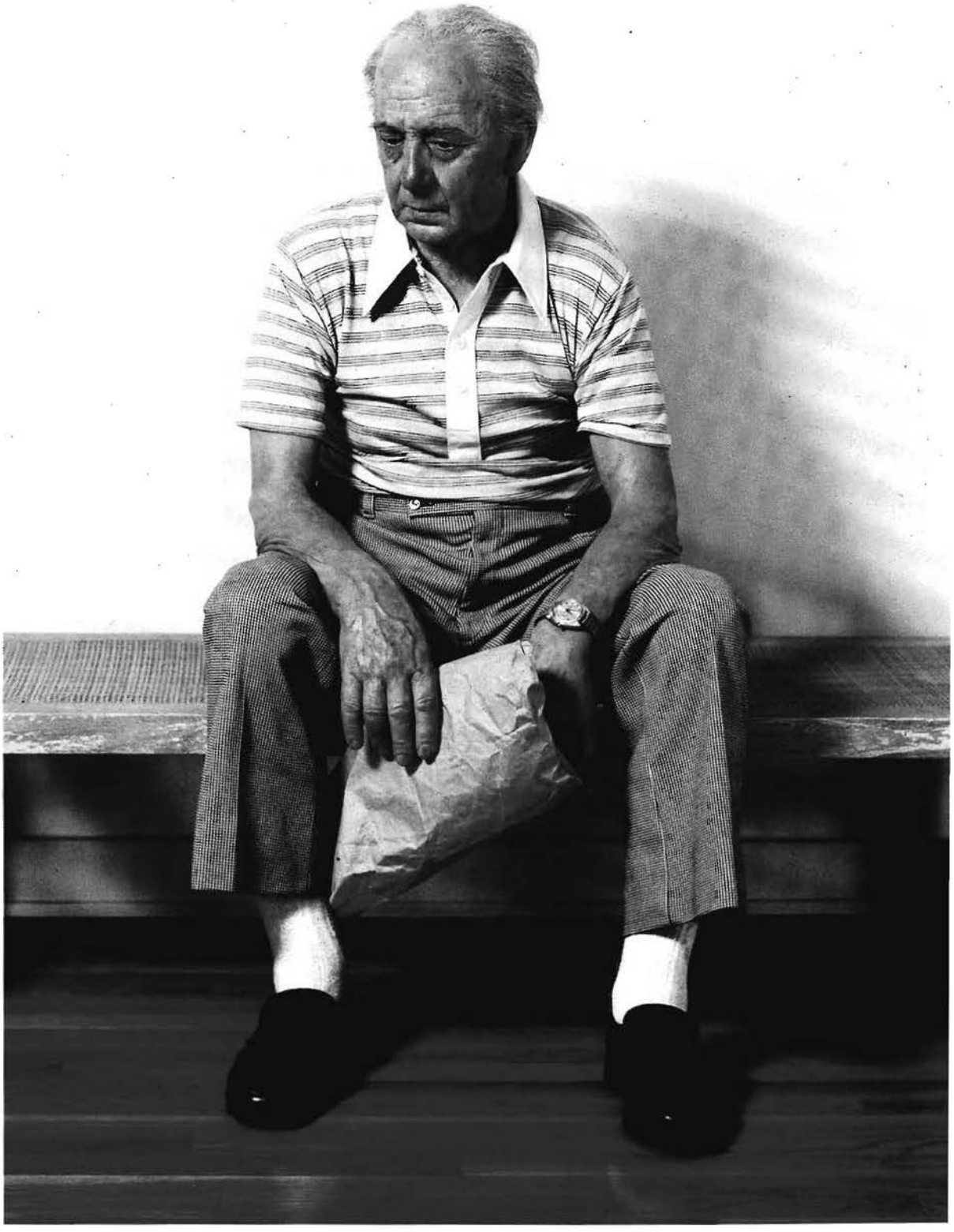
Duane Hanson, *Photographer*, 1978, lifesized polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Collection: Jesse N. Karp, New York.

This passage was taken from Robbe-Grillet's theoretical essay "Une voie pour le roman futur" (1956) that was translated into English for publication in the third issue of *The Evergreen Review* (1957).[11] Later it was included in the Grove Press anthology of Robbe-Grillet's writings entitled *For a New Novel: Essays on Fictlon* (1965).[12]Robbe-Grillet's essay was thus available in English to American avant garde audiences who read *The Evergreen Review* and its affiliated Grove Press publications. In the late fifties Grove Press made a concerted effort to publish English translations of Robbe-Grillet's novels. The following titles and dates for the French publications followed by the Grove Press editions give an idea of this author's popularity in the United States: *The Voyeur* (French edition 1955, English edition 1958), *Jealousy* (French 1957, English 1959), *In the Labyrinth* (French 1959, English 1960), and *Last Year at Marienbad* (French 1961, English 1962). Because of the success of these books, *The Erasers* was also published in a Grove Edition but it was published in 1964, eleven years after it first appeared in French. Not only were these books published in cloth editions but they were also available in paperback, so they evidently appealed to a large audience. Considering the availability in English of Robbe-Grillet's books, it is surprising that Barbara Rose undertook her own translation of the passage cited above and made the effort to point out that even though the author's ideas formed intriguing parallels to Minimalism, they were not sources for this style.

"Curiously," Rose comments, "it is perhaps in the theory of the French objective novel that one most closely approaches the attitude of



Duane Hanson, *Man on Bench*, 1977-78, lifesized polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Collection: Richard and Gloria Anderson, Kansas.



many of the artists I've been talking about. I am convinced that this is sheer coincidence, since I have no reason to believe there has been any specific point of contact."[13] In place of Robbe-Grillet, Rose suggests Ludwig Josef Johann Wittenstein because she knew that a number of Minimalists had actually read his work.[14] In 1965 it may have seemed that the Minimalists would have had to have read Robbe-Grillet in order to have been familiar with ideas historically ascribed to him. Our present understanding of the then-important intellectual currents would cause us to be surprised if these artists had not heard of Robbe-Grillet and his ideas, particularly when one considers the relatively small size of the New York avant garde at that time and the intense interests Minimalists had in new ideas. One might suspect that even in the 1960s American artists were careful to avoid admitting, at least publicly, French ideas formative to their work. Since New York replaced Paris as the international capital of art after World War II, there was evidently a need in the 1960s to separate American art from recent French developments: therefore American art might have sources in Wittenstein, but France was still too close and too much a threat to New York's newly established hegemony.

To comprehend the wide-spread dissemination of Robbe-Grillet's ideas that affected Minimalism, and later New Realism, and Photo-Realism, one need only consider Susan Sontag's famous article of 1964 "Against Interpretation" which makes overt references to Robbe-Grillet as well as to a number of other writers, critics, filmmakers, and painters.[15] In addition, Sontag's essay relies on Robbe-Grillet's basic outlook. In this essay Sontag makes the point that interpretation robs art of its immediacy and power. Her following statement is a pendant to the Robbe-Grillet passage that Barbara Rose cited in "ABC Art."

> In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to the content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.[16]

At the end of the essay, she – like Robbe-Grillet – opts for a Zen appreciation of the here and now:

> The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.[17]

Although Minimalism is an art that attempts to avoid the limitations of meaning, Sontag does not mention this style in her essay: her interests in the article are confined primarily to film and literature. But



Duane Hanson, *Dockman*, 1979, lifesized polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Collection: Yellow Freight System Inc. (Photo Credit: Murray Spitzer)

even though she does not refer to Minimalism, her emphasis on Robbe-Grillet's ideas that so clearly anticipate Minimalism's desire to avoid content and interpretation indicates a broad-based sensibility at work in the 1960s, a sensibility that is present in the art that some New Realists and Photo-Realists began to create later in the decade. Sontag's essay testifies to Robbe-Grillet's importance in the United States and represents one way that his ideas were being disseminated.

The purpose of the discussion has thus far been to question the supposed reactionary nature of New Realist art in order to suggest that it has affinities with Minimalism, to indicate that Minimalism might have had a source in the objective new novel outlined by Robbe-Grillet, and to point to the general interest in objectivity and realism that developed out of Robbe-Grillet's writing and that was evident first in Minimalist art and in Sontag's seminal essay "Against Interpretation," and later became important in New Realist art. Throughout this discussion I have implied that the emphasis on the here and now may have developed out of Zen, which became popular in this country in the 1950s as an indirect result of contacts with Japan that developed after World War II. With the emphasis on enlightenment achieved through an acceptance of prosaics, Zen helped to initiate in the United States a reappraisal of reality that affected the Minimalists in their choice of industrial materials and the New Realists in their use of photographs and life castings. Zen, together with the French objective novel and the post-war explosion of American industry and consumerism, can be considered an important source for Minimalism and New Realism. These factors formed an intellectual, aesthetic, and socio-economic backdrop for Duane Hanson's sculpture.

In his sculpture Hanson moved rapidly in the late 1960s from an art of social conscience to gently satirical works extolling the mundane and everyday before he began appreciating realism for its own sake. In his art he blurred differences between art and life in a manner akin to the Minimalists. Although it would be wonderful to say that Hanson transformed Minimalism into its diametrical opposite New Realism, such an inversion is too simple. It is also inconsistent with actual events, with the artist's aspirations, and with his allegiances to the perceived opposing camp. In spite of his quest for a mimetic fidelity that ultimately results in tough-minded objectivity, Hanson has always been uncomfortable with the distance that the Minimalists among others maintain with their work. Even though he may strive in his mature works for objectivity, he is passionate about his subject. One might say that his passion in works beginning in 1973, however, is limited to his choice of subject matter. Once a subject is chosen, he becomes a detached yet intense observer.

Duane Hanson, *Fundraiser*, 1980, lifesized polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories. Collection: Paul and Camille Oliver-Hoffman. (Photo Credit: Murray Spitzer)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# N O T E S

[1]Joseph Masheck, "Verist Sculpture," *Art in America* 60 (November 1972), 90.

[2]Martin H. Bush, *Duane Hanson* (Wichita: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, October 6, 1976-November 11, 1977), 10-11. This catalogue for Hanson's first retrospective exhibition was shown at University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Des Moines Art Center, University Art Museum/ Berkeley, Portland Art Museum, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Although Bush segregates Hanson from vanguard art, he provides an important first thorough assessment of the artist's work and includes a number of the artist's statements taken from his own interviews.

[3]Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), xxii.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Battcock (ed.) *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 145.

[7]Ibid., 129.

[8]Tony Smith's *Die* was created in 1962 in steel. It belongs to the artist's estate.

[9]*Minimal Art*, 274-275.

[10]Ibid., 291-292.

[11]Entitled "A Fresh Start for Fiction" the essay has been republished in *Evergreen Review Reader: A Ten-Year Anthology*, edited by Barney Rossat (Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books, 1968), 57-59. The text was translated by Richard Howard.

[12]*For a New Novel* was translated by Richard Howard.

[13]*Minimal Art*, 292.

[14]Ibid.

[15]"Against Interpretation" was originally published in *The Evergreen Review* in 1964. See *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 95-104.

[16]Ibid., 99.

[17]Ibid., 104.

[18]Kirk Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 31.

[19]*Evergreen Review Reader*, 59.

[20]The terms virtual versus actual space are taken from Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" discussed earlier in this essay.

[21]Quoted in Fried's "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art*, 125.

[22]Bush, *Sculptures by Duane Hanson* (Wichita: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1985), 15.