

## Attitude is everything and everything hurts - interview with Alan Uglow - Interview

David Carrier

By refusing to have a career or to make history, [Chet Baker~ managed to do both, and in the end achieved that rarest of prizes. He had a life in the arts . . . in real time.

Dave Hickey, "Chet Baker: A Life in the Arts," 1991

In a 1965 essay, "Minimal Art," the philosopher Richard Wollheim described works of art that either are "to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves" or else exhibit differentiation which "comes not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like . . . the factory."|1~ As Rosalind Krauss suggests, commenting on this passage, it was natural then to move toward a phenomenological analysis: such artworks, like everyday objects, "simply exist within the user's own time; their being consists in the temporal open-endedness of their use; they share in the extended flow of duration."|2~ Some critics loved the radicality of this breaking of the barriers between art and nonart. Michael Fried, who hated Minimalism's theatrical appeal to the spectator's presence, rejected any such "sensibility or mode of being . . . corrupted or perverted by theater." No doubt "we are all literalists most or all of our lives," he added, but "presentness is grace."|3~ Fried seems to have been rejecting Minimalism in the name of a quasi-theological vision. Perhaps the ideal of the pure encounter between the spectator and the Minimalist artwork, far from being liberating, resembled what was problematic in '60s radicalism: "Minimalism . . . might well be described as perpetuating a kind of cultural terrorism, forcing viewers into the role of victim."|4~ The politics of an art of pure perception are complicated.

When Alan Uglow arrived in New York, in 1969, these concerns were much debated. Today, however, when the original promise of Minimalism belongs to what has become a pretty distant world, we need to find new ways to describe his painting. Often art writers become too academic. As Uglow said to me, "Maybe some people are making footnotes where they're not needed, where they're not necessary." When we talked late this summer, I sought to stave off bookishness. Aiming to avoid the dramatic rhythms or the historical or ideological or philosophical pigeonholing of critical writing, I wanted to stay as close as possible to the surface of the works we were looking at together.

ALAN UGLOW: These recent paintings are called "Standards." They have a uniform nature.

DAVID CARRIER: Uniform because you always subdivide your surface the same way?

AU: No, but I'm playing with that idea. I'm interested in essentials, in getting rid of lots of stuff, I find that very freeing psychologically. Basically I'm trying to make the pieces mundane or ordinary in a certain way. The frame opens the whole idea up and closes it at the same time. My work has changed, but some things have remained consistent, like this idea of "open" and "closed." At the moment, which is a closing-off period, I'm lifting from myself a lot; this work derives from my previous work. But I really question everything.

DC: What were you doing when you began, around 1965?

AU: I was interested in the frame and the edge. I was looking at how Giacometti set a figure in space, just indicating the edge. Sometimes he'd draw a frame, and I always wanted to see if what was outside was also what kept the frame together somehow. I learned from Giacometti a certain kind of meanness I'd like to have in my work. Not in a stingy kind of way, but a poverty--without taking a lot of space, his work has incredible presence. His figure creates a loaded situation. That's why it's always interesting for me to imagine having a Giacometti with a painting of Barnett Newman's. These are essentials I too would like to achieve.

DC: Wasn't the American art you saw in London in the late '50s opposed to Giacometti's?

AU: But one doesn't follow those kinds of restrictions. Ideological imperatives aren't good for artists. I don't see how anyone could really say if you like Giacometti you can't like Newman. Work should be free to do what it wants and go where it wants.

DC: Do you feel doubt?

AU: Constant doubt! You want to make good paintings, so things work. But that is a direct result of hesitation, reluctance, paranoia. My paintings involve an absolute need to complete an act--and putting up work in the gallery is like an action--to see it through from beginning to end. I'm interested in looking at something over a period of time and seeing how it moves, because paintings move, no matter how you try to make them sit. I need to find some way to keep the thing open and revolving in this way.

DC: In that way, is your art like an action?

AU: Most of this stuff is done on the run, under high tension. It's stealing time. These are things and ideas for now, that's for sure. They depend on the past and the present--the future is unwritten.

DC: But the viewer can't know all that, not right off?

AU: Sometimes people just walk into the gallery and take one look. You could pass these paintings and not pay them any attention. There's something about them that will irritate people--they'll be too much this way, or not enough of that. This takes us into the realm of the ordinary, or--

DC: Can I say the word I've been blocking the whole time I've been here?

AU: Let's hear it.

DC: "Beauty." They're beautiful. Now I've really put my foot in it. Calling you a formalist would be nothing in comparison.

AU: Now we've hit rock bottom.

DC: But the rightness--I mean the sense of proportion, the elegance of these works--isn't that beautiful?

AU: I was hoping they wouldn't be that way. I want the paint to get up on that thing in one piece. There are certain precautions you have to take. The thing has to be a clean machine. You want the idea to get out there with no mess, no fuss. Sparseness is another way of putting it; meanly spare. Unfortunately it doesn't turn out that way all the time. Beauty isn't really a bad word, but it's not the whole story. I'm not opposed to the utilitarian, but I'm old enough not to believe in the utopian.

DC: You have to be thinking about the gallery space, don't you, when you are working here in your studio?

AU: It has windows in the front like my studio, and a short wall. It's a little awkward. But it doesn't really matter. You move things around in the studio to look at them. Sometimes you get distracted. The floor piece stands somewhere away from the wall.

DC: The floor piece looks like an industrial fabrication, not a finely worked artwork. But it stands on the floor, so why not say "sculpture"? Is "sculpture" a forbidden word?

AU: I don't know if I like the word. This piece wasn't sculpted, it was constructed. It's called Sudkurve--an object that has meanings in terms of the football ground. They use it for advertising, it's a kind of display. In the end I'm just trying to make the work really easy somehow, which it never is. It's always hard to get to the point, and the work has to look like it's just happened. I like the idea of what you see is what you get, which is an old axiom, but when the hat fits, wear it.

DC: You're always compared to Robert Ryman and Brice Marden.

AU: I know, and I don't know why, though it's not bad company. But I hope I've slipped through that net. I have to say, in the end the people who make the work have made all the decisions already, and anything that happens afterwards in print is written on the wind, to a certain degree. Which isn't to put down writing.

DC: You want viewers to see this object for itself, here and now?

AU: How else! It's better than labeling. When you go back to the painting you can still see something else for the first time. Anyway, why should one want to carry a lot of baggage around? We all receive the same information. I think there's a certain laziness here, and some writers come on like mind police. There's a device that keeps a vehicle from going beyond a certain speed--governors, they call them. Think of the British phrase "all right gov." It's funny how the painting becomes a test. It's testing the attempt to get it up there, and testing back once it gets there.

I'm never sure about interviews. I always think of things after interviews. That's when it gets interesting.

DC: The interview is a kind of fiction?

AU: That sounds like the start of a whole other interview.

1. Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," 1956, reprinted in his *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures*, London: Allen Lane, 1973, p. 101.
2. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York: The Viking Press, 1977, p. 198.
3. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* V no. 10, Summer 1967, p. 23.
4. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 no. 5, January 1990, p. 49.

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