



The Philosophy of Minimalism in Art and Life: Exploring Minimalism as Both an Artistic Movement and a Lifestyle Philosophy

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Abstract

This article examines minimalism as a dual phenomenon both as an influential artistic movement of the mid-20th century and as a contemporary lifestyle philosophy that advocates simplification and intentionality. Through a critical analysis of key minimalist artists including Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, and Sol LeWitt, alongside contemporary minimalist lifestyle advocates, this research explores the philosophical underpinnings that connect these seemingly disparate manifestations. The study reveals how minimalism in both domains shares fundamental principles: reduction to essentials, emphasis on negative space, rejection of excess, and the pursuit of meaning through simplicity. Drawing on phenomenological frameworks and theories of aesthetic experience, this article suggests that minimalism represents more than a stylistic approach or organizational method; it constitutes a coherent philosophical stance toward existence that responds to the complexities and excesses of modern consumer society. Through this dual investigation, the research illuminates how minimalist principles transcend disciplinary boundaries to offer a unified approach to both creating and living.

Keywords: - Minimalism, Minimal Art, Simple Living, Material Culture, Aesthetic Experience, Phenomenology, Intentionality, Consumer Culture

Introduction

"*Less is more*," proclaimed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, articulating a principle that would come to define one of the most influential artistic and cultural movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. Minimalism, in its varied manifestations, represents a radical response to excess, complexity, and ornamentation. As an artistic movement that emerged in the 1960s, minimalism rejected representative art and emotional expression in favor of geometric abstraction and industrial materials. Simultaneously, as a philosophy of living, minimalism challenges the consumerist ethos of late capitalism, advocating for intentional simplification and the reduction of material possessions.

This research investigates minimalism's dual nature as both an artistic movement and a lifestyle philosophy exploring the connective philosophical threads that unite these seemingly distinct manifestations. Through close examination of key artists, artworks, and lifestyle practitioners, this article seeks to identify the core principles that define minimalism across domains and to understand how these principles constitute a coherent philosophical stance toward existence.

The significance of this investigation lies in its integrative approach. While scholars have extensively studied minimalist art in isolation and others have examined the minimalist lifestyle movement, fewer have

considered how these expressions might be understood as manifestations of a unified philosophical perspective. This research addresses this gap, considering how minimalism articulates a response to modernity across multiple domains of human experience.

At its foundation, this inquiry poses several essential questions: What philosophical principles unite minimalism in art and life? How does minimalism, in both contexts, respond to the conditions of modern existence? And what might the popularity of minimalism in contemporary culture reveal about current societal concerns and aspirations?

Historical Context: Minimalism as an Artistic Movement

Origins and Development

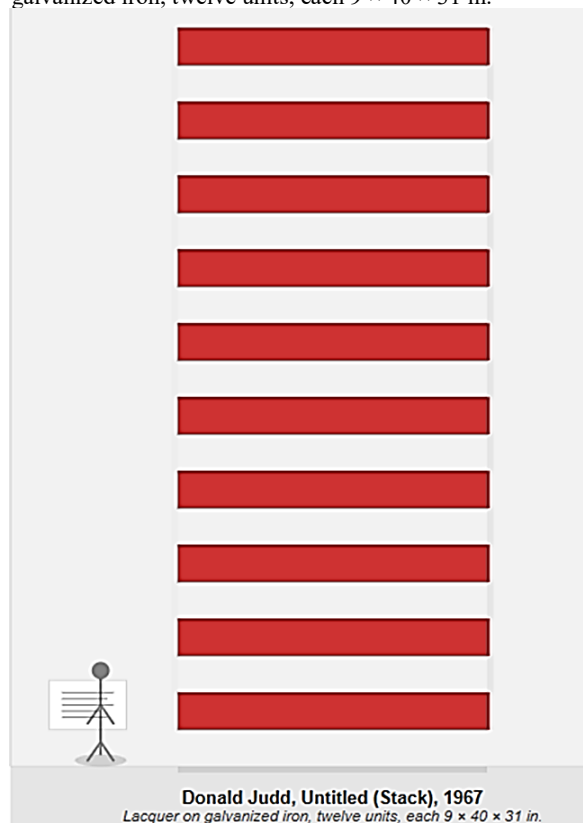
Minimalism emerged as a distinct artistic movement in the United States during the 1960s, though its roots can be traced to earlier Constructivist, De Stijl, and Bauhaus movements. (Foster 1996) As a reaction against the emotionally charged gestures of Abstract Expressionism, minimalist artists embraced geometric simplicity, industrial materials, and serial forms. The term "minimalism" itself was initially used disparagingly by critics but was eventually embraced as an apt description of the movement's reductive aesthetic.

Donald Judd, one of minimalism's principal theorists and practitioners, rejected the term "minimalism" in favor of "specific objects." In his seminal 1965 essay, Judd argued that these new works existed as neither painting nor sculpture but rather as three-dimensional objects that engaged directly with space and the viewer. (Judd 1975) This emphasis on the relationship between object, space, and viewer would become central to minimalist philosophy.

Key Artists and Works

The pioneers of minimal art established a visual language characterized by geometric precision, industrial fabrication, and serial repetition. Donald Judd's wall-mounted "stacks" and floor-based "progressions" exemplified the movement's commitment to clarity and objecthood. His untitled works, often consisting of rectangular boxes arranged in mathematical sequences, eliminated any reference to the external world while emphasizing material presence and spatial relationships.

Fig.1: Donald Judd, Untitled (Stack), 1967. Lacquer on galvanized iron, twelve units, each 9 × 40 × 31 in.



The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Similarly, Sol LeWitt's wall drawings and open cubic structures explored systematic permutation and the relationship between concept and execution. LeWitt famously declared that "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art," highlighting the conceptual foundation of minimalism. (LeWitt 1967) His work often began with a set of instructions that could be executed by others, challenging traditional notions of artistic authorship and craftsmanship.

Agnes Martin's delicate grid paintings represent a more meditative approach to minimalism. Her hand-drawn horizontal and vertical lines create subtle, almost imperceptible grids that evoke natural landscapes and emotional states through minimal means. Martin's work demonstrates how minimalism could incorporate subjective experience while maintaining formal simplicity.

Other significant minimalist artists include Robert Morris, whose simple polyhedron forms altered viewers' perception of gallery spaces; Dan Flavin, whose fluorescent light installations transformed architectural environments through minimal intervention; and Carl Andre, whose floor-based metal plates invited viewers to experience sculpture through a new physical relationship.

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical underpinnings of minimalist art draw from phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception and embodiment. Minimalist works reject illusionism and representation, instead emphasizing the viewer's embodied experience of objects in real space and time. As art historian Michael Fried critically noted in his essay "Art and Objecthood," minimalist (or what he termed "literalist") art created a theatrical situation, in which the viewer's experience unfolded over time in relation to the object and its environment. (Fried 1967)

This phenomenological approach highlights several key philosophical principles that define minimalist art:

- Reduction to essentials: Eliminating unnecessary elements to focus on fundamental aspects of form, material, and space.
- Emphasis on presence: Rejecting representation in favor of the immediate, physical presence of the object.
- Seriality and repetition: Using systematic arrangements to highlight subtle variations and relationships.
- Viewer engagement: Acknowledging the viewer's bodily presence and perceptual experience as integral to the work.
- Industrial materials and processes: Embracing manufactured materials and fabrication techniques that eliminate the artist's hand.

These principles constituted not merely stylistic choices but a philosophical stance toward art-making that challenged traditional Western aesthetic hierarchies and emphasized the contingent, experiential nature of perception.

Minimalism as a Lifestyle Philosophy

Contemporary Development

While minimalist art flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, minimalism as a lifestyle philosophy gained significant cultural traction in the early 21st century. This development can be understood as a response to the excesses of consumer capitalism, environmental concerns, digital overwhelm, and the psychological toll of material abundance. Figures such as Marie Kondo, The Minimalists (Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus), and Leo Babauta have popularized various approaches to minimalist living through books, podcasts, documentaries, and online platforms.

This contemporary lifestyle movement emerged against the backdrop of what sociologist Juliet Schor terms "the cycle of work and spend" the pattern of increasing work hours to fund escalating consumption. (Schor 1992) Economic pressures, including the 2008 financial crisis, rising housing costs, and increasing student debt, further motivated many to reconsider their relationship with material possessions and consumer culture.

Core Principles

Despite variations in approach, the minimalist lifestyle movement adheres to several core principles that echo those found in minimalist art:

- Intentional reduction: Eliminating excess possessions, commitments, and distractions to focus on what individuals deem most valuable.
- Quality over quantity: Prioritizing fewer, higher-quality items over numerous, disposable ones.
- Functional aesthetics: Appreciating objects for their utility and essential forms rather than decorative elements.

- Negative space: Valuing empty space—both physical and temporal—as necessary for wellbeing.
- Conscious consumption: Making deliberate choices about acquisitions rather than consuming habitually or impulsively.

These principles manifest in practices such as decluttering, capsule wardrobes, tiny house living, digital minimalism, and financial minimalism. Each practice represents an attempt to apply minimalist philosophy to different domains of life.

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical underpinnings of lifestyle minimalism draw from multiple traditions, including Zen Buddhism, Stoicism, American Transcendentalism, and contemporary environmental ethics. These diverse influences converge on several key philosophical positions:

- Non-attachment: Drawing from Buddhist philosophy, many minimalists emphasize detachment from material possessions as a path to greater freedom and reduced suffering.
- Voluntary simplicity: Echoing Henry David Thoreau's experiments at Walden Pond, contemporary minimalists advocate for deliberate simplification as a means of "living deliberately." (Thoreau 1854)
- Sufficiency: Challenging the capitalist logic of endless growth and accumulation, minimalists propose that there exists a point of "enough" beyond which additional possessions diminish rather than enhance wellbeing.
- Attention economy: In response to the proliferation of digital distractions, minimalists like Cal Newport advocate for "digital minimalism" to reclaim attention and cognitive capabilities. (Newport 2019)
- Environmental consciousness: Many minimalists frame their choices within environmental ethics, arguing that reduced consumption constitutes an ethical response to ecological crisis.

These philosophical foundations position minimalism not merely as an aesthetic preference or organizational strategy but as an ethical stance toward existence in late capitalism.

Intersections: Philosophical Connections Between Artistic and Lifestyle Minimalism

Despite their different contexts and manifestations, minimalism in art and life share profound philosophical connections that illuminate minimalism as a coherent philosophical response to modernity.

Phenomenological Engagement

Both minimalist art and lifestyle emphasize direct, embodied experience. Minimalist artworks engage viewers in an immediate, physical relationship with objects in space, while lifestyle minimalism advocates for direct engagement with fewer, more meaningful possessions and experiences. In both domains, minimalism represents a phenomenological turn toward presence and away from representation or abstraction.

This shared phenomenological orientation is evident in Donald Judd's insistence that his works be experienced directly, without symbolic interpretation, and in Marie Kondo's emphasis on physically handling objects to determine their value through embodied response ("Does it spark joy?") (Kondo 2014). Both approaches privilege immediate, sensory engagement over intellectual or symbolic analysis.

Resistance to Excess

Minimalism in both contexts constitutes a critique of excess—whether the emotional excesses of Abstract Expressionism or the material excesses of consumer culture. This resistance operates not merely as negation but as an affirmative stance toward alternative values.

Art historian James Meyer distinguishes between "literal" and "critical" minimalism, with the latter functioning as cultural critique (Meyer 2001). Similarly, lifestyle minimalists like Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus frame their approach as resistance to consumerist values, positioning minimalism as "a tool to rid yourself of life's excess in favor of focusing on what's important." (Millburn and Nicodemus 2011)

Essence and Reduction

Both manifestations of minimalism employ strategic reduction to reveal essential qualities. Minimalist artists reduce forms to geometric fundamentals to highlight properties of material, light, and space. Lifestyle minimalists eliminate possessions to focus on core values and experiences deemed essential to wellbeing.

This pursuit of essence through reduction reflects philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of "unconcealment" (aletheia), in which truth emerges through the revealing of essential qualities. (Heidegger 1977)

Both artistic and lifestyle minimalism can be understood as practices of unconcealment, stripping away the non-essential to reveal fundamental truths about objects, spaces, and human experience.

The Value of Negative Space

Central to minimalism in both domains is the appreciation of negative space—the empty, unfilled areas that define and give meaning to what remains. In minimalist art, the gallery's white walls and empty floor space become integral to the work's impact. In minimalist living, empty shelves and uncluttered surfaces are not voids to be filled but positive elements of design and experience.

This valuation of negative space challenges Western tendencies toward *horror vacui* (fear of empty space) and reflects Eastern aesthetic traditions such as the Japanese concept of *ma*, which recognizes emptiness as essential to meaning and balance. (Pilgrim 1986) In both artistic and lifestyle contexts, minimalism repositions absence as presence and emptiness as fullness.

Ethical Dimensions

While minimalist art was not explicitly ethical in its initial formulation, both artistic and lifestyle minimalism have developed ethical dimensions. Contemporary interpretations of minimalist art highlight its implicit critique of commodity culture and spectacle. Meanwhile, lifestyle minimalism explicitly frames reduction and simplification as ethical responses to environmental crises, exploitative labor practices, and the psychological harms of consumerism.

Environmental philosopher Kate Soper's concept of "alternative hedonism" illuminates this ethical dimension, suggesting that minimalism represents not ascetic self-denial but an alternative conception of pleasure and flourishing based on "less tangible, less resource-intensive, and more time-consuming sources of satisfaction." (Soper 2008) This ethical stance positions minimalism as a form of resistance to the dominant consumerist conception of the good life.

Minimalism in the Digital Age

The digital revolution has transformed both artistic and lifestyle minimalism in significant ways, creating new challenges and possibilities for minimalist philosophy.

Digital Minimalist Art

Contemporary artists have extended minimalist principles into digital realms, creating works that employ algorithmic processes, pixel-based reduction, and virtual space. Artists like Casey Reas, Manfred Mohr, and Vera Molnár create digital compositions that echo the systematic approaches of LeWitt while exploring the unique possibilities of computational media.

These digital extensions of minimalism raise new philosophical questions about materiality, presence, and embodiment. When minimalist principles enter virtual space, how do they transform our understanding of object, viewer, and environment? The immaterial nature of digital works both challenges and extends minimalism's concern with physical presence and perceptual experience.

Digital Minimalism as Lifestyle

Simultaneously, the proliferation of digital technologies has spawned new forms of lifestyle minimalism focused specifically on managing digital consumption and presence. Computer scientist Cal Newport defines digital minimalism as "a philosophy that helps you question what digital communication tools (and behaviors surrounding these tools) add the most value to your life." (Newport 2019)

This approach applies minimalist principles of intentional reduction and focus on essentials to digital technology use, advocating practices such as digital decluttering, attention management, and selective technological adoption. Digital minimalism represents a response to what social psychologist Sherry Turkle terms "the tethered self" the condition of constant connection and fragmented attention created by digital devices. (Turkle 2011)

Shared Concerns: Attention and Presence

Digital minimalism in both art and lifestyle contexts shares a concern with attention and presence in an age of distraction. Minimalist digital artworks often create immersive experiences that require sustained attention, countering the fragmentation characteristic of digital media consumption. Similarly, lifestyle digital minimalism aims to restore focused attention through practices like digital sabbaths, single-tasking, and technology fasts.

These parallel developments suggest that minimalism continues to evolve as a response to contemporary conditions, adapting its core philosophical principles to address new forms of excess and distraction in the digital age.

Case Studies: Minimalism Across Boundaries

To further illuminate the philosophical connections between artistic and lifestyle minimalism, this section presents three case studies of figures whose work crosses the boundaries between these domains.

John Pawson: Architecture as Minimalist Philosophy

British architect John Pawson exemplifies the integration of minimalist art principles with lived minimalist philosophy. His architectural works, including the Nový Dvůr Monastery in the Czech Republic and the Calvin Klein flagship store in New York, apply rigorous reduction, emphasis on light and space, and material simplicity to create environments that affect inhabitants phenomenologically.

Pawson's approach extends beyond aesthetic style to constitute a philosophy of space and experience. As he writes, "Minimalism is not about emptiness for its own sake. It's about the quality of what's there." (Pawson 1996) His work demonstrates how minimalist principles can transform everyday experience through the designed environment, bridging artistic expression and lived philosophy.

Agnes Martin: Minimalism as Spiritual Practice

Although primarily known as a minimalist artist, Agnes Martin's approach to art-making constituted a holistic philosophy that extended to her lifestyle. Living in simple adobe structures in New Mexico, Martin embraced material simplicity while creating meticulously executed grid paintings that express transcendent qualities through minimal means.

Martin explicitly connected her artistic practice to spiritual and philosophical concerns, stating that her work was about "innocence of mind" and "perfect consciousness." (Martin 2005) Her integrated approach demonstrates how minimalist art and minimalist living can constitute a unified philosophical stance toward existence one that seeks transcendence through reduction and focused attention.

Marie Kondo: Aesthetic Philosophy in Everyday Life

While primarily recognized as a lifestyle consultant, Marie Kondo's approach to organization contains profound aesthetic and philosophical dimensions that connect to minimalist art. Her emphasis on spatial awareness, the relationship between objects, and the importance of negative space echoes minimalist artistic concerns.

Kondo's method transforms everyday domestic spaces into sites of aesthetic consideration and philosophical reflection. Her criterion of "spark joy" (*tokimeku* in Japanese) introduces subjective experience into minimalist practice while maintaining the core principle of reduction to essentials. In this way, Kondo translates minimalist aesthetic philosophy into practical everyday applications.

These case studies demonstrate how minimalism functions as a coherent philosophical approach that transcends the boundaries between art and life, aesthetics and ethics, theory and practice.

Critiques and Limitations

While minimalism offers compelling philosophical responses to excess and complexity, it is not without significant critiques and limitations that must be acknowledged.

Minimalism and Privilege

Perhaps the most substantial critique of minimalism, particularly in its lifestyle manifestation, concerns its relationship to privilege. The ability to choose simplicity presupposes having resources to simplify, leading critics to characterize minimalism as a luxury belief—a status symbol available primarily to the socioeconomically advantaged.

Sociologist Elizabeth Currid-Halkett notes that minimalism often functions as a form of "inconspicuous consumption" that signals cultural capital rather than challenging fundamental inequalities. (Currid-Halkett 2017) Similarly, in the art world, minimalism has been criticized for its institutional dependencies and market success, which seemingly contradict its reductive ethos.

These critiques highlight the need to consider minimalism within socioeconomic contexts and to distinguish between minimalism as aesthetic preference and minimalism as substantive philosophical stance.

Aesthetic Homogenization

Another significant critique concerns minimalism's potential for aesthetic homogenization. The global spread of minimalist design aesthetics white walls, simple forms, limited color palettes raises questions about cultural flattening and the erasure of local aesthetic traditions.

Design critic Kyle Chayka terms this phenomenon "AirSpace" the increasingly homogeneous aesthetic of global spaces influenced by digital platforms like Airbnb and Instagram.(Chayka 2016) This standardization potentially undermines minimalism's philosophical depth, reducing it to a reproducible style rather than an engaged response to specific conditions.

The Paradox of Minimalist Consumption

Lifestyle minimalism faces the paradox that it often generates new forms of consumption specialized minimalist products, organizational tools, and experiences marketed as "minimalist." This commercialization potentially undermines minimalism's critique of consumer culture, transforming philosophical stance into marketable lifestyle brand.

This paradox extends to minimalist art, which, despite its anti-commercial rhetoric, has been thoroughly absorbed into the art market and museum system. The high prices commanded by minimalist artworks raise questions about the movement's critical efficacy and relationship to the very systems of value it purported to challenge.

These critiques do not invalidate minimalism's philosophical contributions but rather highlight the tensions inherent in any philosophical stance that engages with contemporary capitalism while attempting to articulate alternatives.

Conclusion: Minimalism as Philosophical Response

This investigation has explored minimalism as both an artistic movement and a lifestyle philosophy, identifying the shared philosophical principles that unite these seemingly distinct manifestations. Through analysis of key artists, works, practices, and practitioners, this research reveals minimalism as a coherent philosophical response to the conditions of modernity particularly excess, complexity, and alienation.

The core philosophical principles that define minimalism across domains include:

- Reduction to essentials as a method of revelation and focus
- Emphasis on direct, embodied experience over representation
- Valuation of negative space as positive presence
- Resistance to excess as both aesthetic and ethical stance
- Attention to the relationship between object, space, and perceiver

H@kqn10\$zrF3AzThese principles constitute not merely stylistic preferences but a philosophical orientation toward existence that challenges dominant Western paradigms of accumulation, representation, and value.

The significance of minimalism as a philosophical response extends beyond its specific manifestations in art or lifestyle. As philosopher Albert Borgmann suggests, minimalism offers a "focal practice" that counters the "device paradigm" of technological modernity the tendency to treat objects and experiences as mere means rather than meaningful ends.(Borgmann 1984), By focusing attention on essential qualities and direct experience, minimalism potentially restores engagement with the material world and embodied existence.

As contemporary society faces accelerating complexity, environmental crisis, and digital fragmentation, minimalism's philosophical stance may offer valuable resources for reimagining relationships with objects, spaces, time, and attention. While acknowledging its limitations and contradictions, we might understand minimalism not as a fixed set of aesthetic rules but as an evolving philosophical practice that responds to the specific excesses of its historical moment.

In this light, minimalism represents not merely an artistic style or organizational method but a philosophical tradition that continues to evolve in dialogue with contemporary conditions offering resources for thinking and living differently in a world characterized by excess, distraction, and environmental precarity.

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