2008 First Place Great Works Analysis

A Critical Analysis Using Both Syntax and Diction to Create a Meaningful Essay

*Historical Context*

The birth of a great movement has to start with the birth of a great artist. Sol Lewitt was born to Russian immigrants in 1928. His father died when he was six years old and, shortly following his father’s death, Lewitt’s mother put him into art classes (Kimmelman). His love for art was constant and, before being drafted into the war in 1951, Lewitt studied art at Syracuse University (Kimmelman). After serving his country, he worked for Seventeen Magazine and for a young architect by the name of I.M. Pei (Kimmelman).

Lewitt’s art did not fit in with the art of the times. His abstract shapes and larger than life paintings defied anything the art world was accustomed to. Yet, once he got a job at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in the 1960’s, Lewitt started to see that his work did meet the criteria of a new movement—Minimalism (Kimmelman). In this movement, artists focused on using less color and fewer shapes than before. They wanted their work to look industrious and machine formed (Gray). The pieces of art that were created as part of this movement “thrive on simplicity in both content and form, and seek to remove any sign of personal expressivity” (Doyle). Lewitt, along with other Minimalist artists such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, wanted “the viewer to experience the work more intensely without the distractions of composition, theme and so on” (Doyle.) Along with being simplistic in design, Minimalist art tends to be bigger than life; the artist wants their piece to encompass the “viewer’s field of vision” (Turning Point). Lewitt held true to these characteristics in his art work. Most often, his paintings are found on walls (the entire wall) and utilize only two to seven colors.
Lewitt, as a person, was held in high regards in the art world. He was known “for his for his generosity, often showing with young artists in small galleries to give them a boost,” (Kimmelman). He disliked taking all the credit for his work for he believed it was a collaborative effort put in by all his team (Kimmelman). Given, he did not do most of the work himself; most often, his art comes as a set of instructions that give the “actual” artist room to move (Raghed).

Critical Analysis

Ever since mass media has become an integral part of society, people have felt the pressures of becoming a “cookie-cutter” citizen. Movements have come and gone in attempts to rebel against the expected norms but for the most part, these radical fads have failed. In the fight to remain individual, is there a way to still fit in with societal standards? Sol Lewitt believes that there is and illustrates this ability in his Minimalist piece of art entitled “49 Three-Part Variations on Three Different Kind of Cubes.” Although society expects a man or woman to live up to its rules, an individual can still fit in while he or she remains unique and helps to contribute to the whole.

Because of the identical make up of each structure, Lewitt creates a feeling of monotony and industrialization. Society today is one dominated by industries and work. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, our culture has gravitated around the input of labor and the output of goods. Whether the workers are in cubicles or factories, each individual is expected to give their all for the betterment of the country. A loss of identity is inevitable as workers de-evolve from human to a machine, simply a more efficient way for corporations to make money. A loss of individualism is bound to be lost in the attempt to make the biggest profit, to reach the maximum output. Each structure in this work has lost some of its identity; one does not differ from another in terms of size, color, and material. This helps to illustrate that these structures are meant to work for the whole; they should help contribute to the whole piece of art, not draw attention to itself. Along with the similarities in each structure, the color and shapes in the work help to further illustrate Lewitt’s point that conforming to the norms is expected.
By using a single color and simple shapes, Lewitt leads the viewer to believe that by simply fitting in, an individual passively allows life to become a shell of an existence. Each structure is covered in harsh white enamel. There are no colors to excite the imagination or to create movement; the repetitive white color scheme feels monotonous and dull. This could be interpreted as a glaring reminder that an industrial based life is hard and bland. The straight lines and the rigid cubes show no sign of the artist’s hand; they look industrious and machined formed. There is no deviation from perfection in the lines. By restricting the shapes to something so severe, the viewer may be led to feel that he or she may not deviate from the standards of society. The strict lines also lend themselves to the idea that modern culture has lost some excitement; life has become a mediocre repetition from day to day instead of a joyous occasion to be celebrated regularly. However, Lewitt does not create this piece to be a pessimistic view of the world today. Rather, he illustrates the beauty of individuality that helps the world unite.

When carefully examined, no two pieces are identical; each is unique in its own way. One structure can have all three of its cubes facing north; another could have one cube closed off entirely with the other two facing opposite directions. Because no two are perfectly alike, the viewer may be led to appreciate the beauty of individuality. This can be related to society today because when people are looked at individually, everyone’s idiosyncrasies and behaviors add to modern day culture. Just like the cubes, no two people are identical. Although, many persons may perform the same job or wear the same clothes, he or she still remains an individual. People can easily be grouped together and overlooked, but a person must be understood and appreciated.

Also symbolizing individuality is the fact that the structures are not arranged in perfect lines. Although the structures are set up systematically, they are not laid out in a perfect grid. Each structure is allowed its own space without the fear of infringing upon another’s section of the canvas. Today, people are allowed this same freedom. Many are allowed to do as they wish without being overpowered by an opposing force. Each person, just like each structure, can willingly contribute to the greater good without the fear of succumbing to someone else’s demands.
Although identical in size and shape, each structure stands out because of its particular characteristics, which, in turn, help to make the piece work as a whole. Although each structure casts its own shadow, all of them together create a kaleidoscope of lines, intersecting and interlacing with one another. Each piece stands alone, but in the group, it is a part of the unity and uniformity that the artist required to make his point: being a part of the norm does not mean that one has to lose their individuality.

**Personal Reflection**

When we first received the assignment that we were going to be critiquing Modern Art, I was pretty upset. I wondered how I was going to find anything to talk about in these abstract paintings and sculptures. What more can be said than pointing out the fact that maybe there isn’t a deeper meaning in three lines of paint? Maybe the artist was just bored, and because he had the means necessary to paint something, he did.

Yet, when I looked at “49 Three-Part Variations on Three Different Kind of Cubes” I felt something. With the notion in mind of writing about how the work made me feel what I felt, I went to work. At first I didn’t understand how I know what this work meant, but it resonated with me to be true.

I think the message of this piece of art is especially important here at BYU. I came from a town where my defining characteristics were my religion and ACT score. Now I am surrounded by people who believe the same thing and exceed my intelligence. I knew I shouldn’t allow my contributions to be enveloped by another’s, but I wasn’t quite sure how to make a name for myself. Fortunately enough, I dug deep into my character to find other traits that will help me stand out in a world where everyone looks to be the same on the outside. I was like a cube; similar in many ways to the people I now called “schoolmates,” but not entirely the same. I’m grateful that I have not lost myself in the transition from home to school. I’m glad I can fit in with my colleagues while still remaining myself. I wouldn’t want it any other way.
Works Cited


