

>>EXHIBITION

**ROBERT MORRIS:
HANGING SOFT AND
STANDING HARD**

Until 15 June

Sprüth Magers, London

Review by Herbert Wright

More to minimalism – (right) Robert Morris's *Steel Mesh Ls*, and (far right) his *Untitled (Three Ls)*, two of three of his pieces on show

There's not much to minimalism. Or is there? Robert Morris, who became a major minimalism theorist as well as artist, thought there was, and so an exhibition of three of his works at Sprüth Magers' London gallery should be illuminating.

Minimalism rejected the pretence of metaphor and the inherent ambiguity of representation, seeking honesty in clean, pure forms. As Mies van der Rohe said in an architectural context, 'less is more'. As a New York art movement, minimalism emerged from the late Fifties in reaction against abstract expressionism, and questioned ideas about space and perception. These issues informed Morris's *Notes on Sculpture* essays from 1966, which tackled 'gestalt' (whole shape instantly perceived) in the new sculpture.

Here we see just three works. The minimalism in a rectangular felt wall hanging folded on itself with hooks is clearly in its level of aesthetic appeal. The others are works comprising giant letter Ls. 'The viewer is fascinated by an object that invades brutally' wrote a French critic in 1968, of a Morris' work. In the case of the *Untitled*



(*Three Ls*) (1965), three giant white-painted plywood letters haven't so much brutally invaded but rather huddled up in a small space. Furthermore, the uneven floor requires one to have a discrete prop underneath to level it. Nevertheless, this is a seminal work, opening up Morris' divide between 'the known constant' of gestalt and the 'experienced variable', which alters with the viewer's position.

However, the *Steel Mesh Ls* (1988) – the same shapes with metal frames – here given room enough to separate, are not so successful. The

mesh disperses the cerebral minimalist purity of the white Ls and raises issues about industrial production and the solidity of surfaces. It may also suggest urban metaphors, perhaps even related to Morris' controversial 1974 Castelli Gallery portrait photo as leather-clad machismo persona, linking to the show's suggestive title.

There was always more to Morris than minimalist sculpture – for example, he was involved in performance art and even pioneered land art. But in the case of the mesh, more is less.



>>BOOK

**CAN JOKES BRING DOWN
GOVERNMENTS?**

Metahaven

Strelka Press, £2.49 (Kindle only)

Review by Shumi Bose

The case made by this impassioned and intelligent essay penned by Metahaven is no less than a reorientation of graphic design as a field. At the same time, it questions the very role of the discipline as it is vocationally understood.

If graphic designers have perceived themselves as the conduit between the 'sender' and 'recipient' of a message, then what, asks Metahaven, is the implication when these figures are dissolved – or multiplied into the millions? And how can these millions activate graphic design as a tool for political protest?

Jokes are contagious. The UK enjoys a long tradition of using humour to withstand, resist and to some extent, antagonise the powers that be – think of *Spitting Image* or more recently *The Thick of It*, as examples of acerbic humour with political punch. Metahaven discusses

humour as key to the repoliticisation of contemporary youth and culture. We are united by the 'viral' tendencies of entertaining internet 'memes' that spread across our social networks – which also double as platforms for organising ad-hoc political actions.

The term 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins as a cultural alternative to the 'gene'; the survival of a meme, as with a gene, is dependent on how easily it can be adapted or imitated. Riffing on Dawkins' theories, *Can Jokes...* identifies the threefold successes of internet memes, potentially pointing to a precise strategy for graphic design: to aim for longevity, fecundity and copy-fidelity. Notably, traits that also apply to jokes.

At this point we have to talk about cats. Specifically, the unlikely monikered *Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism* put forward by Harvard professor Ethan Zuckerman. This proposes that if networks are built to promote the sharing of images of cute cats, animated unicorns or advertised products, these same networks can be used to exchange messages of political activism and protest. Anarchic net culture, as on platforms such as 4chan or by cyber-pranksters



like Anonymous, uses funny but 'weaponised' visual memes to wreak havoc. Several familiar examples are discussed here - 'rickrolling' the FBI and our own Milibot, to name but two.

Whether sharing 'lolcatz', checking the news, or organising political actions, communication is inextricably dependent on immediacy and mass. The crawling page-loads of dial-up era internet have become as unacceptable as one-way media channels, with no place to discuss and question en masse. Immediacy

in communication relies on delivery in widely accessible and legible terms. Here is where graphic design implicates itself, wielding pixels as arms. An acute juxtaposition of image and text, of context and implication, is the paramount task of the designer, whether formally trained or technologically enabled amateur.

The prolific graphic output of alternative cultural networks is not a new phenomenon, from sparse, typographic samizdat literature to the punk or riot grrl zines. Due in part to limited scales of production and distribution, the impact of these publications and their graphic influences remained fairly localised. The internet poses no such challenge.

Whether jokes can bring governments down or not, they can certainly critique them. As discussed at length in the profile (see page 58), Metahaven interrogate and engage with the aesthetics of a new youth-friendly and pervasive politicisation. This essay argues that by tapping into the unifying potentials of humour and discontent, graphic design can reclaim a function central to a prevalent form of activism; if it so desires, it can take up a more actively politicised role than ever before.