

## Fred Sandback's Yarn Sculpture: a Closer Look

How can lengths of yarn become art? Why are words like powerful and complex used to describe the work of artist Fred Sandback (1943 -2003)? Let's take a closer look and explore the ideas behind these apparently simple works constructed of yarn.

### **What was minimalism?**

*Beginning in the 1960's, the minimalists made and exhibited three-dimensional art that explored geometric theories and mathematical systems, such as proportion, symmetry, progression. Their artwork was usually constructed from industrial materials like brick, Plexiglas, plywood and steel. They used these machine made and finished materials so that viewers couldn't see the artist's hand in the completed work. They did this in reaction to a group of artists from the 1950's known as Abstract Expressionists whose works were known for incorporating and conveying intense personal emotion and expression. In contrast, the minimalists wanted their art to be devoid of that kind of personal artistic presence. In fact, some of the minimalists conceived and designed their art work, but had the work made by professional carpenters and machinists.*

### *Who were the minimalists?*

*Primary proponents included Carl Andre (b. 1935), Dan Flavin (1933-1996), Donald Judd (1928-1994), Sol LeWitt (b. 1928) and Robert Morris (b. 1931).*

*Webster's Dictionary defines sculpture as a three-dimensional work of art or something made through the action or art of processing (as by carving, modeling, or welding) plastic or hard materials into works of art.*

Sandback first began using yarn and string as an artistic material when he was a student at Yale University's School of Art and Architecture in 1967. He was influenced by the work of a group of artists who became known as minimalists.

Consider the definition of minimalism in the box to the left. Using this definition, let's look at Fred Sandback's work.

How do the yarn sculptures compare to the work of the minimalists?

- How do they reference geometry or mathematical systems?
- Look closely at the material he uses (store-bought yarn). You can get a sample of this yarn at the front desk. What happens when you pull on the ends of your sample?
- We usually associate yarn with crafts projects. Why do you think Sandback began using this material?
- Picture in your mind the kinds of materials the minimalists used (steel, plywood, brick).
- In actuality, does the yarn occupy the same amount of space as, say, a piece of steel? In other words, does it have volume and mass?
- In our perception, can the shape formed by lines of yarn occupy the same amount of space as that piece of steel? Does it have perceived mass?
- If you were to take apart one of the sculptural forms in the gallery (for example, the leaning box shapes), how much space would the yarn actually occupy?
- How much space does the yarn seem to occupy when it is strung in place in the gallery?

Is this really sculpture? Sandback said: I wanted to make something without an interior, at least in the sense of sculpture that has a conventional interior; I didn't want a volume enclosed by a surface.

- How does this work fit Webster's definition? How is it different?
- Think about other sculptural work that you have seen. How does this art compare to that?
- How do Sandback's yarn forms change your ideas about what sculpture might be?

Sandback would arrive at galleries and museums with just a few drawings and some yarn, and then

calibrate and construct his sculptures based on that space. This made every installation unique. This tradition is carried on by his wife who oversees the installation of his work, based on his drawings.

**Looking at space differently**

*An important principle of the minimalist artists was to make the viewer and the space around the work part of their sculpture. They did this by presenting their work unframed or directly on the floor instead of using pedestals. In addition they pared their sculptures down to the most basic elements. This directed the viewer's attention to relationships outside the sculpture, including the surrounding environment and the viewer's interaction with time and space.*

- How does introducing a few straight lines into an architectural space change the way we see that area?
- Consider the work in the rotunda gallery. How do the lines of yarn change the way we look at this round room?
- View the artist's sketch of this sculpture posted on the wall. Can you see how the sketch is translated into the sculpture?
- Why do you think the artist's wife chose to place this sculpture here?
- Look down at the floor. What do you see? What part do the shadows thrown by Sandback's works play in our response to the sculpture?
- Where are you, the viewer, in the overall picture presented in this space?
- Is it the line formed by the yarn itself or the line formed by the yarn's shadow that is most important? Is this always true, or does it change?
- Explore the work on display in other parts of the

gallery. How does the use of differently colored yarns affect the way we see the work in the space?

Which is your favorite piece and why?

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Many thanks to the writings of noted Sandback scholar and historian, David Raskin, for helping us explore the concepts behind Fred Sandback's work. Raskin will provide an Art Talk on Sandback's work here at the museum on Monday, October 16, 2006, at 7 p.m.