

## Object Lessons

May, 2020 | By Hal Foster

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Left: View of "Stack" (2016),  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Floor: oil, undated, 1963/1975,  
undated, 1983, undated, 1985,  
undated, 1985, undated, 1985.  
Photo: Jonathan Murley.

Right: Donald Judd, undated, 1966,  
Turquoise enamel on aluminum.  
See also: undated, 1955 x 60".  
Photo: Shadun C. Collins.



## OBJECT LESSONS

HAL FOSTER ON THE ART OF DONALD JUDD

SEVERAL DECADES ON, the art of Donald Judd is still stunning. In the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that opened March 1, smartly curated by Ann Temkin, Yasmin Raymond, Tamar Margalit, and Eric Cooke, all the work looks fresh (kudos to the conservators), but the early paintings and objects are especially vivid. The intensity of the cadmium red, often made tactile by roughened surfaces of board and wood. The physicality of the specific shapes, such as a yellow oval affixed to the support or a tin pan embedded there. The first tentative move into actual space with a painting whose aluminum top and bottom curl outward toward us. And then the initial objects, cut in sharp geometries, set boldly on the floor without pedestal or plinth.

Also very impressive, the second gallery presents several pieces Judd exhibited in his first solo museum show in 1968 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. At this point, he had already begun to repeat elements, as in his "stacks," which consist of identical shelves set on a wall at regular intervals from floor to ceiling, as well as in his "channels," which are comprised of rectangular frames spaced on the floor so as to describe a perfect square. Represented here, too, are other familiar series, such as his "progressions," which are made of box and ball nose units sized and arranged along horizontal bars according to mathematical orders like the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, etc.). The second gallery marks a shift in produc-

tion from the homemade work of the early 1960s, when his father, a skilled carpenter, assisted Judd, to the pieces fabricated later in the decade in iron, stainless steel, brass, aluminum, and Plexiglas by sheet-metal specialists. Some of these objects have a fragile finish that in the '70s Judd offset with pieces in unpainted plywood, which recovered the crafted hardness of the early work and allowed him to go larger than he had heretofore.

Along with a few other templates, Judd turned these series into a basic language that he deployed in different materials, colors, and sizes for the next two decades of his life, excellent instances of which are displayed in the third gallery. The fourth gallery of the exhibition is dominated by pieces that represent a final twist in his practice. In 1984 Judd began to collaborate with a Swiss fabricator that helped him assemble long blocks of color units in enameled aluminum. This is Judd at his most pictorial (the blocks are often set on the wall); the random combinations of colors might call up the grids of Ellsworth Kelly or even the charts of Gerhard Richter. This is also Judd at his most free; the work has little of the asperity usually associated with "late style," but then Judd died prematurely, felled by cancer in 1994 at the age of sixty-five.

With Judd it is impossible to separate the artist from the critic, and some of his words remain as forceful as most of his objects. "Half or more of the best



Left: Donald Judd, entitled, 1964, red light and light enamel on galvanized iron, 10 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 7 1/2".

Right: Donald Judd, entitled, 1970, blue and purple anodized aluminum, 8 1/2 x 2 1/2 x 8".

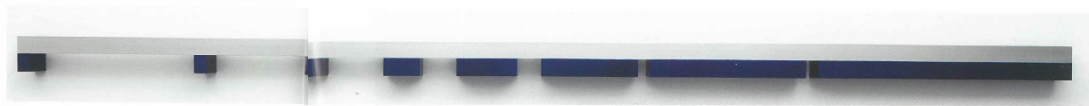
Below: Donald Judd, entitled, 1962, cadmium red light and zinc black oil on wood, lacquered fire polished aluminum, 76 x 96 x 1 1/2".

Opposite page, bottom: Donald Judd, entitled, 1965, cadmium red light oil on wood, iron pipe, 22 1/2 x 45 1/2 x 30 1/2".

new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture, he stated in the famous first lines of "Specific Objects" (1965). "Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms: The use of three dimensions is an obvious *site naïve*." Although Judd appeared to dismiss painting in toto, "The main thing wrong" with it, he remarked in his usual deadpan, "is that it is a rectangular plane faced flat against the wall"-it was Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt who prompted his shift into three dimensions. Along with a commitment to large scale, unmodulated color, and emphatic materiality, their painting mandated a "sense of singleness" for Judd, who felt that this "wholeness" had "a better future" outside that medium.

Judd didn't eliminate composition so much as he displaced it from the interior of the work to the exterior where it became a matter of "symmetry" and "proportion" along a wall or on a floor. This was a radical move artistically but less so aesthetically, for first and last Judd held "that ultimately one essential of art is unity," a traditional criterion indeed. Here, as unlike many of his peers, he had little interest in chance or any other device of the Duchampian avant-garde. Still, his shift from an arrangement of parts within a painting or a sculpture to the wholeness of an object in actual space was mirrored by early critics, and Judd responded fiercely. "I object to several popular ideas," he wrote already in 1966. "I don't think anyone's work is 'reductive'... Far less was Minimalism a label Judd also abjured-an attack on art: "'Non-art,' 'anti-art,' 'non-an art,' 'a-thr art' are useless. If someone says his art is art, it's art."

For all his resistance to "anti-art," Judd articulated most of his motives in the negative. Above all, he was opposed to "illusionism" and "rationalism," which, in his view, were closely linked. "Three dimensions are real space," he wrote in "Specific Objects." "That gets rid of the problem of illusionism." Why did Judd object to this "relic of European art" so strongly?



**Judd was limited philosophically, and I imagine he liked it that way: He thought what he thought, and defiantly so.**

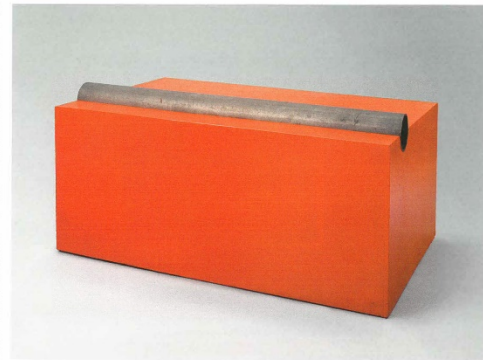
Again, his argument was not avant-gardist-that abstraction had voided illusionism once and for all (it hadn't, in any case). Rather, the problem was that illusionism was "anthropomorphic," by which he meant not simply that it allowed for the representation of the human body, but that it assumed an a priori consciousness, whereby the subject always preceded the object. In short, like composition, illusionism was "rationalistic," a vestige of an outmoded idealism in need of expunging. "There is little of any of this in the new three-dimensional work," Judd insisted. "The order is not rationalistic... It is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Judd also put forward positive values, especially the related ones of "specificity" and "objectivity," but largely to counter the negative ones. "Materials vary greatly and are simply materials-formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexiglass, red and common brass, and so forth," he stated, in his laconic way, about several of his preferred substances. "They are specific. If they are used directly they are more specific." Here "specific" means physically emphatic: His explicit materials and straightforward presentations were intended to make us focus on the intrinsic qualities of the former and on our reflexive perception of the latter. At the same time, at least for Judd, these substances were unburdened by associations, artistic or otherwise, and this lent them even more objectivity. In his view, this specificity and that objectivity supported the autonomy of the artwork, which he honored most of all.

These values are mostly materialist, but what kind of materialism, exactly? In an incisive critique from 1975, Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, two members of the Art & Language camp of Conceptual art, called it "middle-class" materialism, one that put too much faith in "the supposed 'objectivity' of science." "I leapt into the world an empiricist," Judd stated proudly, and his posture was indeed empiricist, according to which all knowledge is derived from sense experience, if not positivist, according to which all

knowledge must be scientifically verified as well. (For a point of comparison, Frank Stella was positivist when he said of his painting of the early to mid-60s, "What you see is what you see.") Judd moderated his empiricism a little through a reading of pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, and there is also a trace of the transcendentalists in his writings, especially when he struck his recurrent note of Emersonian self-reliance. Although Judd was art historically trained-he did an MA under Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University-he was limited philosophically, and I imagine he liked it that way: He thought what he thought, and defiantly so. Judd believed, correctly,

that, apart from other vices, "European rationalism" was too dependent on problematic binaries, not only of subject and object and mind and body, but also of content and feeling, spirit and matter, and form and each part. Yet, for the most part, he couldn't think his way through these oppositions: He didn't have enough Marx to dialecticize them (Judd mentioned Marx only twice in his texts), nor did he later possess any Derrida to deconstruct them. Arguably, his very insistence on the object removed it from the subject all the more. Clearly Beveridge and Burn thought so. They read the vaunted objectivity of his specific



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS



Above: View of Judd's 2020, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Background, from left, installed, 1972; installed, 1975; installed, 1977; Photograph, installed, 1976-77. Photo: Jonathan Mackler.

Left: View of Judd's 2020, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Background, from left, installed, 1976-77; installed, 1975; installed, 1969; Photograph, installed, 1976. Photo: Jonathan Mackler.

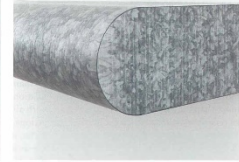
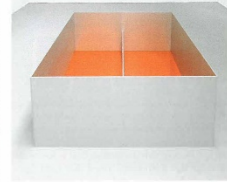
Opposite page, top left: Donald Judd, installed, 1960, clear anodized aluminum, another acrylic sheet, 2590 x 700 x 781/2".

Opposite page, top right: Donald Judd, installed, 1976, galvanized steel, 10 x 22 x 20".

Opposite page, bottom: Donald Judd, installed, 1968, Douglas fir plywood, orange Plexiglas, six pins, each 1000 x 300 x 250".

objects as so much "alienability," equally divided between artwork and viewer. (This is what other viewers have long registered as the "coincidence" or "impersonality" of Minimalism.)

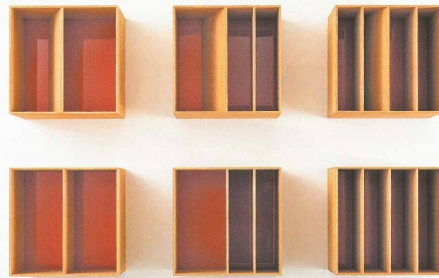
Judd didn't oppose the specific to the general; he believed in "generalities," that of art above all (again, "if someone says his art is art, it's art"). If the specific object lies beyond the discrete mediums of painting and sculpture, that realm is the realm of art in general. Art with a capital A, which was also the conclusion drawn by his Conceptual followers, of whom Judd mostly disapproved.<sup>8</sup> Prominent critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried saw the situation quite differently. Far from autonomous art, the specific object was too close to a mere thing (like "a chair, a table, or a blank sheet of paper," Greenberg mused), too caught up in mundane time (Fried famously termed Minimalist objecthood so much "theater" and opposed it as "art" in no uncertain terms).<sup>9</sup> Yet Judd resisted on the autonomy of art every bit as much as Greenberg and Fried did, even if, as Beveridge and Bunn alleged, his version initially required the institutional context of the gallery or the museum for it to be recognized as such. There is a further connection to his two great antagonists: Like Greenberg and Fried, Judd conformed to a conceptual framework that, far from being alien to "European rationalism," might well be essential to it. In *The Order of Things* (1966), written in the same years that Minimalism



was developed, Michel Foucault argued that modern man is "a strange empirico-transcendental doublet," by which he meant that, however opposed they might appear, the epistemological orientations of empiricism and transcendentalism are actually bound up with each other.<sup>10</sup> Greenberg and Fried put forward such a double-medium-specificity on the one hand, autonomous art on the other—and so did Judd with his empiricist attention to the object and his transcendental commitment to art in general.

To be sure, Judd helped to open up new possibilities for postwar art. "The main thing for anyone now," he remarked in 1966 in the full flush of this expansion, "is to invent their own means." Yet, again, he ruled out some devices from the start, such as chance operations as in John Cage, and shied away from others, such as the found image or object. "I've lived in the shade of a coat hanger and a bed spread," Judd lamented in 1981 in a light swipe at Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Certainly, after his initial move into three dimensions, Judd did produce brilliant variations, but he held fast to his basic theme. "I want a particular, definite object," he remarked in a 1969 text on Dan Flavin. "I think Flavin wants, at least first or primarily, a particular phenomenon." One can distinguish Judd from his other peers in this differential way as well. Whereas Carl Andre insisted on given material units, and Robert Morris opted for direct bodily engagement, and Richard Serra ventured into emphatic spatial intervention, Judd stuck with his discrete specific object. By and large, he supported, even prepared, these other moves, but he didn't join them, not fully.

This point seems clear enough now—the MOMA show helps in this respect—but it wasn't always evident to artists and critics (myself included). For all the visual power of the Judd oeuvre—and often it has a



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happier force, too—it doesn't often engage us deeply in a phenomenological way. That it was thought to do so was partly a projection onto his work from the practices of Morris and Serra, who were actually interested in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. (Although *Phenomenology of Perception* was translated into English in 1962, Judd didn't mention Merleau-Ponty in his writings.) An involvement in phenomenology might have also led Judd to probe process and space more amply than he did; clearly, it nudged Morris and Serra in those directions. Judd was interested in the effects of fabrication more than the discourses of process, in the drama of installation more than the articulation of space. In fact, with all its reflections, transparencies, and color interactions, the viewer can get caught up in the mesmeric surfaces and volumes of his work in a way that disembodies and dematerializes more than the opposite. "Little was done until lately with the wide range of industrial pieces," Judd stated in "Specific Objects." "Almost nothing has been done with industrial techniques." He did a lot with the products, of course, but not so

much with the techniques—a point that Serra has recently underscored with a distinction drawn between the "shiny Minimalism" of Judd and Heviss, centered on objects and phenomena, and the "down and dirty Minimalism" of his own cohort (among whom he names Robert Smithson, Bruce Nauman, and Eva Hesse), focused on processes and materials.<sup>10</sup> It is this a fair assessment of Judd, though, when it comes to space? Although his move into three dimensions was hardly the first, it did alter the relationship of art to architecture significantly: No one could see it any longer as a simple matter of rectangles on walls or things in galleries. More precisely, his Minimalism altered "the geometry of viewing" in art and made us newly alert to the nuances of installation.<sup>11</sup> For some critics, however, this awareness had a downside: Heveridge and Burn complained that Judd "programmed" his viewers and "choreographed" his objects too much.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, although many pieces are nicely site-adjusted—including the stacks, the plywood pieces that extend across an entire wall, and multiple works in Marfa, Texas—not many are

Right: David Judd, titled, 1960-61, concrete, 1/2 x 2 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches, view, Central Foundation, Marfa, TX, 2004. Photo: Douglas Jack.  
Below: View of Judd, 2013. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Jonathan Kaprielian.  
Opposite page top, center: Robert Rauschenberg, 1972-73, watercolor/ink, installation view, Robert Miller Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, the Netherlands. Photo: Gary Kosterink.  
Opposite page bottom: View of "On Judd," 1978, 5000sq Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

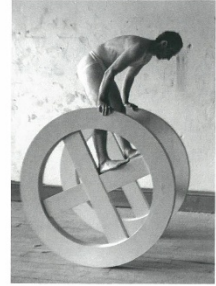


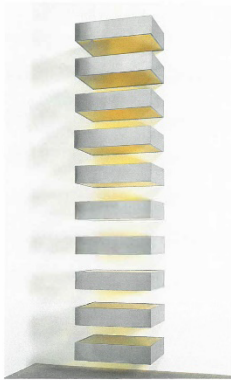
Judd rejected anything that looked like compromise, and, to him, a lot did.



truly site-specific, at least in the rigorous sense given the terms by Serra ("to move the work is to destroy it"). In this respect, Judd was also limited in his outdoor pieces, whose concrete geometries often seem more imposed on the landscape than fitted there. I don't mean to be overly critical. Again, Judd set up critical investigations of the '60s and '70s, and he shouldn't be judged according to subsequent criteria in any case. Nevertheless, one wonders why he didn't take his own radical move further. I have floated a few possible reasons: another concerns his historical resources. In a 1981 text titled "Russian Art in Relation to Myself," Judd stated simply, "I essentially missed the Russian work," by which he meant Constructivism above all. "I would like to have known of that interest in the early 1960s," he added, with "the culture of materials" of Vladimir Tatlin in mind. Covers his art-historical knowledge, did this work really escape his notice? Contemporaries such as Sol LeWitt, Andrei Stela, Flavio, and Serra were all aware of the basics of Constructivism, mostly through the 1962 book *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1964-1922*, by Camilla Gray. (Judd claimed that he was also "late" to De Stijl, though given his primary colors, conic geometries, and scalar experiments, that too seems a little dubious.) In any case, Constructivism could have assisted Judd in his principal battles: Its insistence on construction would have supported his critique of composition, and its understanding of materialism would have deepened his critique of idealism (it might have also complicated his empiricism). The Constructivist principles of *faktura*, tectonics, and construction were dedicated to a Marxist und-

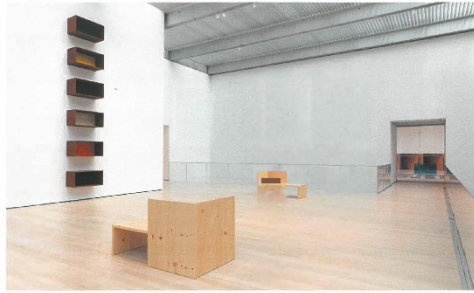
ing of bourgeois art forms; the aim was to defetishize the works of art via a new transparency of materials and production. Arguably, Judd often did much the opposite, fetishizing facture as techy surface and outsourcing construction as fabrication. Obviously, there was no sociopolitical context for any thorough recovery of Constructivism, but that didn't stop Andrei, Serra, and others from a partial recuperation of its artistic principles. Perhaps the primary reason Judd held fast is that he rejected anything that looked like compromise, and, to him, a lot did: in his writings he often railed against wayward artists, obtuse critics, perfidious collectors, bureaucratic autocrats, untrustworthy foundations, and devious governments. His partial withdrawal to Marfa in the early '70s was also a defiant stand against any encroachment on his autonomy: it is where his liberal belief in self-reliance edged into a Texan brand of libertarianism ("Don't tread on me"). Yet, paradoxically, standing his ground also opened him up to some slippages, most of which weren't his fault. For instance, if Judd didn't oppose the specific to the general, he did pit it against the general, and what is more generic than the omnianthos that suffuse our everyday world? However, when repeated, as Judd did repeat his boxes, stacks, and other elements, the specific object became less specific and more serial—one thing after another. Indeed, in structural terms, then, the specific object began to approximate the commodity, and too often it is as "stony" as any (other) product, which is far less the case with the "down and dirty" version of Minimalism. In this respect, too, Judd came to share a serial logic





with his "many twin, Andy Warhol (Judd disliked Pop). The difference is that Warhol needed that condition. Rather than deny it, only to reproduce it, as Judd sometimes did, Warhol often exacerbated it and exposed it.

Similarly, even though Judd insisted on the autonomy of art, he also designed furniture and architecture. That was his prerogative, to be sure, and he kept these ventures separate—and they remain so in the MOMA retrospective, where only a few benches, settees, and tables appear, and these outside the exhibition proper. But, intentionally or not, this activity blurred the line between the specific object and the utilitarian thing, the very line that Greenberg condemned Minimalism for crossing. In what ways did Judd preface the repurposing of Minimalism by commercial design, both high and low, from Design Within Reach to IKEA? Are his detractors wrong to compare his late blocks of aluminum colors to giant Rubik's Cubes? Whereas Minimalism once meant materially emphatic, formally rigorous, and perceptually precise, it now signifies differently. To some people it means sleek, expensive elegance, to others moral uplift via Komono space management. This note so secret sharing between Minimalism and design is barely all on Judd—it is a matter less of production



### Are Judd's detractors wrong to compare his late blocks of aluminum colors to giant Rubik's Cubes?

than of reception—and yet, just as Leo Steinberg once pointed to a connection between Color Field painting and Detroit automobile styling, it must be noted nonetheless.<sup>16</sup> Other possible crossings are no less problematic. For example, if Minimalism initiated a new geometry of viewing for art installation, it might also have paved the way for galleries and museums to entertain the immersive spectacles favored by the culture industry at large.

Finally, there is this turn, for which Judd is responsible. In "Specific Objects," he declared matter-of-factly, "A work needs only to be interesting." Here, consciously or not, he posed the open criterion of "interest" against the Greenbergian shibboleths of "quality." Whereas quality was judged by reference to the standards of both the old masters and the great moderns, interest was prompted by the testing of aesthetic categories and the transgressing of traditional mediums. In 1964, two decades after Judd made that famous declaration, in a two-part essay with the unironic title "A Long Discussion Not About Master-pieces but Why There Are So Few of Them," he stated the opposite: "Quality . . . is nearly the definition of art."<sup>17</sup> Why did he take it back? Given that Judd had ascended to great-modern status by then, did he simply want to reclaim old-master quality

as the ultimate criterion? Or had he secretly held out for it all along? For those of us who even so we admired Judd, were also quickened by feminist critiques of the male genius in the early '80s, this was a real letdown. What happened to his caustic skepticism of traditional categories of art?

On the one hand, what Judd initiated is well-nigh epochal. "It's not so far from the time of exact painting," he commented in 1982, "it's still the time of the museum, and the development of the new work is only in the middle of the beginning." Certainly, for my generation he was a key reference, not unlike Pollock for his own generation; in 1987, I went so far as to declare his Minimalism "the crux" of postwar art.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, how silent is his work for artists and critics today? "The past never stays the same since it is always seen from a new time and place," Judd also wrote in 1987. "The experience, the work, that once could not be seen from outside, is eventually, often sadly, given an outside." Has that outside come to his work as well? However fresh it might still look, has it reached that Hegelian status, at once grand and melancholy, of "a thing of the past"? <sup>19</sup>

AS I WRITE THESE A FEW OF OUR BEST AND MOST INTERESTING ARTISTS ARE BEING FORGOTTEN IN THE NAME OF VALUE.  
*De lauder, we sleep 176*

Opposite page, left: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1969, stainless steel, white Plexiglas, ten parts, each 9 x 43 x 21".

Opposite page, right: View of "Judd," 2020. An edition of Andrew R. Shaw's "Judd and the Background," Minneapolis-based artist, 16, 1000, Photo: Jonathan P. Miller.

This page: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1969, same, 77 x 48 x 36".

