

JUDD-LIKE.

At Marfa, Donald Judd's studio and living place in West Texas, the works are not permanent but Judd wished them to be. Permanence in sculpture is associated with death (and, somewhat, with fascism), neither of which I think of as remotely Judd-like.

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE.

In Edward Said's essay 'On Late Style' he describes a position where an artist, in command of all his or her expressive means, makes work that attempts to convey something inexpressible. The viewer or listener is left overwhelmed and perhaps confused and bewildered, aware that something is being said but not able to integrate that into an expressive whole. Amongst his examples were Beethoven's late quartets and Picasso's late paintings. This is a wonderful essay and I persuaded Lynne Cooke to read it, in part because I wanted to discuss the more recent sculptures of women by Thomas Schütte in relation to its premise. In the way of things the discussion broadened and we began to wonder if there were any artists amongst the group in the DIA collection who could be said to have a 'late style'. Judd's name came up – at this point I hadn't been to the installations at Marfa – it seemed a possibility, but we left it at that. Slightly later Lynne asked me if I would be interested to contribute to the 'Artists on Art' series, where artists are invited to discuss the work of artists in the DIA collection. This was early in October 2004. I was due to go to Dallas later in the month and had arranged to go on to Marfa, so I said, yes, Judd. He is an artist whom I have found important for a variety of reasons at various stages in my life so it was an opportunity both to reflect on that and perhaps to answer our speculation about 'late style' in his work.

At the west end of the great Romanesque cathedral of Durham there is a sister chapel. This is a refined space, with the vaulted roof supported on thin columns and the east wall retaining many elements of original fresco. At a position about a third of the way in and off-centre to the central east-west axis leading to the altar, there is a black granite tomb chest. This is a simple, unadorned block, about two-and-a-half feet high by four feet deep and seven feet long, placed transversely across the space. Carved into the top surface, in a very plain letterface, is the name BEDE. This is the tomb of the venerable Bede, eighth-century monk, astounding scholar and international correspondent, author of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* and the first English historian. There is an assertive humbleness to the tomb chest – precisely placed so as to command (and obstruct) the space, whilst not being glorified by taking up the centre – that I have often thought of as being characteristically Judd-like.

Near to the old Bankside power station in Southwark, now the home of Tate Modern, is a nineteenth-century assay station – a materials testing laboratory – built to house ‘Kirkaldy’s Testing and Experimenting Works’. Inside is a magnificent machine that can measure and record the behaviour of material samples put into its various clamping and holding devices and bent, stretched, twisted, pushed, sheared, compressed, heated, cooled etc. under the control of the tester. Over the front entrance of the building is carved, again in a simple typeface, the motto FACTS NOT OPINIONS. This, too, I have always regarded as being characteristically Judd-like.

The first time I saw a work of Donald Judd was in late 1968 or early ’69 at the Tate Gallery, London, in a touring show called *Art Of The Real*. The exhibition featured American, mostly New York, art of the mid 1960s. Judd’s piece in this show was a vertical stack, a series of galvanised boxes with pale-purple Plexiglas tops and bottoms running from floor to ceiling in one of the gallery spaces. I did not

understand it. However, since I can barely remember any other work from this show (perhaps a couple of black Frank Stellas) it is worth saying that my not understanding was coupled to a fairly precise registering of what I had seen. I did not understand it because I had not seen anything like it before, yet it is possible for me to recall the image with some precision.

I'm not uninterested in ordering – as a teenager I worked in vacations at an agricultural feed mill and was very absorbed in the various ways in which differently sized bags and sacks were stacked to achieve a secure load on a palette. I was also for a long time an avid stamp collector and spent hours arranging coloured squares and rectangles to form sets on the page. And stacking dishes to dry after the washing up of an evening was always interesting, so perhaps the memory has something to do with a recognition of a correspondence with that kind of ordering, and with the confusion in finding it in a gallery.

The second time I encountered Donald Judd's work was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in late 1970 or early '71 and, shortly after that, in two shows at the Lisson Gallery, also in London. The Whitechapel show was mostly of metal boxes on the floor, plus a couple of progressions on the wall. The first Lisson Gallery show was entirely of wall-mounted boxes, the second included three very large wooden boxes (probably five-foot cubes) occupying a wall in the downstairs gallery (this was the old Lisson Gallery space in Bell Street). I was by this time a student at Saint Martin's School of Art and very interested in American art. These were clearly important shows and I recall that I really wanted to get something from them, yet it was with some embarrassment that again I realized I did not really know what it was I was seeing. These were difficult, ungiving things to be looking at and I had no real vocabulary for doing so. It was uncomfortable. The group of wooden boxes in the second show at the Lisson was the first work that I felt okay with. This is largely

because the material characteristics of the grain on the shuttering ply had some attraction and the problematic of dealing with the thin edge of an angled piece meeting a flat face evoked something familiar for me. But I also knew this was a frail straw.

At the same time I sort of knew what I was supposed to be looking at, or what I was supposed to be seeing. The group of students that I hung out with at Saint Martin's were avid readers of *Artforum*, storming into the library each month for the latest issue. And, when it came out, we all had copies of Gregory Battcock's anthology *Minimal Art*. This collection was sufficiently well known to produce appropriate obscene graffiti in the toilets of art schools. So it wasn't that I didn't know, it was more that I couldn't see.

In the summer of 1973 – the year after I graduated from Saint Martin's – I spent three months in the United States and in Canada. I was based in Chicago and travelled around on a go-anywhere Greyhound bus ticket. At the time the artists I was specifically interested in were David Smith, Jackson Pollock and Donald Judd – though this trip was more escape than research. I was quite depressed at the time and, passing a travel agent in Camden Town one day, noticed that they were advertising cheap flights to the United States with a company called Jetsave – £50 return if you stayed three months – and I desperately needed to leave England. Ending up in Chicago was more accident than design – I couldn't figure out a way to stay in New York and a friend of a friend sub-let an apartment in Chicago to me for the summer. Whilst there I did become very interested in Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and took a course at the Chicago Art Institute on the work of the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski. My itinerary for travel was a bit quixotic – I was looking for places as much as works. I caught busses to Bolton Landing to find the Smith studio for example, ending up sleeping in the woods outside the locked

gates. I bussed up to Halifax because the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design had just started publishing the Judd catalogue raisonné and, because of that, I wanted to investigate their MFA programme.

I did discover on this trip that I still wanted to be an artist, and made an application to Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. I was accepted, but I turned it down as I had also been accepted into the Department of Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art in London. I was in love with someone in London and there didn't seem to be a choice.

I don't recall the Donald Judd exhibitions of the second half of the 1970s very much, but he became very important as I thought about his practice. The work I began making was very much in relation to issues that I connected with his work. 'Wholeness', for example, became important as an issue and at some point I began to make works that were always 'whole'. At the time this involved starting with a shape and a material – a quantity of material configured in a given shape, a square or a disc for example – and restricting my actions to within those givens. A part of this was also recognition that the real is important (as in *The Art of the Real*, the international touring exhibition that started at Moma in 1968) and that Judd's work was concerned with what was real. However, I did not believe that this was all that mattered. Cans of paint or counting are only interesting if there is also a discourse where they can be seen to be interesting. Partly to do with my developing a way of making, akin to folding something up, and partly to do with the issue of meaning and of discourse, some questions about the inside and the outside of things and about what lay between the inside and the outside became, and remain, important to me. I also thought that, despite the apparent austerity of Judd's practice, its consequences were never prescriptive but, rather, liberating, certainly on the very fundamental question of material, of what it was possible to work with. The core of this liberation

seemed to be that material was allowed to retain, at a simple level, its connectedness to the world and was thus 'real'. Meaning, however, was a more difficult issue, whether in terms of the experienced object or of the experiencing subject. I thought that Judd's empiricism, whilst empowering, at the same time disenfranchised the subject.

In 1984 I met Donald Judd for the first time, in the context of an exhibition at Merian Park in Basle, Switzerland. I was a surprising inclusion in this exhibition, titled *Sculpture in the 20th Century*, awed to find myself in company with artists whose work meant a lot to me. Judd showed a very large, multi-coloured, enamelled aluminium piece. On being introduced, I said what a pleasure it was to meet him and said something about the work, to which he replied, "It's brand new." This is puzzling, but something that I heard him say on other occasions. It either means that it is a new kind of thing or, intriguingly Warholian in its connotations, that it was one of a new range, a new kind of product.

Towards the end of the 1980s I heard Judd give a slide-talk at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. It was curious, the images were fairly consistently bad – I've likened them to the kinds of slides beginning art students take – and seemed to emphasise that the photograph did not represent the work, that what you saw, in this case, was not what you got. At the same time one of the slides presented a view of the studio with a full-scale mock-up for the installation of Judd's exhibition in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in 1975. This struck me as equally important since there was considerable effort involved in making a trial installation of that sort and that, therefore, important issues about the relationship between the works and between the works and the space were being established. He spoke a lot about Marfa, about the restoration of the buildings, the use of adobe in the courtyard wall of the studio block, the beds, tables and chairs, the beginnings of the installation in the

artillery sheds, the installations of works by Flavin and Chamberlain. It was interesting, and fulsomely generous, yet at the same time faintly disturbing – particularly in relation to the domestic arrangements. Thinking about this much later, I recalled a description I had read of the upbringing of the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret who, under the eye of a strict governess, were instructed to line everything up, clothes folded, shoes together at right angles to the bed, cover turned back etc., before going to bed at night. There was an implication that Elizabeth's willingness to go along with the arrangements might suggest an apparent, defensive emotional frigidity whilst Margaret's inability to conform predicated an emotionally troubled life. The point being that obsessive ordering is not emotionally neutral. I also recognize that the collecting together and ordering of like with like has a fascination for me, the continual re-ordering of my boyhood stamp collection standing as proof of this. Perhaps the most curious slide in that Whitechapel lecture was a picture of a mass grave in what was then Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, a barely marked rectangular mound, in which were interred some of the two million dead from the terrible siege of that city. The implicit demonstrative restraint obviously mattered a great deal to Judd.

My last direct contact with Judd was in 1992, when I was again in an exhibition with him, this time in the region around Stuttgart in Germany. Organised by the curators Veit Görner and Rudi Fuchs, the exhibition, *Platzverführung*, associated each of some twenty artists with one of the satellite communities of Stuttgart. A budget had been set aside by the regional authority for cultural activities in a failed Olympic bid and remained available. The mayors of the various communities collectively insisted, on behalf of their taxpayers, that the pot of money be spent in the regions rather than in the urban centre. Each invited artist developed some sort of relationship with their host community and many of the resulting works had a strong relationship to particular sites. Judd's work was in the small town of

Gerlingen, I worked nearby, in Waiblingen, alongside Niele Toroni. For a visitor, the exhibition was difficult and finding all of the localities involved next to impossible. I suspect very few people outside of Gerlingen saw Judd's work. He was already ill and this was one of his last installed projects. The proposal involved significantly altering the form and grading of the town square, 'correcting' the space. The exhibited work consisted of this proposal, mocked-up at full scale in plywood on the site, there not being sufficient funds to execute it as a permanent work. It was different from anything else I saw by him, perhaps the beginning of an attempt to reconcile how he saw things with facts on the ground. His writing at the time evidenced a severe disillusionment with the qualities of contemporary urban space:

"Small buildings should be symmetrical and the plan for an area of a city should be as well. Buildings in a city should also be symmetrical from top to bottom, on the street and on the skyline, and not snaggle-toothed like New York." Donald Judd, 'Symmetry', 1985.

". . . within the capacity of one person or of a small group, the relationship of all visible things should be considered." Donald Judd, 'Art and Architecture', 1987.

In 2002 I had an experience that I can only describe as epiphanic. This was Thomas Kellein's exhibition *Donald Judd, Early Work 1955–1968* at Kunsthalle Bielefeld, again in Germany. Installed in the Philip Johnson building that is the Kunsthalle, it was breathtaking. The exhibition comprised 30 paintings, 20 drawings, 8 objects and 8 larger works. The ostensible motifs of these early paintings are unprepossessing, banal interiors and non-descript street scenes – entrances, bridges, paths, bleak gardens, stairwells. They have something in common with Rothko's early subway paintings, representations of fairly compressed spaces in a muted palette. These motifs are repeated in successive paintings, the detail progressively reduced until

there is a kind of equality across the picture, the framing character of a motif and the space between being equally valued, equally solid or equally empty. A concrete bridge spanning a park segues into a band and then into the bent tube connecting two painted panels. An early relief painting (1961), a black painting with an inserted baking tray, belonging to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has a folded object, which encloses a space, framed within a textured black surround. This surround is read as a wall, situated in space, fenestrated by the partially reflective folds of the baking tray, which it compresses, holds and dematerializes. Yet at the same time the textured black is empty, a space or an absence, lacking surface. The object within this is there, present, plain to see. The value that Judd extracts from these humble early paintings and drawings and from the subsequent reliefs is quite extraordinary. There is no revelatory vision, no laying bare of transience but a progressive, insistent assertion that object and space are coincidental, equal and important, that this is how the world is. The world is not pushed away or schematized but is solidly in front of us, factual. I had completely misunderstood, thinking that geometry was a kind of idealisation – systematisation or purity – as it is in Constructivist Art, from which Judd's work was generated. The reverse is true, geometry is a fact, not a schema.

Marfa, Texas,

Oct 26 2004

Dear Alice,

I'm sitting waiting for breakfast in a diner decorated with plastic chillies and a couple of murals of the Texas war against Mexico and a map of the Big Bend on the Rio Grande. There is also a board with a collection of different barbed-wire strands. As I walked in someone wearing an enormous cowboy hat walked out. The town I'm in, Marfa, is three hours drive from the nearest airport. At first the drive was across

flat desert, then slowly up into hills and mountains, then out onto the flat, high plain. There were a few cactuses and gates barring the entrances to long drives, each with the names of ranches written above them – Bar Z, Lazy T – that sort of stuff. The road up onto the plain passes some fantastic columns and cliffs of rock. I’m here to look at sculptures by an artist called Donald Judd, who spent the last years of his life buying and converting abandoned military buildings around Marfa into spaces where he could make permanent installations of his works (and of some of his friends). His reason was that he thought the clarity of light and space were particularly special, but I think he also liked the idea of people having to travel out here. The work is very strict and geometric, beautifully finished. The ambition involved is awesome – as if there was a way the world could be made good by a bit of re-ordering – though the standard strategy of like to like and of variation within a typology under strict parameters betrays perhaps a rather unsatisfactory vision of the way the world is. It can seem absurd in relation to a barbecue or chicken coop, yet at the same time the 100 milled aluminium boxes that form the last work, protected in two special sheds – converted and re-roofed artillery stores – are wholly transcendent in their quality. The surfaces fluctuate between material and immaterial, incredible complexity builds up and subsides as you move around the boxes and they seem to capture and dispel light. They have sharp and diffuse dark spaces and seem to appear and disappear. There are 48 of them in one shed, 52 in the second, and this difference leads to changes in disposition and balance between two ostensibly similar places. It is wonderful.

Judd-like.

Richard Deacon 2005–08