



DONALD  
JUDD  
ARTWORKS:  
1970 – 1994



# OBJECT — ATTENTION — ENVIRONMENT

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For Michelle Perron

They sang desiring an object that was near,  
In face of which desire no longer moved,  
Nor made of itself that which it could not find . . . /  
this hard prize,  
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

Wallace Stevens, “Credences of Summer”<sup>1</sup>

It was startling to receive this invitation to write on the art of Donald Judd. I have long stored notes on Judd, many made as I prepared for each visit with a set of new students to untitled, 1969, at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Each visit is an opportunity to begin again, a new challenge to engage ill-prepared viewers who give off a look of, *So, tell me why I am here? To look. Look at what? This. What? These.*

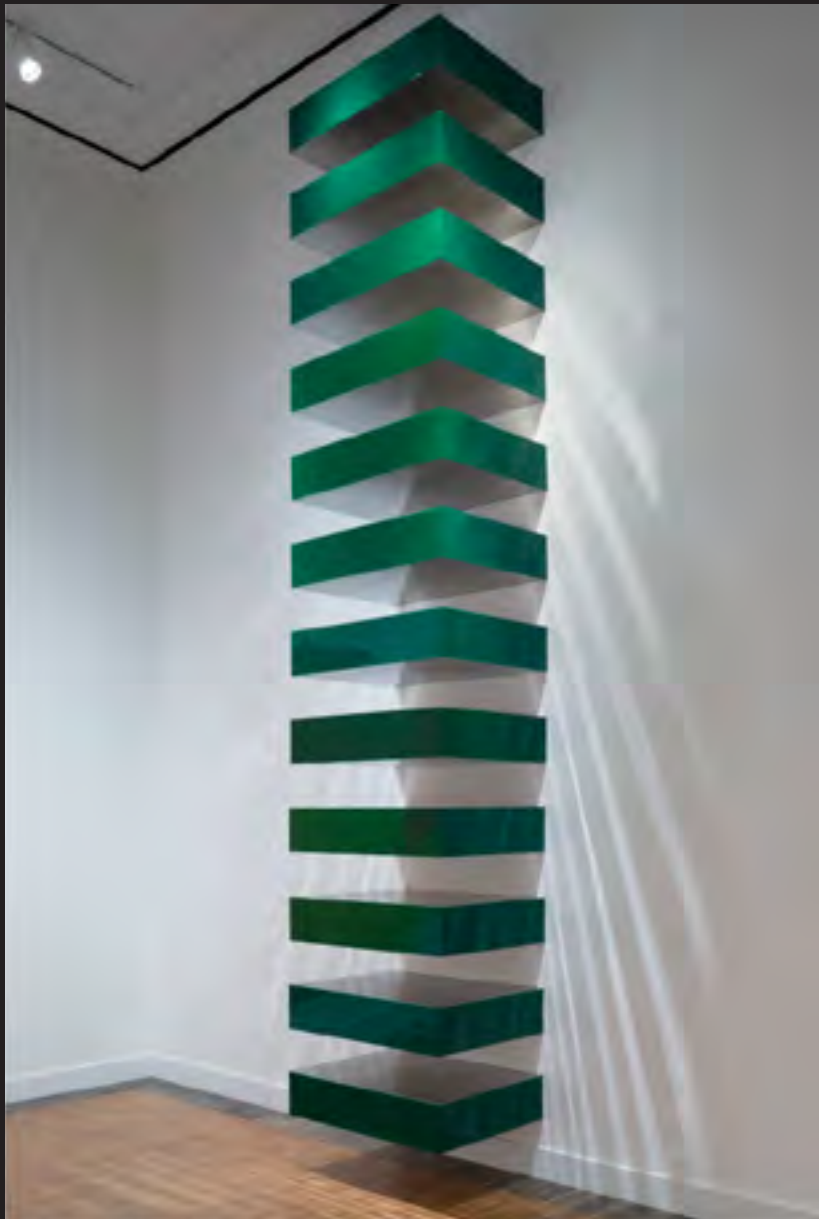
The pointing, the ostensive gesture, is a good way to begin, since it defers explanation, defers language a while longer, and gives the illusion that we, my audience and I, are on the same plane, in the same state. Which we are, since each time I visit Judd’s stack I find myself needing to start over anew. The notes have piled up. My most recent set of notes came from preparing a class of very able students to meet and talk with Flavin Judd as part of my college’s distinguished Woodward Lecture Series. I recall an extended conversation with them about the environmental and hence architectural aspect of Judd’s practice. More notes. Especially on how one might be able to pursue Judd’s self-comprehension of his liminal practice—an activity of neither sculpture nor painting, an engagement with the object in real space, a means of making that in many deep and ingrained ways has been resisted by curators and art historians who simply find it more commodious to call the works *sculpture* rather than *objects*, even after the consolidation of the spatiality of his thinking and work in Marfa, not merely as a legacy but as a *practice*, a form of embodied environmental knowledge.

What a time, though, to receive an invitation to reflect on this practice—now, when *architecture* is an image of exclusion, when *environment* is the city of layered repression and invisible injuries. I had just finished writing a long essay on the camouflaged violence of Confederate monuments in the South of the United States as witnessed through the photography of Carlos Diaz. That essay examines how the organization of appearance in these photographs, taken before the time of George Floyd, reveals a particular hidden but active architecture of suffering. With the invitation to reflect upon Donald Judd, suddenly the image of a landscape of art in Marfa, and Judd, cut through the day, setting up affects of resonance within contemporary social disturbances.

The Judd-inspired conversations of art, landscape, and environment of light in Marfa have come to be associated in the art world with distance—the distance necessary for a certain kind of thinking not dominated by density, as well as the distance needed for a generosity, a certain breathing or air of invention. This need for air is every bit as fundamental as the need to engage in the city for breath. The difference of air and landscape triggers complex associations and needs. This deeply felt parallel of lightness and density at the same time took me back to my initial encounters as a student with the writing and practice that so shaped me. The installations that at the time always stopped me in my track. One of the first moments when the question, *What . . . ?* became existential. As in, *What is this that I am looking at?* when the question was existential. It mattered. I also recall making sure, in 2003,

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Atem aped maionse  
et, sa quis consediae  
voluptae et veniendes  
core dolora  
doluptatum adios  
repeI iur, suscil il  
imentia eceatur

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that I got to New York to visit The New Museum's exhibition *Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001*, so that I might see Judd's 1987 collaboration with her (although the connection to Judd was not the only draw — Trisha Brown had also long been one of the examples of contemporary sensibility for me). From the moment that I, as a young man, allowed myself to be serious about modern and contemporary art, which is to say, understood it to be a form of life lived with equal seriousness by others — like, dare I say, at the time, Rachel Whiteread and Edmund de Waal, who were no strangers to Judd — Judd was part of my accession. He was my entry into a language to be learned and internalized, one of the means by which I realized that Art — and I think the capitalized "Art" is appropriate here for the same reason that it is appropriate for the minimalist composer Steve Reich — was a mode of thinking.

How far Judd's Marfa is from 2020 Minneapolis! And Covid-19 wrapped The Museum of Modern Art's *Judd* in a state of suspended animation; this is as is should be, in an important sense, for one of the qualities that characterizes Judd's work, in my experience, is arrest. The stopping and commanding of attention — an entailment on the viewer. Judd's work early on not only made me stop and ask, What is it this that I am looking at? but did so by making palpable the experience of attention, the feeling of attending to something that is also simultaneously seeking a vocabulary by which it might find articulation. This is important, for articulation means thought, the experience of thought becoming nascent and simultaneously being aware of something coming into being but only so long as one continues to pay attention, which is not the same thing as simply looking for an extended period. Something moving from background to foreground, from feeling to thought, is articulation, achieving a kind of presence, a coming into fragile appearance.

As I began to realize what it meant that the objects of my engagement were neither sculpture nor painting but something linked to the environment of their location, I began to respond to them in terms of a situational ontology and epistemology. Such a response could not be readily conceived in terms of the art history of sculpture — an epistemology of looking, I would come to realize, not based on contemplation so much as the grasping of an instant made stable by form. Seeing MoMA's *Judd* and David Zwirner's *Donald Judd, Artworks: 1970–1994*, however, made me want to resist the temptation to seek a politically topical reading of the work. (David Raskin has written as thoughtfully as anyone on the

Jeffersonian, and implicitly Arendtian, politics relevant to Judd and the group behind the Citizens for Local Democracy and the journal *The Public Life*.) Instead the exhibitions inspired me to pursue another piste: to get at Judd's insistence on "object" rather than "sculpture," which the thoughtful presentation at Zwirner articulated in its interplay of wall, space, floor, proportion, surface color, and what I can only characterize as form reduced to the eidetic turning of the object, yielding a sense of constancy through presentation.

Specific Object, Surrealist Object: "This business about sculpture"

There is a moment when, entering the culture of modernism and the avant-garde, one encounters the diction of absoluteness, the (enviable) assertions of certainty bearing on quality ("I think continually of those who were truly great,"<sup>2</sup> was Stephen Spender's antique turn of phrase, to which I am by no means immune) and kind (what is and is not to be counted or accounted for; what does or does not even rise to the threshold of being worthy of attention). As one moves beyond these diktats, one becomes aware that at issue is a fundamentally ontological problem of classification; there is a dawning realization that there may not be any language for this *crisis of what is*. One such example is what we shall call here, following Lucy Lippard, "this business about sculpture" and how the word "object" has come to be a stand-in for this art-historiographic and categorial blindness. The distinguished curator Ann Temkin, at the very beginning of her *Judd* exhibition catalogue for MoMA, cited a 1968 conversation between Lippard and Judd as the epigraph (italics are my own):

Lucy Lippard:

Well, we'll begin I guess with this business about sculpture *again*. Do you still consider that it's not sculpture?

Donald Judd:

It's not sculpture . . .

LP What in God's name do you call it then?  
You just call it three-dimensional art?

DJ [inaudible]

. . .

LP You *really do* mind the word?

DJ Yes. And also because I never thought about sculpture  
Almost never.<sup>3</sup>

Temkin channels the professional terms of current art-historical practice when she observes that "Judd's stubborn refusal of the genre classification gains clarity when viewed through the lens of modernism's profound commitment to the concept of originality."<sup>4</sup> We are then informed by Temkin that when Judd thought *sculpture* he envisioned, say, works by Rodin or Brancusi, with or without a pedestal. If I understand Temkin correctly, she is suggesting that Judd's refusal of the genre classification *sculpture* was tactical. This, however, was precisely not how Judd

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conceived the matter. He knew what sculpture looks like, and an important part of his programmatic essay “Specific Objects” is a passage on the genealogical aspects of the Dada *object* from Duchamp to Johns. Judd, in a manner that was indeed characteristically modern, thought in terms of an *activity*, that is, a practice: he said repeatedly that he was interested in a certain kind of activity,<sup>5</sup> the medium of which is a three-dimensionality that is neither painting nor sculpture. “Activity” is not here meant to be understood as simply the act of undertaking or making; instead, it is linked to a mode through which a (new) set of values may be activated or explored in reciprocal impact upon the agent. In other words, it constitutes the creation of a new kind of practice, for it was Judd’s clearly stated—and comprehensible—conviction that painting and sculpture are practices with tightly established cultural forms (indeed, he tellingly characterized them as “containers”). He noted, “Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms. The use of three dimensions is an obvious alternative.”<sup>6</sup> So, what is this kind of activity in which Judd was interested and of which specific objects—essay and concept—were an early formulation?

In the early to mid-twentieth century, among European philosophers (Meinong, Heidegger), psychoanalysts, and physicists, as well as in as the philosophical members of the avant-garde, there was a wide concern with the object. Let’s take a brief look at another moment when the term “object” has been used to refuse “sculpture,” namely, André Breton’s formulation of the philosophical and environmental significance of the surrealist object, indeed, the *situation* of the surrealist object—not because Judd’s taste had anything in common with surrealism, but because both Breton and Judd, who knew what sculpture looked like and knew how it could look otherwise, both explicitly refused sculpture in search of a kind of activity. In their respective practices, the *object* was linked to the *environment* in distinctively new ways, rather than as a *thing* of art-historical culture. (For the surrealists, a broad set of techniques they called automatist were a means of challenging inherited culture in the subject; for Carl Andre—but also Judd—“Art is what we do. Culture is what is done to us.”) It was not newness per se that was at issue but practice, a “practice bearing its own know-how,” as Maurice Blanchot said of surrealism.<sup>8</sup> Breton asked his peers not to take the surrealist object as merely a *nonsculptural* construction, but to take “the word *object* in the largest philosophical sense,”<sup>9</sup> as something caught between “the sensible and the rational.”<sup>10</sup> The object in surrealism is fundamentally a fetish object that comes alive in a group activity where it elicits a shared language of fantasy. The object, in other words, is part of an environmental and spatial practice. Judd was aware of this, as his response to Mark di Suvero on the active kind of space at work in Giacometti’s sculpture made clear: “I hate that kind of space and purposely avoid it, because it’s an anthropomorphic kind of space.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the object for Judd is a nonsculptural construction that is part of a spatial and environmental activity—the internal relation is that between object and activity (but absolutely not kinetic sculpture, say). What Judd refused in surrealism is the role of the image—he was clear that art is not an image—as a trigger for metamorphosis (and its link to linguistic materiality), that is, for an action that is fundamentally anthropomorphic. This was Judd’s fundamental refusal: anthropomorphism. For Judd, objectivity, which I construe as being-thereness, is this: “It simply exists”<sup>12</sup>—something that commands attention within a configured environment for itself without meaning, hence, “There is no meaning.”<sup>13</sup> In short, the object entails a practice of attention stripped of anthropomorphism.

No artist qua artist has anything worth saying about politics, but

certain art enjoins an accompanying ethics, the subject of which, in Judd’s practice, is the refusal of anthropomorphism, the source of human violence. One might go so far as to say that any attempt to yoke art to a cause other than art is a form of anthropomorphism, because fundamentally the attempt to link art to anything beyond itself is an activity haunted by the insufficiency of art and so seeks a transcendental foundation—be it in politics, be it in the social, be it in religiosity. One aesthetic aspect of this rejection of anthropomorphism is the refusal of any kind of surface on the object that indulges projective qualities facilitating or encouraging metamorphoses or affective indulgence. This is so, I would suggest, because such surface work—factice in painting, patina in sculpture, for example—implies a manipulation of the viewer in the name of something transcendent, that is, something unnamable and unutterable, and yet controlling. Hence the utter surprise of seeing the *work* and *moving surface* of galvanized iron, untitled, 1970 (pp. 151–158), which, when I encountered it, opened a new chapter for me—a quiet, encompassing, breathtaking glimpse of tragic affect, almost, one might dare to say, a work of proleptic mourning.

- 1 Wallace Stevens, “Credences of Summer,” *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 377.
- 2 Stephen Spender, “The Truly Great,” *Collected Poems 1928–1953* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 47.
- 3 Lucy Lippard and Donald Judd, from an interview at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1968, quoted in Ann Temkin, “Introduction: The Originality of Donald Judd,” in *Judd*, ed. Temkin. Exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2020), p. 11.
- 4 Temkin, “Introduction,” p. 11.
- 5 Donald Judd, “Don Judd: An Interview with John Coplans” (1971), reprinted in *Donald Judd Interviews*, p. 345. “I had always considered my work another activity of some kind.”
- 6 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects” (1965), reprinted in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (New York: Judd Foundation, 2015; Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 181. Citation refers to Judd Foundation edition. Also reprinted in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation; David Zwirner Books, 2016), p. 135.
- 7 Carl Andre, “Art Is What We Do” (1967), in *Cuts: Texts, 1959–2004*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 30.
- 8 Maurice Blanchot, “Le demain joueur,” in *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 597.
- 9 André Breton, “Situation surréaliste de l’objet, situation de l’objet surréaliste,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 475.
- 10 Breton, “Situation surréaliste de l’objet,” p. 472.
- 11 Donald Judd, “The New Sculpture” (1966), published in *Donald Judd Interviews*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation; David Zwirner Books, 2019), pp. 95, 97.
- 12 Donald Judd, “Notes” (1986), in *Donald Judd Writings*, p. 444.
- 13 Judd, “Notes” (1986), p. 445.

