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## Object Lessons

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Has there ever been an artist more sure of himself than Donald Judd?

### Reviewed:

#### Judd

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#### Donald Judd Writings

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#### Donald Judd Interviews

edited by Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray

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At CalArts in the 1970s I once had a seminar with the poet and maverick art critic David Antin. The dean introduced him at the first class. “So David, we haven’t seen you in a while. What have you been up to?” Antin shot back, “Waiting for minimalism to die.”

We’re still waiting.

Has there ever been an artist more sure of himself than Donald Judd? All artists, even those who appear to be timorous, quavering messes, have a core of steel. But Judd’s certainty and his high opinion of his own intellect were of a different order. No whiff of his limitations seems ever to have crossed his mind. He must have harbored deep-seated anxieties somewhere in his psyche, as does everyone, but his defenses were such that they were never put to productive use. In a way, that certitude became his art.

Judd was a kind of hybrid—a maker of things, of specific objects, to use his term, and also a prolific, contrarian writer. He advanced an industrial aesthetic new in American art. His work was based on a stringent objectivity; Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” could have been his credo. Judd’s career flourished at the intersection of three trends: the increased specialization, Americanization, and intellectualization of contemporary aesthetics. For Judd, and for much of his generation, the so-called expressionist art of the previous decades was bogged down by the legacy of an exhausted moral relativism. Seeking the higher ground, Judd and his cohort rejected the very notion of art as a *composition*, as something relational—the configuration of parts in relation to the whole, as had been practiced during centuries of Western art. Drawn to the most extreme position, Judd eschewed any sort of contrapuntal or hierarchical arrangements of shapes and marks on a surface. The alternative was an unfussed-over pure form, something that could remain self-evidently “true” over the long haul, like geometry.

In March, the Museum of Modern Art opened the first major retrospective of Judd’s work in over thirty years.<sup>1</sup> Organized by Ann Temkin, the chief curator of painting and sculpture, it is handsome, concise, and even-tempered, and clearly lays out Judd’s rationalist vision. Judd’s radical campaign was launched in 1962, when he was thirty-four, by homing in on single geometric forms animated by highly specific, even eccentric detailing. These aggressively colored objects defend the space they occupy with the tenacity of a bulldog guarding its bowl. A good example in the show is *Untitled* (1969; DSS 131), a low, hollow wedge made from a sheet of unpainted perforated steel.<sup>2</sup> The 66-by-120-inch rectangle rests directly on the floor, with the slightly inclined top plane rising about ten or fifteen degrees, or eight inches off the floor. The small-bore holes in the steel give the surface a slight visual stutter, and also provide access to the interior volume of space. The crisply folded, inside-welded seams express the form in a satisfying way; it’s the right ratio of inside to outside, both modest and irrefutable.

Judd preferred the term “specific object” instead of “sculpture,” and he was right insofar as his serially deployed boxes and reliefs offer nothing of traditional sculpture’s in-the-round anticipation and discovery. The sensation of looking at a Judd is simply one of sharing space with it. You have to walk around Bernini’s *Rape of Proserpina* to see just how Pluto’s fingertips make such a dramatic imprint in his victim’s thigh. There is no such revelation here; a box is always a box, and, as you walk around it, nothing really changes as your point of view shifts—it’s you who changes.

After the mid-1960s, Judd most often worked with multiple cubic forms in configurations that invite a game of compare and contrast. These works are less aggressive than the single-form pieces, and more elegant. Several of those at MoMA feature groupings of boxes that are identical or have slight variations, in either equidistant linear sequences or grids; the placement is mathematical rather than subjective: anti-composition in action. As you pass by the variations of open, closed, or partially closed boxes that were the (literal) building blocks of Judd’s enterprise, you begin to grasp his

insistence that the real subject and material of his art is space itself—not just occupied space, space displaced by mass, but also the internal space within a form. Eventually these clusters expanded to occupy entire rooms, engaging with the architecture in a way meant to dominate, destabilize, or awe. Some of the room-sized installations achieve a loftiness, a reaching for grandeur of equipoise and rhythmic progression, like walking in a forest of well-spaced trees.

However, the feeling that it all still matters is hard to sustain, and in its cumulative effect, MoMA’s show is a little dull, or perhaps only anticlimactic. The touchy, contrarian temperament that was so much a part of Judd’s presence while he was alive has now, twenty-five years after his death, been dialed down to a low thrum. Walking through the four large galleries, I found myself thinking not so much about space as about the



Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart/© 2020 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
Donald Judd: *Untitled* (DSS 123), stainless steel and plexiglass, 1968

relationship between eccentricity and good taste. There are a few pulse-quickenings through the high-ceilinged rooms, but apart from the awkward, confrontational attitude of the early pieces, Judd's work now looks more than a little remote. It's impressive in the way of a mountain: you have to keep reminding yourself how inspiring the view is.

Judd began as a painter of abstracted landscapes, modest-sized works in which you can see him trying to break down the image into simple forms in a shallow space. The forms got even simpler and the space more shallow, until all that was left might be an undulating colored line on a colored field. It was not the beginning of something but an end. His paintings aren't bad or even uninteresting, but they were not going to redirect the argument, and for Judd, anything less was intolerable. Like many young artists, Judd struggled to find a form to contain all that he thought and felt about his time and place, and that did not violate his core values. The process begins with a childlike refusal: *I won't do this, and I won't do that*. The first task of the artist is not to betray himself.

One of the earliest pieces in the show, *Untitled* (1961; DSS 23), is a four-foot-tall rectangle of heavily impastoed black paint, into which has been inset a rectangular steel baking pan. I hadn't quite been aware of just how much Judd initially took from Jasper Johns, and in this work he tries to out-Johns Johns in frontality, blankness, and self-evident materiality. You can imagine that Judd might have continued in this vein for some time, but his attention started to stray, and it was this dissatisfaction, the sense that he was coming "after" something, that propelled him to push away from the wall toward objects in space. In this piece and other works from that time, you can feel him searching for that almost alchemical formula that could engage his temperament and skills.

There is often a mystery at the heart of an artist's early evolution, some fundamental recalibration that's hard to account for, so sudden is the shift or so radical the departure. Sometimes the small jumps really do add up to a leap, and it's still exciting to think about how Judd progressed from his blank-faced, Johnsian paintings to his first free-standing objects. He might have been inspired by his walks along Canal Street, which at the time was a source for nontraditional art materials like sheet metal, plexiglass, rubber, plastic, and all manner of tubes, fittings, and gaskets, usually heaped in plywood bins on the sidewalk. It was like a block-long ready-made, inviting a game of compare-and-contrast, of theme and variations. One found there a kind of elemental "things-in-themselves-ness" that presented a challenge: how to use it without ruining it.

The first step Judd took in the direction of concreteness was to eliminate sculpture's traditional pedestal. While hardly the first to do so, he early on made the decision to work directly on the floor or the wall. Except for a few outdoor pieces, there would never again be another framing device besides the room itself, something that we now take for granted but wasn't obvious at the time. Shifting focus to include the corners, the floor, and the light source—all the conditions of the architecture—was in part the thinking of a young person looking to speedwalk his apprenticeship. It was a sidestepping, almost a dodging, of responsibility that became, in the magical way that sometimes happens in art, a generational reset. Not unlike what Frank Stella had achieved at the end of the 1950s with his "Black Paintings," or what Johns had accomplished with his targets and flags, Judd's situating the room as a condition of his work set him on a divergent course.

Judd's first works in three dimensions, from 1962, were made in collaboration with his carpenter father. They are variations on the theme of a box—an inherently self-evident but also enigmatic form (what's inside?). In one early work, *Untitled* (1962; DSS 33), the idea of a box is represented by only two of its sides, a pair of four-foot-tall, two-inch-thick planks of wood that form a right angle, joined together on the "inside" space by a length of black painted metal pipe with two elbow bends to form a complementary right angle to the wood verticals. The oddness of this object is undiminished today: What the hell is it and what is it doing here?

One definitive piece, *Untitled* (1963; DSS 39), is a closed (six-sided) wood rectangle, approximately 45 by 30 inches and 22 inches tall, painted a vibrant red/orange, the top surface of which is inset with a hollow iron pipe that fits snugly into a half-round slot grooved into the wood. This aggressively space-eating form rests on the floor at about coffee-table height. It's absurd and gawky, and projects the certainty that it can't be anything other than what it is. All other versions of itself have been boiled down into this one. It's the definitive *thing*—it serves no purpose, has no points of reference, and can only be itself. It radiates specificity and at the same time is almost generic—a box.



Alex Jamison/Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C./© 2020 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
Donald Judd: *Untitled* (DSS 39), oil on wood with iron pipe, 1963

All of Judd's early pieces are painted with the same cadmium red light oil paint, a color that was chosen to make them stand apart from the room, to be readily perceivable by the viewer. It works; the color produces a retinal buzz and gives the work a strong identity. The paint is brushed on rather than sprayed, yielding slight modulations; the result is assertive and retentive at the same time. Later, Judd would only use color applied by industrial processes—baked-on enamel, anodized aluminum, and the like—and I've often thought that something was lost when he threw away his brushes.

After a year or two of making objects using the skills and tools available to him, incorporating bits of found materials, lengths of pipe, and so on, Judd fundamentally changed the way that he conceived of and realized his work. Small shifts in working methods sometimes have outsized results. Looking for help in fabricating a cubic form, Judd luckily met the right collaborator. By early 1964 he was outsourcing the production of his work to Bernstein Brothers Sheet Metal Specialties, and the shift in what was now possible, in form as well as color, was profound. The handmade quality in Judd's work was now a thing of the past.

Judd formed a close working relationship with Ed Bernstein, the shop's proprietor, who helped him visualize the possibilities of contained volumes expressed with a minimum of obvious effort. The ability of Bernstein's artisans to bend, fold, drill, and weld just about any type of metal with great precision and elegance recast Judd from thing-maker to designer. A very thin metal sheet that was structurally rigid enough to construct open or closed boxes of almost any size allowed him to fully manifest the reciprocity of inside and outside; no longer merely indicated, space itself could now be both the subject and the material of his art.

Perhaps the most iconic of Judd's works from the mid-1960s are the many variations of "stacked boxes," which fuse the rhythmic progression of Brancusi's endless column with the aesthetic of a high school shop class. Each is a vertical column of stacked cantilevered metal boxes (aluminum, galvanized, or stainless steel), roughly 9 by 41 inches at their face and 31 inches deep, with the top and bottom made from translucent, colored plexiglass (see illustration at the beginning of this article). The works typically contain anywhere from seven to twelve identical elements hung from the wall at nine-inch intervals (the same dimension as the box face itself). From a purely formal perspective, there had never been anything like them—the way they protrude into the room and hug the wall at the same time, and the fact that you can't really take in the whole thing at once, except as an image, as a kind of floating stepladder, but that doesn't really make any sense, so you just have to accept how weird it is and try not to hit your head on a corner. The stacked boxes resist any attempt at interpretation or personification; they are art and only art.

Judd's work can be broken down into two main types, depending on their means of manufacture. One type is made from a pattern cut from a flat sheet of metal, the edges of which are crisply folded in on themselves. The thinness of the walls and the precision of the folds and joints give the work a tight, engineered presence. The other type uses material with heft and thickness. They are still enclosed volumes of space within rigid planes, but the thick sheets of Douglas fir plywood that Judd began using in the 1970s, as well as the hot-rolled steel

and thicker-gauge aluminum, require a different means of joining the edges. Judd opted for exposed butt joints, with the edge where the two planes meet plainly visible. As in all of his work, this detail is executed with a precision that tell you these objects are not generic but are things apart.

One large plywood piece, *Untitled* (1973–1975; DSS 280, see illustration below), consists of six rhomboids, six feet tall and deep, open at the front and placed flush against the wall at the back, and spaced at twelve-inch intervals. Peering into the deep, shadowed interiors is like looking at armoires from which all the clothes have been removed. These absences are sober and evocative; I found myself thinking of tombs and church architecture, naves and transepts, confessionals for atheists.



National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa/© 2020 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Donald Judd: *Untitled* (DSS 280), plywood, 1973

The last major enlargement of Judd's formal vocabulary came in 1983 when, partly out of disgust with the New York art world (of which I was a part), he began spending time in Switzerland, where he fortuitously discovered another metal fabricator, Lehni AG, outside Zurich. This shop offered a wider, more sophisticated palette of powder-coated enamel: lemon and canary yellow, cadmium orange and cherry red, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, barite and cadmium green, chartreuse, azure blue, turquoise and teal, as well as cool black and warm white, all with a wonderful, hard satin finish. All that color opened up something in Judd's head. Lehni AG's metalsmiths also devised a new way of joining multiple boxes at their edges, their tightly crimped standing seams fastened by tiny stainless-steel screws, a system that is simple and discreet.

The works that resulted from this collaboration give the impression of something machined and precious at the same time. They relate to pricey midcentury European furniture design, as well as to 1940s jewelry; they're metallic butterflies. The forms of the Swiss works are a sustained riff on the idea of a shelf, "a hollow, rectilinear volume—not unlike a shelf with low sides," as Yasmil Raymond writes in the exhibition catalog. Think of a shoebox lid turned vertically on its side to make a shallow, outward-facing box, and then joined with, or stacked on top of other, identical elements, each assigned a different color. The agglomerations comprise horizontal rectangles of variable lengths (the shelf), mounted on the wall at just below eye level, like a multihued Rubik's rectangle. The whole construction—from flat sheet to shallow box to ever more complex combinations and intervals—has an ingeniousness to it, a delicacy. It's the refined spirit of origami in the metal shop.

As always with Judd's work, there are myriad permutations. Sometimes the rows are stacked four or five high and sit directly on the floor; at other times they are joined in such a way as to create open spaces between the linear spans, either continuous, intermittent, or repeated in the center. Some resemble two-sided bookcases with hollow spaces in between. (The original inspiration for the multicolored works was a metal bookcase glimpsed in the office of Judd's Zurich dealer.) The different units are each assigned a color, and the colors often repeat, but not in a regular sequence. Some combinations come close to reading as patterns, while others appear unpredictable. Some of the juxtapositions—lemon yellow, red, and orange, for example—are acidic, bright, and jaunty; others—like black, cream, brown, and teal—are the colors of Italian business dress.

This expanded palette gave Judd access to a rhythm and musicality in his use of color that refreshed the earlier industrialism of his work. Your eye bounces along the sequences of color in a new way. At the same time that he was pumping up the scale, other works in this period were rendered in easy-to-own sizes, and that modesty too is refreshing. The works resolve in an image, something more purely retinal, decorative even, which comes as a relief. It's hard to see how Judd could have missed the one obvious fact of these pieces: their color sequences are actively compositional. He wrote some mumbo-jumbo, quoted in a wall text at MoMA, about how his use of color in these works is just colors in themselves, not relating to one another, but it's

nonsense. Color is always relational. In the show's final sweep, an overlarge example of this late style, *Untitled* (1991), dominates the room. At 295 inches long it's obviously meant to be a showstopper, but I think it's unfortunate; the scale of the multicolored lid-shapes seems to overtake their deployment within the whole, and the piece does the opposite of what Judd intended: your eye starts and stops, it doesn't flow.

What are we to think about Judd's devotion to a narrow range of geometric forms and industrial materials? His art combines an obdurate stubbornness with great material refinement, even elegance. The work is *factual*, insistent; its "there-ness" is meant to be overwhelmingly persuasive, irrefutable. It also contains elements that, at this remove, feel arbitrary. Why these bulbous, bull-nose forms, why these cuts or removals, why these custom-car colors, the metal-flake red, or turquoise, or phthalo blue? Why plexiglass? At least part of the reason is cultural: those were the materials and colors that signaled a break with the fine art tradition, and as such are easier for an artist to "own." But that doesn't seem to fully account for the taste for them in the first place. Judd liked certain kinds of surfaces—highly polished or raw metal, anodized color or untouched wood—and these attributes represented a choice: the materials point in the direction of a sensibility, not necessarily to a larger truth.

Judd came of age in the 1950s and early 1960s, when it was still possible to imagine internalizing all of art history and distilling from it a correct analysis of the way forward. It was as if finding the right path was akin to cutting the Gordian knot, the bold stroke that once and for all resolves a vexing conundrum. It's a seductive idea, the solution we failed to see. Of course Judd, in his writings, takes pains to describe just how hard-won this apparent bold stroke was, the grinding work of which it was the product. That's the Judd I like—the one who, though still kvetching, is at least describing something real.

For Judd, the knot that had to be cut was the weight of the recent past: he had the misfortune of entering the art world when the groundbreaking example of Jackson Pollock was still very much within living memory. Indeed, when Judd first showed his paintings in 1955, Pollock was still alive. He was the artist who embodied for Judd the pinnacle of excellence and innovation. It's almost as if Judd experienced Pollock's achievement as a kind of trauma, in much the way that the relentless innovation and reinvention of Picasso had taunted a previous generation of American artists. Simply put, the problem for Judd was how to build on Pollock's unique achievement and move beyond it.

The deeper issue, or conflict, in Judd's thinking concerns his idea of "wholeness": a work of art should not be perceived as a relational set of parts but as pure sensation, legible on its own terms and independent of cultural or personal narratives. Put another way, Judd believed in art's separateness, its essential autonomy.

Judd is like a child who can't bear the peas on his plate to invade the mashed potatoes; if there are to be separate parts, they must remain clearly separate, as far apart as possible. He can't bear the idea of harmonies, or blending, or paintings in which lots of different things happen on the canvas, which is to say most painting. This aversion to any kind of visual multitasking had always puzzled me until I read Judd's journal entries from the 1980s. There he writes about wholeness as a quality to be experienced, and about its opposite, the feeling of things not being whole, as what madness must be like, as the dissolution of the self:

Craziness must be when.... There is no whole of person and objects, when there is space between everything...

In visual art the wholeness is visual. Aspects which are not visual are subtractions from the whole.

Did Judd, of all people, have a fear of dissolution? There is a fine line between feelings that motivate us and ones that hold us in place. Judd made his work into a bulwark against doubt. Perhaps imagery and narrative were not his enemy; complexity was. What if his aversion to relational art was really an inability to hold two things in mind at the same time?

One thing that emerges from MoMA's show is how little formal development occurred after Judd stopped making paintings. Geometry found him right at the beginning, and he seldom deviated from the right angle. Ann Temkin valiantly tries in her catalog essay to make the opposite case, that Judd was a restless experimenter with new materials and scales and so forth, but I can't see it. He takes up boxes in 1962, and almost thirty-five years later the box is still the dominant form of his art. The nature of Judd's ideas and his way of methodically working through their permutations exclude so much that we're left feeling: Is that all there is? Of course, an artist need not be a restless experimenter. Most artists, if they're lucky enough to find a

meaningful style in the first place, cling to it as to a life raft. Arrayed in the tasteful neutrality of MoMA's institutional embrace, Judd's works bleed into one another, and their consistency, the very thing that once might have counted as proof of rigor or high-mindedness, today looks like he just ran out of ideas.

Judd was also, from 1959 until the early 1970s, a working critic, something he did to pay the rent. His superior tone and philosophical bent established the tenor for his own work, and his willingness to hack away at group-think and mandarins alike contributed to his stature as an artist.

An extensive collection of Judd's writing and a companion volume of his interviews were recently copublished by the Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books. Each is close to nine hundred pages of closely packed text, and his voice is clear and recognizable on every page.<sup>3</sup> An earlier volume, first published in the 1970s, collected his early, mostly terse, hard-ass assessments of other artists' work from the time when he was writing for money. These made Judd's name as a critic. The later collection brings together all of his longer essays, a number of unpublished pieces, diary entries, letters, and notes to self. Taken together, the two volumes give a pretty good idea of his pessimistic worldview.

Judd's chief value as a critic was to point out the obvious: that art is a *thing*, something that is made. It is not inevitable and doesn't exist in all times and places equally. There is an objective difference between art and non-art, and a given society will either view art as worth the trouble or not. For Judd, art had certain factual properties, and comprehending a work required first of all observing what is or is not the case, and also a knowledge of art's history, of how we got to this moment. Furthermore, Judd reminds us that this history is often quite apart from whatever story happens to serve the cultural moment. People obviously feel very differently today: the question is, On whose authority is this history being scored?

Judd was a master of the declarative sentence. Reading him today is bracing, occasionally inspiring, funny in a cruel sort of way, and finally a little wearying, even depressing. He can be petty and at times risible. When Judd started writing in the late 1950s, art criticism, with the exception of Fairfield Porter's, was mushy, bloated with vagueries, full of overly literary metaphors, and, worst of all, unobservant. Judd's criticism was a welcome corrective. Taken in small doses, it still is.

Judd's unsentimental beheadings of artists past—most now forgotten—is today a kind of guilty pleasure, and his takedowns of other critics are like a giant squashing ants. Everyone else's writing is no more than "received opinions," or "know-nothingism," or "malicious cliché" (which is a pretty good phrase). Other critics are simply "wrong" or "useless," or worse. People are "stupid" or "wrong-headed," or only interested in commerce, or in general show "a visible absence of thought."

Judd could also be generous. His best writing occurs in the several pieces devoted to the work of Lee Bontecou, and it's suddenly enlivening to see him trying to figure out just how Bontecou achieved her effects and why they matter:

The quality of Bontecou's reliefs is exceptionally single. Often power lies in a polarization of elements and qualities, or at least in a combination of dissimilar ones. The four obvious aspects of the reliefs—the broad scale, the total shape, the structure, and the image—combine exponentially into an explicit quality and are the aspects of a single form....

[The work] is actual and specific and is experienced as an object.... The image extends from something as social as war to something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other.

There was a time, in the late 1960s, when peevishness itself was thought to be a virtue. For years, Judd's friend and chief rival for the title of prickliest cactus in the desert, the sculptor Dan Flavin, wrote a column for *Artforum* called "Excerpts from A Spleenish Journal." Today, Judd's relentless attack on institutional thinking in all its guises is basically on target, but not exactly news. Yes, culture is a business, too. And Americans have no sense of sequence, let alone history. Judd hated all the fatuous cheerleading that fuels the art world, and he was right to hate it.

Even Judd's kvetching was overscaled. Artists from Michelangelo to Francis Bacon have complained, in letters and diaries, about the perfidy and cheapness of the patron class, but Judd's sense of having been wronged, misunderstood, exploited even, was in a class by itself. Dealers, collectors, and curators fail to understand the first thing about his work. They all want to take his ideas and cheapen them. You just cannot believe all the



shit he has to put up with; he's equal parts gun-slinging sheriff and Saint Sebastian. At some point in the 1980s, Judd went from being an upholder of standards to a semi-crank; the writing devolves into meandering, self-congratulatory rants. He was practically unhinged by his loathing of anything postmodern; for him, history moved in one direction only. The real problem for Judd was that he couldn't stop time.

Judd conceived of the viewer's encounter with art as something apart from fashion and novelty, like a canonical book always found on the library shelf that one could return to again and again. This was something that no museum could offer, and early on he was determined to create the ideal conditions under which to view his work. If Judd didn't exactly develop his formal vocabulary, he greatly expanded his field of operations.

From the mid-1970s onward, Judd largely relocated to the high desert town of Marfa, Texas, near the border with Mexico. He discovered Marfa by chance while hitchhiking as a young man, and on revisiting found that the former army base offered everything he was looking for: a sparsely populated, rugged western landscape and plentiful industrial spaces. By the mid-1960s, the town was in steep decline, which created an opportunity. With the financial backing of the Dia Art Foundation, Judd was able to accumulate an impressive real estate portfolio: a residence with a separate enormous library, studios, massive exhibition sites, offices, and several rustic ranch complexes eventually bore the Judd logo. In these minimally renovated spaces, he installed his own work and the work of other artists he admired. His installations eschew the contemporary museum's pursuit of "context" with which to persuade the audience; he leaves the work to speak for itself. The Marfa experience *is* the Judd experience, and vice versa, which is one reason it's difficult to do a show of his work in a museum. He was right about that—his work doesn't always sit well in the museum. What it wants are the spaces he defined for himself.

Marfa became the place where Judd's dream of wholeness might come true. Libertarian isolationist, Bauhaus heir, philosopher-king, lifestyle magnate, and real estate mogul: in Marfa one feels the binding of Judd's ethics and philosophy with his aesthetic. The big skies and dusty streets, the courtyards and vistas and the tumbleweed, survivalist, loner vibe of the place—there Judd's work has a rightness to it. The sheer scale and unlikeliness of it, played out in the open spaces of West Texas—it's *Fitzcarraldo* in the high desert. We're glad he did it.

Judd wrote about Pollock a fair amount, but the lessons he derived were limited in scope, focusing, naturally, on Pollock's *wholeness*, along with one or two other aspects like scale and color. His appreciation is largely technical and historical, and he doesn't bother trying to imagine the connection that existed between Pollock's head, heart, and hand:

Pollock used paint and canvas in a new way.... This use is one of the most important aspects of Pollock's work, as important as scale and wholeness.... It's a different idea of sensation.... The dripped paint in most of Pollock's paintings is dripped paint. It's that sensation, completely immediate and specific, and nothing modifies it.

What galvanizes Judd is materiality—paint is just paint, canvas is just canvas—which serves to push Pollock away from de Kooning and bring him into alignment with Judd's friend and contemporary Frank Stella, who famously said, "What you see is what you see." While literally true, as it is for any painting, it's only part of the story.

Painting is always more than one thing—it's like the Buddhist idea of the fourfold negation, that something could be true, untrue, both, or neither all at the same time. Judd misses the intricate balancing act that painting routinely performs, the difficulty of the needle it must thread. He can't seem to accept that art, like life, involves any kind of balancing at all; he wants something that can be true all the time.

To say that Pollock used paint "as itself" is to obscure the architectonic, relational underpinnings on which that materiality is anchored. For Judd, the all-over style that Pollock helped birth "isn't really compositional," which is a semantic distinction without real weight and is contradicted by the paintings themselves.

In a way, Judd's physical, material response to Pollock's art in his own work is very odd. In his ambitious determination to equal Pollock's materiality-degree-zero, Judd's choice of materials is counterintuitive. On the one hand, there is paint—viscous, fluid, controllable but just barely, microns thin, and capable of taking the form of line, shape, color, texture, and image *all at the same time*, and furthermore, immediately perceivable as



such. On the other hand, there is sheet metal, which is recalcitrant and rigid, the opposite of paint in every way. It's almost as if a composer, having been transported by the music of Mozart, decided to restrict his own compositions to the sounds made by throwing pots and pans out the window.

Why Judd now? Perhaps, having opened their new building with a deep wade into the multicultural waters, the MoMA leadership wanted to give the counterargument: art for art's sake, or the love that today dares not speak its name. This is pure speculation, but it did occur to me that Judd was chosen at this moment to represent a time before meaning in art was largely identity-based, to show what "art and only art" looks like, to let Judd be the standard bearer for art that is not referential—that is, to use his preferred term, specific, whole unto itself, and not *about* anything.

If you subtract the bombast and the latent authoritarianism of Judd's persona, what he accomplished in his art was the ability to wrest from industrial materials a type of spatial musicality. At times, especially in the large grids of open and closed steel or wood boxes from the 1970s, or the installation of one hundred mill aluminum boxes in Marfa, you can feel him merging the gravitas and repetition with a kind of grace, perhaps a word that he would not have used, but a useful one nonetheless. It is the quality that sets Pollock's work apart and keeps it relevant even today. Judd's feeling for the rhythm and pulse of intervals—the units of measure for any series of objects in a given space—and his understanding of the way those rhythms can seem to expand and contract and also affect our perception of time, quicken it or slow it down, make me think that maybe he did internalize Pollock's lesson after all.

## David Salle

David Salle is a painter and essayist. His recent paintings will be shown at Skarstedt Gallery in New York in April. (December 2020)

1. The David Zwirner gallery is also presenting "Studio: Donald Judd," an online exhibition of a series of twenty woodcuts from 1992–1993, at [davidzwirner.com](http://davidzwirner.com). ↩
2. All of Judd's work is untitled, so talking about specific pieces is a little challenging. The Judd Foundation uses the letters DSS plus a number to identify them. ↩
3. See Jed Perl's review of *Donald Judd Writings* in these pages, October 26, 2017. ↩