The persistent disbeliever: on Donald Judd's writings
A new book of his collected essays reveals the ferocity with which he questioned almost everything

by Pac Pobric | 24 March 2017 | The Art Newspaper

Donald Judd at 101 Spring Street, New York, 1985. (Photo: Doris Lehni Quarella © Antonio Monaci. Image Courtesy Judd Foundation)

Has there been a more rigorous sceptic than Donald Judd? Set aside, for a moment, the philosophers who only think about the world, and picture Judd in Long Island City at the Bernstein Brothers metal shop in 1970 telling fabricators how to make his work. Picture him at home in Manhattan at 101 Spring Street, the building he bought in 1968 as a studio, home and space "in which to install work of mine and of others" so he could spend a long time looking to see whether or not something worked. Imagine him at his desk with pen and paper complaining about those who were too sure: "I gave up on Michael Fried when I heard him say during a symposium that he couldn't see how anyone who liked Noland and Olitski or Stella could also like Oldenburg and Rauschenberg or Lichtenstein, whichever."

Judd liked Noland and Olitski and Stella and Oldenburg and Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein—and that's all it took, Fried was already disproven. It was too artificial for Judd, this idea that art should hang together in a perfect ideological constellation. Who was Fried to say, as he did at that symposium, that anyone who liked both Noland (the supposed heir to Pollock) and Lichtenstein (a supposedly frivolous aberration) was "in the grip of the wrong experience"? What made Fried the

adjudicator of proper and improper experience? Judd felt that whatever a work of art had to say, it said so clearly and directly. It required no special knowledge; it had no ulterior motive or "any hidden subjective depth," as the scholar David Raskin says. It was all right there.

"Most people have some philosophical ideas," Judd wrote in 1983. "Almost none live by one of the grand systems, only by their fossil fragments." The crystal ball of Modernism was broken. Now each individual had to piece things back together in a way that made sense to him or her. It was senseless to form a "closed situation," which he accused "Clement Greenberg and his followers" of trying to do in an essay he published in the magazine Studio International in 1969. Their teleological ideas were not only needless; they were absurd:

"I've expected a lot of stupid things to reoccur—movements, labels—but I didn't think there would be another attempt to impose a universal style. It's naive and it's directly opposed to the nature of contemporary art, including that of the artists they support. Their opinions are the same as those of the critics and followers of the late 1950s: there is only one way of working – one kind of form, one medium; everything else is irrelevant and trivial; history is on our side; preserve the true art; preserve the true criticism. This means that Grace Hartigan and Michael Goldberg were better than Reinhardt and Rauschenberg and that Jack Bush and Edward Avedisian are better than Oldenburg and Flavin. Both groups, by these attitudes, slowly destroy the work they're protecting."

These are the polemics that emerge from Donald Judd: Writings (or the orange book, for the colour of its cover), which was published by the Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books in November. The book reveals a deeply incredulous man whose arguments were sustained and broad. He was against dealers and collectors, sub-par painters, architects of all kinds (they are "like dentists, in that they are routine and don't think beyond what they're doing, but at least dentists are practical"), art handlers ("the various shippers are careless and usually the museum staff that handles art is careless"), critics (Peter "Schjeldahl should try to think and not ramble and jeer"), clueless middling bureaucrats, the US government, Richard Nixon and the first George Bush. He had not the slightest appetite for polite back patting. Ellsworth Kelly, a gentle man if there ever was one, once told me with a resigned sigh that Judd had dismissed him as a "good old European" artist, a barb Judd used often.

Doubt always came first. Even his 1965 essay Specific Objects—which sets out to define, in the broadest terms, the characteristics of the best contemporary art—begins negatively. The opening line is: "Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture." The next paragraph begins: "The new three-dimensional work doesn't constitute a movement, school, or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities." And they are. The artists he was drawn to—Yayoi Kusama, John Chamberlain, Lee Bontecou, George Segal, Ronald Bladen,

H.C. Westermann—make a distinctly heterogeneous group. They share less a formal or conceptual tendency than an ability to attract Judd's interest.

Fried was wary. In "interest," he saw the true measure of Judd's lack of principle. The artist had many misgivings, but where were his positive values? What did he believe in, what did he defend? In Specific Objects, he wrote that a work of art "needs only to be interesting," which Fried dismissed as intellectual frivolity. For the critic, there was much more at stake. A work of art needed to be significantly more than "interesting"; it had to compel conviction—"specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work," as he wrote in his essay Art and Objecthood, first published in Artforum in 1967. Minimalism (or Literalism, as Fried called it) had no such investment in tradition. It negated art until all that remained was the mere, hollow objecthood of a spare metal box on a gallery floor.

Judd's reply, which came in 1969, was characteristically biting: "That prose was only emotional recreation and Fried's thinking is just formal analysis and both methods used exclusively are shit." Yet the critic had a point: Judd's method seemed to always emphasise negativity and doubt, whereas for Fried, doubt was a hurdle to be overcome. For the critic, as the art historian James Meyer writes in his book, Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties, "Only an assertion of faith in the means of expression could stave off the dadaist doubt that art could still matter, still convince, still have something to say." Persistent scepticism looked to Fried like plain nihilism and nothing short of religious zeal was the proper corrective. It is no coincidence that Art and Objecthood begins with an epigraph by the 18th-century Colonial Calvinist preacher Jonathan Edwards.

But Fried had missed something about Judd. He was an atheist, certainly, but a pessimist? That cannot explain his belief that art had political and moral dimensions. Barnett Newman, one of Judd's idols, felt that if his paintings were truly understood, "it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism," which was a sentiment Judd largely echoed. Like Newman, he was an avowed anarchist and he bristled when a curator from the Guggenheim Museum said their Hans Haacke show from 1971 was cancelled because the museum charter's prohibited political art. "I was offended," Judd said, "since that meant that my work, acceptable as so-called abstraction, had no political meaning." It did have such content, he felt, because a work of art was like a person, a complete character, full of the same convictions and confusions, half-thoughts, guesses, intentions and wavering reflections. "It's seldom said," Judd wrote in 1984, "that art involves all of the concerns of philosophy, even of living."

Donald Judd at his print studio in Marfa, Texas, in 1982. (Photograph: Jamie Dearing. Image © Judd Foundation)

When Judd was still young, he developed the conviction that only a mechanical description of a work of art could be true; anything else was empty speculation. In 1959, when he was a graduate student in art history at Columbia University, he wrote a paper for Meyer Schapiro where he mapped out a painting by James Brooks, with letters designated for various sections, and wrote:

"'E' and 'C' are both light and similar in color, yet 'C' functions as a concavity while 'E' is convex and is one of several such areas surrounding 'C.' The convexity is formed by the outward bulging contour, by the light orange patch and the black line – a reference to the frontal black plane of 'D' – laid across 'E,' which prevent its recession and describe its curve, and by a blue-green earth-colored stroke, which pushes the area inward, on an angle into space, also described by the lines, and separates 'E' from 'C.'"

To be fair, Judd was young—only 31—when he wrote this essay and he did not intend it for publication. But a certain tediousness never left him. His prose, especially in large doses, can be tiresome, which was a quality he cultivated. He did not care for Art News poet-critics like Frank O'Hara, whose book on Pollock had "some baloney, and no real thought." Judd's style was tougher, more exact; more practical criticism than art criticism. Nuts and bolts were what he was after: shape, colour, tone, hue. In a review of Burgoyne Diller's work from 1963, he wrote: "The color structures suggest the idea that different colors, given the same volume, appear to have different volumes in space. Or that different volumes, painted the

right colors, can be equal or otherwise related. This is a good idea, but it needs considerable development."

He wrote hundreds of reviews like this between 1959 and 1973, primarily for Arts magazine where Hilton Kramer was the editor and paid $6 for 300 words. The articles are often sharp and articulate, but never quite completely comprehensible. Judd was an exact writer: specific, deliberate, but often too close to the thing to see it whole, like an assembly line worker who only does the fittings. He was an applied critic; his insights came from the mechanics of the thing and he disparaged those full-time writers who "invent labels to pad their irrelevant discourse" while artists actually made art history. No writer since Greenberg had explained Pollock as well as Judd did in his 1967 essay on the painter, but even then he was worried it didn't make sense. "It would take a big effort for me or anyone to think about Pollock's work in a way that would be intelligible," he said, adding that he couldn't write "what I think should be written about Pollock." To really understand the painter "would be something of a construction. It is necessary to build ways of talking about the work"—to literally make something of it.

Here, at last, is the root of Judd's positive belief: that art is a holistic activity that requires not just ideas, but production, too. Through 1973, the latter had been difficult. Judd's work was expensive to make and difficult to sell. He made most of his money writing until then. In the early 1970s, through the dealer Leo Castelli, he finally found consistent support from the Italian collector Giuseppe Panza, who bought 11 works in those years. Panza was fond of Judd; he liked the artist's pragmatic openness to selling cheap. He wanted to buy in bulk to decorate his villa in Varese. By 1974, he was purchasing not just finished sculptures, but plans too, like a sketch for a work of eight open plywood cubes and another for a sculpture made of 70 brass boxes. It was win-win: Judd had a patron and Panza got a discount by buying just the idea.

From then through the early 1980s, Judd published irregularly. The money he began to earn from his work allowed him to make more of it, which occupied much of his energy. It also helped finance his purchase, in 1973, of a city's block worth of land in Marfa, Texas, where he later spent much of his time. But his relationship with Panza steadily soured. He thought he had been clear with the collector: the works on paper were only proposals, not blueprints. They could not simply be fabricated in Italy without the artist's oversight, as the collector had done. ''The understanding was that my work would be paid for by Panza and constructed under my supervision,'' Judd later said, but that had not happened. Panza, citing lower fabrication costs, simply went ahead and had the works made. Judd alleged that the sculptures were "fakes," but it was too late: Panza, "an attorney, after all, was technically correct," as Meyer points out in his essay The Minimal Unconscious. "The certificates Judd signed pointedly omit the requirement that he make the work." Panza was within his right. "His were 'bad' Judds, perhaps, but they were legal—and so legally speaking—authentic."

Why did Judd's scepticism fail him? Why did his otherwise extreme distrust of collectors, fabricators and handlers, his attentiveness to exhibition design and the rhetoric that surrounded his work abandon him when it came to Panza? Maybe the simple answer is financial: the stability the collector offered may have been too difficult to give up. But the episode also speaks to the limits of Judd's method. Doubt can only take one so far; at a certain point, we all have to take some things for granted, as even he knew. "Otherwise we could never get from A to Z, barely to C, since B would have to be always rechecked," he wrote in 1983. "It’s a short life and a little speed is necessary."

Donald Judd: Writings
Donald Judd
Judd Foundation/David Zwirner Books, 1,048pp, $39.95 (pb)