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Celebrating 175: Judd, Donald, 1965-1983

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[[image]]
Donald Judd, untitled wall sculpture brass and lacquered galvanized iron, 40 1/2 x 84 x 7", 1965. (Green Gallery)

such work seeks not to reject a dead academic tradition, but to confront, with the intention of reformulating and revising them, the issues presented in vanguard art.

Right now, Judd and a few other young sculptors appear to be casting aside not only the accomplishment of those who tried, with varying degrees of success, to translate painterly abstraction into a sculptural style, but, more than that, they are turning their backs on the entire tradition of open assembled sculpture. That this tradition has been sufficient to accommodate every kind of non-academic sculptor working for the past three and a half decades testifies to the immense potential of Gonzalez' and Picasso's innovations. In one sense, Judd's work, in its programmatic rejection of the premises of open assembled sculpture, may be a signal that the possibilities left to be explored within the terms postulated by the Spaniards and codified by David Smith are rapidly diminishing.

If Judd's work comes out of assembled sculpture only insofar as it is a criticism of it, then, perhaps, one might be tempted to conclude, it grows out of the geometric sculpture of de Stijl or the Russian Constructivists. But, although his wood and metal constructions are basic, often box-like structures, stripped to a bare minimum, Judd's severity and reductions have little of nothing to do with the immaculate purity of Dutch or Russian modernism. To begin with, there is no sense of a relationship of parts, which we always find in neo-Plasticism. Rather, there is only one single continuous volume that must be apprehended whole, though it is sometimes stepped or notched. Nor is there any sense of the engineered balance or interest in materials for their own sake that one gets from Constructivist sculpture.

So far, describing the work has only led to saying it is not this and that. But a discussion of Judd's work almost has to begin with a series of negatives; like Reinhardt's black paintings, it is partially defined by what it has renounced. More "nots" include that it is not concerned with the repetition of analogous forms or with the ponderousness of sculptural mass. In fact, we are quite aware that a hollow, lightweight wooden shell is involved. Nor does it, in terms of its content, intend to transcend the physical, either to become metaphysical or metaphoric. Its prime quality, then, is its concreteness and substantial presence. And if color is important, it is as an additional method of stating concreteness.

In one respect it is difficult to establish a lineage for Judd's work because, in his challenge of traditional sculpture, he has drawn on painting and architecture for inspiration. Like the new painting, Judd's work is involved with the use of rhythmic accents and intervals and compositions that must be seen not as a series of related parts or anecdotes, but as a single "gestalt," to be perceived whole. Like the young painters, he, too, replaces the flamboyant baroque rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, with a cool impersonality which, nonetheless, often strikes one as stubbornly aggressive.

Like an architect, Judd prefers to have his conceptions executed by others; and again like an architect he deals in terms of static spatial relations, setting his works inertly on the floor rather than posing them in



the manner of conventional sculpture, gracefully on a base. But by renouncing certain of the traditional approaches to sculpture in favor of approaches that have more to do with painting and architecture, Judd has achieved that degree of abstractness which is available to architecture by virtue of its function, and to painting by virtue of the artificiality of its space, but which has rarely been won for sculpture. Most sculpture today still continues to evoke human or landscape relationships. This is not true of Judd's work; in its degree of abstraction it has kept pace with the best new painting being done, with the result that, like such abstract painting, it is direct to the degree of bluntness and severe to the degree of asceticism. In its insistence on concreteness and impact, it is often liable, like the new painting, to be relegated to the status of a mechanically-made, easily reproduced object. But it is as mistaken to consider Judd's sculpture as mere objects, rather than the art objects they are, as it is to consider Chamberlain's sculpture junk, or Reinhardt's paintings blackboards, or Johns' paintings flags. These are confusions that can be made. That they are, is but one indication of how remote are the positions the artist is compelled to defend if he would advance into unknown territory.

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