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Celebrating 175: Judd, Donald, 1965-1983

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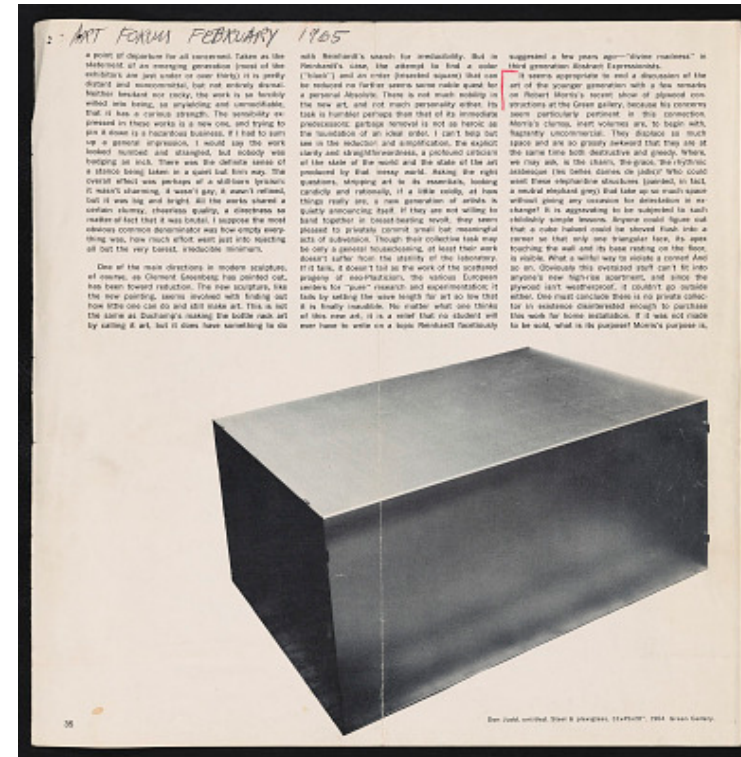
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Art Forum February 1965

a point of departure for all concerned. Taken as the statement of an emerging generation (most of the exhibitors are just under or over thirty) it is pretty distant and noncommittal, but not entirely dismal. Neither hesitant nor cocky, the work is so forcibly willed into being, so unyielding and unmodifiable, that it has a curious strength. The sensibility expressed in these works is a new one, and trying to pin it down is a hazardous business. If I had to sum up a general impression, I would say the work looked numbed and strangled, but nobody was budging an inch. These was the definite sense of a stance being taken in a quiet but firm way. The overall effect was perhaps of a still-born lyricism: it wasn't charming, it wasn't gay, it wasn't refined, but it was big and bright. All the works shared a certain clumsy, cheerless quality, a directness so matter-of-fact that it was brutal. I suppose the most obvious common denominator was how empty everything was, how much effort went just into rejecting all but the very barest, irreducible minimum.

One of the main directions in modern sculpture, of course, as Clement Greenberg has pointed out, has been toward reduction. The new sculpture, like the new painting, seems involved with finding out how little one can do and still make art. This is not the same as Duchamp's making the bottle rack art by calling it art, but it does have something to do with Reinhardt's search for irreducibility. But in Reinhardt's case, the attempt to find a color ("black") and an order (trisected square) that can be reduced no further seems some noble quest for a personal Absolute. There is not much nobility in the new art, and not much personality either. Its task is humbler perhaps than that of its immediate predecessors: garbage removal is not as heroic as the foundation of an ideal order. I can't help but see in the reduction and simplification, the explicit clarity and straightforwardness, a profound criticism of the state of the world and the state of the art produced produced by that messy world. Asking the right questions, stripping art to its essentials, looking candidly and rationally, if a little coldly, at how things really are, a new generation of artists is quietly announcing itself. If they are not willing to band together in breast-beating revolt, they seem pleased to privately commit small but meaningful acts of subversion. Though their collective task may be only a general housecleaning, at least their work doesn't suffer from the sterility of the laboratory. If it fails, it doesn't fail as the work of the scattered progeny of neo-Plasticism, the various European centers for "pure" research and experimentation; it fails by setting the wave length for art so low that it is finally inaudible. No matter what one thinks of this new art, it is a relief that no student will ever have to write on a topic Reinhardt facetiously suggested a few years ago—"divine madness" in third generation Abstract Expressionists.

It seems appropriate to end a discussion of the art of the younger generation with a few remarks on Robert Morris's recent show of plywood constructions at the Green gallery, because his concerns seem particularly pertinent in this connection. Morris's clumsy, inert volumes are, to begin with, flagrantly uncommercial. They displace so much space and are so grossly awkward that they are at the same time both destructive and greedy. Where, you may ask, is the charm, the grace, the rhythmic, arabesque (les belles dames de jadis)? Who could want these elephantine structures (painted, in fact, a neutral elephant grey) that take up so much space without giving any occasion for delectation in exchange? It is aggravating to be subjected to such childish simple lessons. Anyone could figure out that a cube halved could be shoved flush into a corner so that only one triangular face, its apex touching the wall and its base resting on the floor, is visible. What a willful way to



violate a corner! And so on. Obviously this oversized stuff can't fit into anyone's new high-rise apartment, and since the plywood isn't weatherproof, it couldn't go outside either. One must conclude there is no private collector in existence disinterested enough to purchase this work for home installation. If it was not made to be sold, what is its purpose? Morris's purpose is,

[[image]]

Don Judd, untitled, Steel & plexiglass, 31x45x20", 1964. Green Gallery.

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