Celebrating 175: Judd, Donald, 1965-1983

ments I read seemed doctrinaire and sloppy, both typical of general statements. Most of the advice seemed utopian, impractical or rather fascistic itself; I couldn't think of any great explanations and gradually came to the conclusion that there weren't any. All the institutions and their actions seemed like the explanations, overblown and unsubstantial. So my work didn't have anything to do with the society, the institutions and grand theories. It was one person's work and interests; its main political conclusion, negative but basic, was that it, myself, anyone shouldn't serve any of these things, that they should be considered very sceptically and practically. A person shouldn't be used by an organization of two on up. Most of the emotions and beliefs given to institutions should be forgotten; the bigger the institution the less it should get; I never understood how anyone could love the United States, or hate it for that matter; I've never understood the feelings of nationalism. Ask what your country can do for you.

My interest in actually doing something grew partly because my work became easier, clearer, more interesting, so that I didn't feel I would be swamped by other interests; partly by the example of the civil rights movement, that things could change a little; by the Vietnam war, which presented a situation of either/or-I marched in the first Fifth Avenue parade and I hate group activities (Ad Reinhardt was the only artist I recognized); by the realization that politics, the organization of society, was something itself, that it had its own nature and could only be changed in its own way. Art may change things a little, but not much; I suspect one reason for the popularity of American art is that the museums and collectors didn't understand it enough to realize that it was against much in the society.

At any rate,.I think everyone has to be involved in politics, in organizations that will defend their rights and obtain more, that will decide on what should happen in all public matters. If you don't act, someone else will decide everything. There isn't any way to get out or any place to go. Even when I wanted to be out, I didn't agree with the artists, scientists, professors, church members, business men, whoever, who thought that they and their activity shouldn't become involved in politics. The social organization by definition concerns everyone; it doesn't belong to experts; it doesn't have the specialization of most activities. Possibly the time will come when everyone will spend a day a week or more on public matters. It can be disagreeable but it's a necessity. Most people seem to think that their representatives are elected to think for them, decide things, rather than represent decisions. One represents thousands only as a practical matter of dealing with numbers. And there is no other way but some kind of representation. The main fact about the people of the United States is their docility, which results in part in their disinterest in using the representative scheme.

It sounds obvious, but isn't so in terms of what happens, that everyone is a citizen, an equal part of a social organization, a political, public entity, an individual in a group that is only a sum of individuals. The citizen, individual, person has his interests and rights. He or she's not or shouldn't be an economic, military, or institutional entity. I think the main confusion of both the right and left is the confusion of politics, public action, with economics. On both sides the individual is turned into an economic being. It's incredibly stupid that a person's reason for being should be the production of cars, whether here or in Russia. The people in both places are educated to be useful persons, producers, and not citizens.

The structure enabling people to act as citizens is there but it's not being

used. Other than the general docility and ignorance, the main reason for the failure of the scheme is that both parties, Republican and Democratic, are secondary organizations, in no way necessary or legal, established between federal, state and local government and the people. The parties won't allow real representative government. If you don't know this from home, watch any convention, Stevenson and Eisenhower or Humphrey and Nixon. The easiest way to change the United States, and that's still very difficult, is for citizens to act as citizens and use representative government. If the people don't learn to be citizens, the slight improvements of a benevolent dictator don't matter. Nothing matters imposed on people. The lesson, the improvement, won't stick, won't count. So much for anyone who wants to start a civil war. If everyone acted as a citizens, many of the peripheral economic wrongs would be corrected. The major economic situation could then be studied as economics, as production, in a practical way. I don't think there's anything intrinsically wrong with either government or private ownership or with large institutions. The main thing is whether the large institution has to be large, whether it works. All economic institutions should be considered exactly as that, as producers and distributors, nothing more, certainly not as political entities. There's nothing mysterious and necessarily powerful about GM, GE, the Teamsters, Ford or whoever. They're just cars and light bulbs. Fear of these or adulation is sort of primitive. I thought that about the Art Workers Coalition, too; I didn't see why they were so excited about the Modern, certainly an indifferent institution.

Another important point about people acting as citizens is that everything that can be done in the smallest group, the local area, should be done there before anything is delegated to a wider area. This distribution of representation should always be watched. Again, both the right and left, in different concerns, would rather the federal government act. Communities prefer the county to do it, counties, the state and so on. If you don't have local control, you don't have anything. You certainly have no say in the federal government.

That shows in the parties and in the meaningless candidates.

I'm involved with an organization called Citizens for Local Democracy which is starting local groups. It also publishes pamphlets and prints ads. It's allied in thinking to a journal called The Public Life, whose editors for a year or so were Harvey Shapiro and Walter Karp. It's now written by Harvey Shapiro. I think a book of the first issues is to be published soon. Anyway, I agree with The Public Life, and that's unusual. Their thinking is more developed than mine and has influenced mine; but when I read the first issue of The Public Life, I recognized some of the ideas; I hadn't seen them stated before.

There is a big difference between the politics of citizens and the politics of interest groups. Obviously interest groups are a lot less important and necessary. Often they prevent people from acting as citizens. But if they don't they're legitimate. I think there should be an artists' organization functioning as an interest group. There's no reason why the organization shouldn't oppose the war in Vietnam, for example, as long as it knows it does so as an interest group and as long as the members act first as citizens. Certainly one thing an interest group should have is a sense of the integrity of its activity. One thing of the several I have against the Art Workers Coalition is that they were using art for all sorts of things. An activity shouldn't be used for a foreign purpose except when the purpose is extremely important and when nothing else can be done. I thought the suggestion of the Art Workers that a separate section of the Modern be permanently given to black artists and another to artists without galleries to be useless corruptions of the nature of the activity, one aspect of which is that art is good, middling and bad. Neither, as they think, are all artists equal; citizens are equal, not workers, not doctors, not anything.

I'm also unimpressed by SoHo (I hope the name disappears); it's too narrow an interest group. Unlike the Art Workers, an artist's organization should decide what it wants and go after it practically and politically. If museum boards should be one third money and otherwise, one third staff and one third artists, as I think they should be, state that and talk to the museum. Allow some for differences in the museums, and those who refuse without reason can be struck. Why is the Modern so interesting? Why be so eager to demonstrate, to use a tactic that was originally used for a much more serious purpose?
There should be an artists' organization. It's very odd to have a whole activity that can't help anyone in the same activity, that can't defend itself against carelessness and corruptions. The organization should have its own money; there could be a self-imposed tax by members on all sales, part from the artist's portion, part from the dealer's.

- Don Judd

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