

Hiding in Plain Sight

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**Donald Judd's Non-Referential
Architecture**

Judith Birdsong

"Between the two large buildings on the south side is being built an inner wall that slopes slightly with the land there. The rest of the area is level, as is the outer wall. The two walls and two areas, one sloped and the other level, make *a work, I suppose both art and architecture*, although usually the distinction is important. The inner wall is twelve feet in from the buildings, the module throughout. The adobes are now made on the site."

/ Donald Judd, "Marfa, Texas 1985," in *Donald Judd Writings*, eds. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books, 2016), 424.

Donald Judd's serially arranged installations in Marfa, Texas challenge our conceptions of art and architecture. They serve no purpose other than the one put forth by their artist-creator, and this alone would seem to distinguish them from architecture; but in scale, in their capacity to define space and engender movement, in their industrial materiality and tectonic expression, and their resolutely geometric forms, they borrow heavily from the palette of the master builder.

Judd's *15 Untitled Works in Concrete* (1980-1984) and *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum* (1982-1986) are his largest artworks, and to spend time wandering among them in Marfa is to be reminded of the potential still to be tapped in the interaction between form, material, light, shadow, space, and container. The former, fifteen evenly spaced clusters of between two and six dimensionally consistent concrete volumes, stretch out for the length of one kilometer along the edge of the parade ground at the former Fort DA Russell Air Force Base (now Judd's Chinati Foundation), where these and other Judd artworks are permanently installed. The aluminum pieces (as Judd called them), fill two former artillery sheds that Judd modified specifically to house them; like their concrete counterparts, they are outwardly identical, but here each has a unique internal configuration. Both have an imposing physical presence secured by their number and scale, by the solid heft of concrete and the tectonic sobriety of the aluminum plates. Still, we sense that other, unseen forces are at work here, evident in the carefully considered and precise alignments of the objects and in the rhythmic spatial interludes that fall like moments of silence in a musical score. A covert experiential power escapes from the lucid placement and deceptive rigor of these installations – a capricious and evasive apprehension that delights in what cannot be scripted: the mutable play of light and shadow on the simple, receptive forms; the raucous exchange of limits that destroys any sense of material solidity as it bounces from aluminum surface to window glass with each subtle shift in the viewer's position; the constant recalibration of immediate and remote as one moves from extensive to introspective to unbound space in the array of concrete volumes.

To what extent Judd intentionally orchestrated these otherworldly aspects of his art is difficult to say. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the

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Donald Judd, *Architektur* (Munster: Westfälischen Kunstverein, 1989), 191.
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Judd, "Notes 1986," *Writings*, 445.
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Judd, "Marfa, Texas 1985," *Writings*, 427.

straight-shooting, Midwestern empiricist did nothing to script these somatic, yet almost transcendental, effects. It is tempting (and, in fact, fitting) to imagine a deist Judd, bringing forth his creations in Marfa only to withdraw to observe in silence the unanticipated consequences of the interaction between physical form and metaphysical ephemera. It is also easy to forget, in the aftermath of the many movements it helped spawn, how profoundly radical these works and that of Judd's like-minded contemporaries was at the time. We take for granted today that art can be neither painting or sculpture (as it had been heretofore defined), but much of the art of the 1960s still lingered in the shadow of a European tradition tied to a pictorial, compositionally-determined formalism and an illusionistic representation of three-dimensional space that Judd considered both limiting and "too old and irrelevant in meaning."¹ Judd was at the forefront of artistic explorations that sought to relocate art from the wall into the room, and away from an image depicting reality to a reality rooted in experience. It severed the fixed and static relationship of painting and viewer, releasing a new and temporal promise and opened the singular product to serial possibilities. Above all, it freed signification from mediation: form from content. To paraphrase Judd, "There is no meaning, except that these *things* exist."²

Judd removed himself from the social and physical confines of New York in the early 1970s to settle permanently in Marfa, a small county seat on the edge of the Chihuahuan desert in one of the most isolated corners of the United States. There were few people and ample space; real estate was cheap and the town was, in Judd's words, "the best looking and most practical" of the others he considered.³ Access to material resources was limited, the consequence of being three hours from the closest city, and this no doubt contributed to the economy-of-means character that typifies the town still. The no-nonsense architecture of the former fort is similarly spare, and over time several of the base's buildings would, in fact, insinuate themselves seamlessly into the fabric of the town; one of Judd's first purchases was a full city block with three such structures that he would slowly convert into his personal residence compound. Much of Marfa's architecture, domestic and military, evidences a concern for symmetry, apparent in the centric placement of entries and openings, and well-proportioned spaces, two qualities that Judd would eventually promote in his writing and work.

Dissatisfied to the point of disgust with what he saw as cavalier behavior on the part of most museums who put the business of art above those of the artists it purported to support, Judd intended to establish an alternative model in Marfa – one that would house, permanently and *in situ*, his work and that of other artists he selected. As he began acquiring

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In addition to the various properties comprising the Chinati Foundation, Judd owned more than 20 properties in town and three ranches south of Marfa near the Mexican border at the time of his death. These are now owned and managed separately by Judd Foundation, which also retains ownership of the recently-restored 101 Spring Street in New York.

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Judd, "101 Spring Street," *Architektur*, 19.

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Judd, *ibid.*

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"In architecture all aspects have to be considered in regard to symmetry. To me, just realigning the doors and windows, if possible, of old buildings so as to be opposite one another or on an axis, is a great improvement. Other than function, there's no reason why doors and windows should be haphazard." (Judd, "Symmetry," *Architektur*, 192.)

properties in and around town for that purpose, architecture began to play an increasingly generative and synergetic role in the development of his art.⁴ Judd had initiated this artistic exchange prior to leaving New York with the purchase, in 1968, of 101 Spring Street, a five-story former industrial building with a cast-iron façade constructed in 1870 that he subsequently remodeled into a combined residence and studio space. Judd kept each floor bare of all but a few thoughtfully curated works of art and a minimum of furniture, which only in and of itself defines each space's purpose. Uninterrupted by partition walls or other physical encumbrances, the large and open rooms read as pure spatial volumes defined by floor and ceiling "planes." So abstracted, preconceptions governing scale, function, and even conventional means of assembly fall away, no longer deciding disciplinary allegiance or proscribing the potential for creative reinterpretation. "My main inventions," Judd wrote, "are the floors of the 5th and 3rd floors and the parallel planes of the identical ceiling and floor of the 4th floor. The baseboard of the 5th floor is the same oak as that of the floor, making the floor a shallow recessed plane. There is no baseboard, there is a gap between the walls and the floor of the 3rd floor, thus defining and separating the floor as a plane." ... These ideas were precedents for some small pieces and then for the 100 mill aluminum pieces in the Chinati Foundation."⁵ Elsewhere he noted, "the little I've added to the building in reworking the interior is nevertheless to me very important, constituting serious ideas, architectural, but also the result and cause of some works of art."⁶

Judd would most thoroughly and ambitiously explore the symbiotic potential of art and architecture with the renovation, between 1981 and 1986, of the two brick and concrete artillery sheds where the 100 mill aluminum pieces were to be installed, and the generative rapport is evident in his account of the process: "The buildings, purchased in 79, and the works of art that they contain were planned together as much as possible. The size and the nature of the buildings were given. This determined the size and the scale of the works. This then determined that there be continuous windows and the size of their divisions." With the exception of several small, infill buildings added to his residence compound in Marfa and the construction of a few, largely utilitarian interventions at his ranch properties, Judd's built efforts were limited to modifications made to existing buildings. These were typically subtle and discreet and often served to call attention to, or strengthen, a building's symmetrical aspect⁷; he followed the same directive here, replacing the sheds' garage-style doors, already regularly arrayed and aligned, with glass windows quartered by muntins, creating a new axial orientation: "The given axis of the building is through its length, but the main axis [now] is through the

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Judd, "Artillery Sheds," *Architektur*, 72-3. The windows allow for views of the 15 *Untitled Concrete Works* in the near-distance, visually collecting the two installations as Judd intended.
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Judd, "Artillery Sheds," *Architektur*, 74.
- 10
Donald Judd, "In defense of my work," in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1975-1986* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and New York University Press, 2005), 9.
- 11
For example, Judd referred to his residence compound, La Mansana de Chinati, as "the largest work I've made." (Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987," *Architektur*, 198.) Although Judd died before the completion of his last, and largest, architectural project, the façade of contrasting matte and transparent panels of green glass for the Peter Merian House in Basel (commissioned in 1993 as one of eight large scale artworks, but designed in collaboration with the project architects) must be included as another example. For more information, see Hans Zwimpfer, *Peter Merian House Basel* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2002).
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Cameron Dodd, "Inside the Chinati Mountains State Natural Area," *The Big Bend Sentinel*, March 9, 2017. Portions of this research were originally presented at the Fall, 2017 ACSA Conference, "Crossings Between the Proximate and the Remote" and will be included in the proceedings publication, forthcoming.

wide glass façade, through the wide shallow space inside and through the other glass façade. Instead of being long buildings, they become wide and shallow buildings, facing at right angles to their length.”⁸ As the original roofs were flat and leaked, and since “patching the flat roof had been futile, and since insulation was needed, and for architecture, Judd replaced them with barrel vaults, where the “height of the curve of the vault...[is] the same as the height of the building. Each building became twice as high, with one long rectangular space below, and one long circular space above.”⁹ Within this reconfigured shell, the individual aluminum pieces, 58 in the first shed and 42 in the second, each take their place on points of intersection that result from the superimposition of the primary grid established by the exposed concrete beams and columns, the secondary grid of the expansion joints of the concrete floor, and, in elevation, the quartered windows. A rhythm of spatial intervals between each piece and those adjacent to it results. Judd considered these an integral and essential part of the work: “the space surrounding my work is crucial to it.”¹⁰ In time, Judd would refer to these interdependent efforts as single “works,” collecting art and architecture together as one¹¹

“You’ve duplicated my house and used my ideas in the tanks and pavilions and in the headquarters. Moreover, you’ve done this badly, debasing my ideas.”

/ Excerpt, Letter to Philippa Friedrich,
25 August 1983
Donald Judd Text ©2017 Judd
Foundation.

Although Judd did design several freestanding architectural projects, alone and in collaboration with other architects, none were ever built. When the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department revealed plans recently to open a new state natural area not far from Marfa with four cabins allegedly designed by Judd, the announcement, therefore, was met with surprise and skepticism.¹²

The cabins are located on land once owned by Heiner and Philippa Friedrich, founding partners of the Dia Art Foundation which helped fund work by artists such as Judd, Dan Flavin, James Turrell, and Walter de Maria in the 1970s – large-scale and prohibitively expensive projects that could not have been realized without such patronage. Heiner had visited Judd in Marfa in 1978 with the intention of helping him establish a permanent collection of his work there and, not long after, Dia began purchasing property, including most of the former Ft DA Russell as well as other structures in town, that would eventually form the basis of the Chinati Foundation. In 1979, acting privately, Heiner and Philippa also bought two large tracts of land within a few miles of the

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- The Richard King Mellon Foundation purchased the property from the Friedrichs and subsequently donated the land to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1996.
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- Donald Judd to Philippa Heinrich, 25 August, 1983, Judd Foundation Archive, Marfa.
- 15
- Auden Porras, interview by the author, July 6, 2017, translated by Justin Fleury (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department). Follow-up interview by Sammy Marquez (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department), August 24, 2017. Mr. Porras has been in the employ of the Friedrichs since they purchased the property in 1979 and still resides at the Mesquite Ranch headquarters. He states the construction work was done under the supervision of the Friedrich's foreman, Al Real, who conveyed orders orally to the workers; he does not recall ever seeing drawings for the project. Although he doesn't remember ever meeting Donald Judd personally, he did say that "white out-of-townners" would occasionally "show up." The author would like to thank the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for sharing their project files for the Chinati Mountains State Natural Area with me. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the help of Justin Fleury, lead park planner for the CMSNA, who allowed me to visit the cabins with him and arranged for, and translated, the interview with Mr. Porras; he also generously shared the results of his own investigation and insight. This research would have withered in the realm of speculation and conjecture without his help.

Mexican border, 60 miles to the south: one known as the Mesquite Ranch and another adjacent to it where the cabins now sit.¹³

Judd's own words provide the most compelling evidence that at least one of the four cabins can be attributed to him. In a letter written in August of 1983 on file at Judd Foundation archives, Judd accuses the Friedrichs of plagiarism by appropriating and corrupting his ideas in the duplication of "my house."¹⁴

Judd's professional and personal relationship with the Friedrichs quickly and quite publicly deteriorated. After foundation funds began to dry up in the aftermath of the oil and gas bust in the early 1980s, Dia attempted to extricate itself from its contractual obligations to Judd, and Judd brought suit against them for violating the terms of their agreement; by 1983, at the time the aforementioned letter was written, Judd was working toward securing private ownership of their shared Marfa properties. However, the letter makes it clear that at some time, probably not long after the Friedrichs purchased the land, Judd had received compensation for the redesign of an existing structure (which Judd refers as "the original house") on the site.

This area of west Texas remains as rugged and isolated as when Judd moved here 40 years ago. It is sparsely vegetated and even more sparsely populated; vast tracts are still all but inaccessible. Ranching has been the area's main economic driver since the Comanche and Apache tribes abandoned it in the late 19th century, and simple cabins were often built here for the use of shepherds who helped manage the flocks and to house migrant workers who, at that time, crossed the border from Mexico with ease to help at sheep-shearing time. Historic aerial photographs reveal that only one of the four cabins, since named the San Antonio cabin [1] for the canyon that runs to the north of it, existed on the site at the time of the Friedrich's purchase; it was constructed sometime between 1958 (where it doesn't appear in the photo) and 1972 (when it does). The aerials also make it clear that it was enlarged after 1972 and before 1984, a fact corroborated by on-site investigation and in conversation with a worker who was involved with the reconstruction that he says took place in 1980.¹⁵

Not all the drawn work currently held at Judd Foundation archives has been researched and identified, and in the absence of sketches or other documentation that definitively tie Judd to the cabin, it is difficult to assert with certainty exactly what he contributed to the "redesign." More problematic still is deciding what "ideas" the Friedrichs could have been guilty of so naively replicating.



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1 San Antonio cabin, Chinati Mountains State Natural Area. ©Judith Birdsong, 2017





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Judd, "Horti Conclusi," *Architektur*, 41. Two other examples may serve to illustrate the case in point: at Casa Perez, one of his three ranch properties collectively known as Ayala de Chinati, Judd observed, "The house needed more shade." – although he eventually decided, "...putting a larger porch around it would only increase the house's more conventional aspects." "Finally," he said, "I thought that the best thing to do would be leave the house alone and build new and separate structures for shade, bathing and storage..." (Judd, "Ayala de Chinati," *Architektur*, 61); and in his speculative design for "La Catorcena": "...there are a lot of sketches. Some are for single houses progressively closed as you go inward, because of the variable climate: paved with a roof, the same screened, walls and many windows, walls and a few windows, and at the center a courtyard. ...Rooms and porches and courtyards alternate." (Judd, "Casa Lujan and La Catorcena," *Architektur*, 30).

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Judd, *ibid*, 823. He also stated, "Art is done in a very different way and for a different purpose – very much the purpose of the individual. The architect cannot go against the purpose of the people who use the building, the function of the building. Architecture can be quite individual and ultimately very creative, but it cannot be in opposition to the function of the building. You just get a hunk of junk." From Donald Judd, "Regina Wyrwoll in Conversation with Donald Judd," interview with Regina Wyrwoll, October 4-5, 1993, <https://chinati.org/programs/donald-judd-in-conversation-with-regina-wyrwoll>.

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Judd, "Horti Conclusi," *Architektur*, 40. Judd referred to light, air and space as "reasonable functions." They take form by modifying the degree of enclosure, from open to closed.

“I remember doing drawings of houses with porches around them, improved houses, at thirteen or so.” / Donald Judd, “Art and Architecture 1987,” *Writings*, 491.

Art and architecture emerged as parallel pursuits early in Judd’s career, and in the years immediately preceding his death, he was investing more and more of his energy on architectural projects. Because so much of what Judd wrote and drew has been published, and because Judd often notated his sketches with the date and place where he was working, it is possible to reconstruct a chronology of his many overlapping projects. His drawings in particular reveal a surprisingly prolific and dexterous design mentality that was able to shift from project to project, and from art to architecture, with an agility that seems to betray any disciplinary distinction. Over the course of just a few weeks in 1983, for example, at roughly the same time he penned the letter to Philippa, Judd produced sketches for new buildings at his residential compound in Marfa, the first sketch for a multi-colored floor piece, a sketch for what was to become one of his stainless v-channel works, a sketch for an architectural competition in Providence, RI, and sketches for the *15 Untitled Works in Concrete* at Chinati. Many exhibit a striking similarity of formal aspect that Judd acknowledged as inevitable in the work of anyone crossing disciplinary lines: “Of course, if a person is at once making art and building furniture and architecture, there will be similarities. The various interests in form will be consistent.”¹⁶

The photograph, [2], is significant as it is the only photograph on file in the foundation’s archive that places Judd at the San Antonio cabin. It was taken by Judd’s assistant, Jamie Dearing, sometime in 1980 (the girl in the foreground is Rainer, Judd’s daughter, who would have been nine or ten at the time). But the setting is also suggestive. Judd and the others sit on the porch, in that interval between house and (here) harsh environs – one neither in nor out.

Judd repeatedly stressed the importance of having “several kinds of enclosure, according to climate, and not just inside and outside as usual,”¹⁷ and providing for a variety of spaces, from fully open to completely enclosed, is an imperative that underscores many of his architectural projects. The triumvirate of light, air, and space that Judd deemed critical architectural needs converges in the threshold space between a building’s interior and exterior – where the natural and built worlds enfold into one another. As the above quote suggests, appending such an interface to an existing structure to “improve” the architecture seems to have been an originary impulse.¹⁸

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Consistent with what I observed on site, Mr. Porras confirmed that they increased the size of the slab and enclosed the existing cabin with a new wrap-around porch. New stone columns were added at the perimeter of the slab to support the extension of the roof, and the original round "vigas" (roof rafters) were replaced with milled 2x8s. They replaced the bathroom fixtures and fittings and built the kitchen counters and freestanding interior shelving (which bear a strong resemblance to similar counters and shelves in other Judd buildings). The fascia board seen in the photograph is not original to the remodel; TPWD replaced it with one of a different size a few years ago.

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Judd, "Marfa, Texas, 1985," *Writings*, 424.

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In addition to *Donald Judd: Architektur* (1989), and Flückinger's, *Donald Judd: Architecture in Marfa, Texas* (2007), both already noted, the others are *Donald Judd: Räume Spaces* (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1993) and *Donald Judd: Architektur*, ed. Peter Noever (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1991).

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The Center for Architecture (New York) hosted "Obdurate Space | Architecture of Donald Judd," an exhibit of Judd's built and unrealized projects curated by Claude Armstrong and Donna Cohen, in the fall of 2017.

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In this, the last essay Judd published before he died, he called space, "my main concern," and laments the absence of a history of theory of space, "the most important and developed aspect of present art," in art.

I believe that Judd “renovated” the Friedrichs’ stone shepherd’s cabin with the addition of a porch.¹⁹ Not as an architect might, privileging performative concerns such as orientation and heat gain (whereby the self-shading north side would probably have been left exposed), but as Judd the artist would: creating an autonomous and immediately legible *object* by wrapping the cabin with a flat-roofed space *reasonably* divided by *intentionally-placed* columns. Obscured in shadow, the house proper withdraws; placed at the periphery of the slab, the columns catch the light, foregrounding the cabin’s formal aspect. The immediate impression is of a volume of space held between two horizontal planes subdivided by linear, vertical elements. It reads as a Judd “work,” a construction “both art and architecture.”²⁰

Four monographs dedicated to Judd’s architecture have been published to date, yet his architectural work has so far not been subjected to the same critical scrutiny as his art – and what little that has been published has largely been written from the art historian’s perspective.²¹ Until recently, the most informative source for anyone seeking a richer understanding of Judd’s architecture has been, not surprisingly, the one authored by Judd himself, *Donald Judd: Architektur*, published in 1989, coincident with the first (and, until 2017, only) exhibit dedicated solely to his architectural work.²² As Judd unpacks each project, concisely describing process, purpose, and inspiration, it becomes clear that his intent is to educate as well as elucidate. Hard-rights into politics, fake culture, war, the environment, governmental bureaucracy, strip malls, skyscrapers, and blistering attacks on the “commerce” of art and architecture, all delivered in Judd’s characteristically pithy style, worm their way into the text; other essays more broadly decry the decline of American culture, in general, and the profession of architecture, in particular, and promote his sincerely held solutions to virtually every ill. It is, in all, more treatise than exhibition catalog. The publication in 2016 of *Donald Judd Writings*, an exhaustive anthology of essays, jottings, notes, observations, articles, and lectures authored by Judd from the time he was a student in 1958 until his death in 1994, has also added immeasurably to our understanding of his universal and consistent worldview.

“Space is made by an artist or an architect; it is not found and packaged.”²³

/ Judd, “Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular,” *Writings*, 833.

“Visual reasonableness,” achieved through the intertwining of space and proportion, is one imperative that repeatedly surfaces in Judd’s

24 Judd, "Art and Architecture 1983," *Writings*, 339.

25 Four sheets of drawings made for his woodblock prints in 1976 include the notes, "Horizontally divided horizontally, Horizontally divided vertically, Vertically divided horizontally, Vertically divided vertically," Brenda Danilowitz, "Donald Judd: Some Aspects of His Prints." In *Chinati Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 19 (October, 2014), 11. He also "divided and organized" the loft at 19th St. and Park. where he lived prior to his move to 101 Spring Street. (Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987," *Architektur*, 198.)

26 Many of these operatives — centered, quartered, split — result in a symmetrically ordered disposition of parts.

27 Richard Shiff, "To Stop the Heart," in *Chinati: The Vision of Donald Judd*, ed. Marianne Stockebrand (Marfa: The Chinati Foundation and Yale University Press, 2010), 270.

28 Marianne Stockebrand, "Preface," *Architektur*, 9.

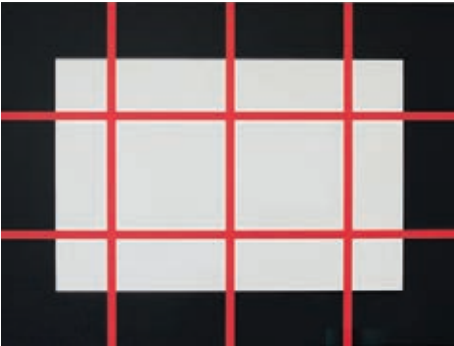
writing. Space and proportion to Judd are not just mutually dependent; they are one and the same, simultaneously the means and the end, with one determining the other. Their conjoined nature underscores the importance of process in Judd's work: "...to me, the process is first and primary and in a way is the conclusion."²⁴ That the process begins with space reveals that space is, in fact, "the conclusion." This consistent engagement with the material fact of space, regardless of whether the project was an artwork or architectural project, undoubtedly contributed to the ease with which Judd was able to change disciplinary hats.

Space insinuates itself into the line between Judd's art and architecture, inflating it into a space of confluence. Space was Judd's mother material, supreme above all others that bind his art with his architecture. Judd's often begins with the circumscription of space: specifying the dimensions of a canvas (while still a painter), defining the volume of an object, delineating an enclosure by erecting a perimeter wall. So defined, space becomes substantive and can then be simply and non-hierarchically partitioned: it can be "cut," "separated," "surrounded," "doubled," "quartered," "divided," or "subdivided."²⁵ Judd's writings are peppered with such operatives. Objects, likewise, can be "arranged," in space; "aligned," or "centered;" they can be collected to "enclose" space. Space is, quite literally, Judd's blank canvas, awaiting the artist – or architect – to render it visible.²⁶

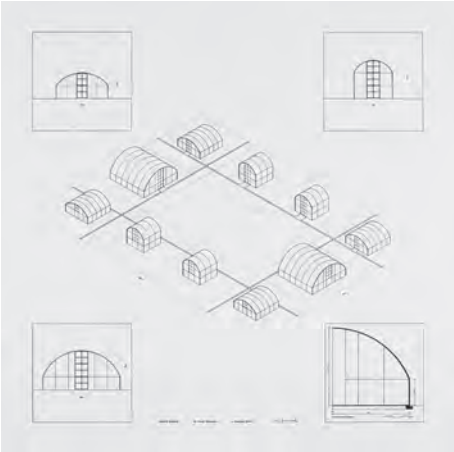
"Proportion is specific and identifiable in art and architecture and creates our space and time."

/ Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1983,"
Architektur, 177.

Judd's space rejects the unconstrained freedom of modernism's universal space to realize a precisely constructed, but nonetheless neutral, limit determined by numbers fixed in non-arbitrary, non-referential proportional relationships. This requires edges and surfaces – boundaries – for space becomes architecture only when, in Judd's words, this objective of "visible reasonableness" is achieved. As Richard Shiff explains, "What [proportion] actually provided or facilitated is the crux. To put it Judd's way, the numbers produced space – space to be lived. They brought sensory, intellectual experience into the present and held it there. Using simple ratios directly and obviously, Judd avoided the indirectness that he understood as having undermined so much contemporary practice."²⁷ Comparing one of Judd's characteristic woodblock prints with the layout for the Concrete Buildings (1985-89) Judd designed for Chinati (which Marianne Stockebrand, in her preface to *Donald Judd: Architektur*, called "the most uncompromising version of Judd's architecture")²⁸ may serve



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3 Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1993
60 x 80 cm (23 1/2 x 31 1/2 in)
Image © Judd Foundation
Donald Judd Art © Judd Foundation / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

4 Donald Judd, axonometric drawing for the
concrete buildings at the Chinati Foundation,
drawing by Claude Armstrong and Donna
Cohen, 1987, ink on tracing paper, 42 x 42 in
Image © Judd Foundation
Donald Judd Art © Judd Foundation / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

There are slight deviations from the proportional ideal in the as-found condition. The porch slab, for example, measures 65'-11" along the south edge and 65'-8" along the north, and the spacing of the columns varies within the range of a few inches, but given the remote location of the cabin, the primitive working conditions, and the use of rough cut stone masonry, such anomalies hardly surprising. Overall, the inconsistencies are indiscernible and the intention is clear.

as an illustration. Major and minor grids, defined by lines and blocks of color, elucidate a proportional logic in the creation of the space of the woodblock print [3]. Judd explicitly describes the use of a similar strategy in his plan for the Concrete Buildings [4]: “The ten buildings are centered on ten squares of twelve, the two in the middle remaining empty. Narrow walks on a grid determined by the doors of the buildings connect them all, making two grids, one major but not linear, and one minor but linear.”²⁹ The grids, in other words, predetermine the disposition of objects in space and devise the plan, the primary purpose of which, architecturally speaking, is to collect a work’s parts into a recognizable and meaningful whole. The location of architectural elements – doors and walks – implicitly ensures the legibility of the spatial scaffold underpinning the work, even if the lines themselves are absent.

The Concrete Buildings, the woodblock print, and the plan of the San Antonio cabin [5] each display an ordering framework that is strikingly similar and proportionally consistent. With the cabin, it appears that Judd drew inspiration from the placement of the existing windows and doors, and from its length-by-width dimensions to then decide simple modifications that subsequently return the order to the viewer in legible form. The width of the new porch, for example, (in plan, a spatial border, the lines of which define the major grid) is 8’, duplicating that of the porch space carved from the rectangle delineating the original plan. Adding eight feet to each of the cabin’s four sides results in a new overall footprint of 44’x66’ – a ratio of 2:3 that Judd favored. Lines struck through the center of the existing windows on the west side divide the 44’ into three even spaces of 14’-8”. The porch columns on the north and south elevations are located at 22’ on center which, when paired with the 14’-8”, establishes a minor, linear grid subdividing the primary unit into nine smaller modules that echo its 2:3 proportion. Finally, the roof was raised one foot, so that the negative space between the columns corresponds to a 1:2 ratio.³⁰

Judd was to employ a similar strategy later in the redesign of a former hotel at Eichholteren, Switzerland (1987-92; see [6]. There too he enlarged the footprint of the structure (in this case by adding a “plinth,” not a porch, but again a mediating interval) employing proportions derived from the existing structure, and in this case he was explicit about the reasons governing his decisions: “There will be a granite terrace around the building, two-thirds of the width of the building, except at the front, which will be one-half. A low granite balustrade, 50 x 50cm, out one-half the width of the building

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Judd considered symmetry "the rule" and asymmetry, which "indicates the absence of a reason," "the exception." "...I long ago reached an agreement with what I consider the primary condition: art, for myself, and architecture for everyone, should always be symmetrical except for a good reason." (Judd, "Symmetry," *Architektur*, 190). He later added that "reasonable particulars, such as the site or the function" were acceptable causes of asymmetry (Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987," *Architektur*, 198). Interestingly, this echoes Otto Wagner who, in 1896 wrote, "Only where the shape of the site, purpose, means, or reasons of utility in general make compliance with symmetry impossible is an unsymmetrical solution justified." (Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to this Field of Art* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), 86.) Judd owned two copies of Wagner's book.

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Judd, "Una Stanza per Panza, 1990," *Writings*, 656. A new floor of square, hard-fired, clay "Saltillo" tiles was laid over the original concrete slab at the time the cabin was renovated. It continues outside to mark the extent of the original building, but does not encroach on – and in fact helps define – the space of the bordering porch. It appears to have been thoughtfully set as an uninterrupted grid with one row of tile running the length of the house through the middle of the opening of the interior communicating doors. The doors are centrally and axially aligned, and the tile calls attention to the symmetrical partitioning of space.

33

"Report of a Debate.," *RIBA Journal* 65 (1957): 460-61. Smithson, in a somewhat backhanded comment, called attention to the continued "present interest in America in systems of proportion," adding they were, "just an academic post-mortem of our European post-war impulse, as also is this debate at the RIBA."

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Rudolf Wittkower, *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture* (New York: Trustees of Columbia, 1963).

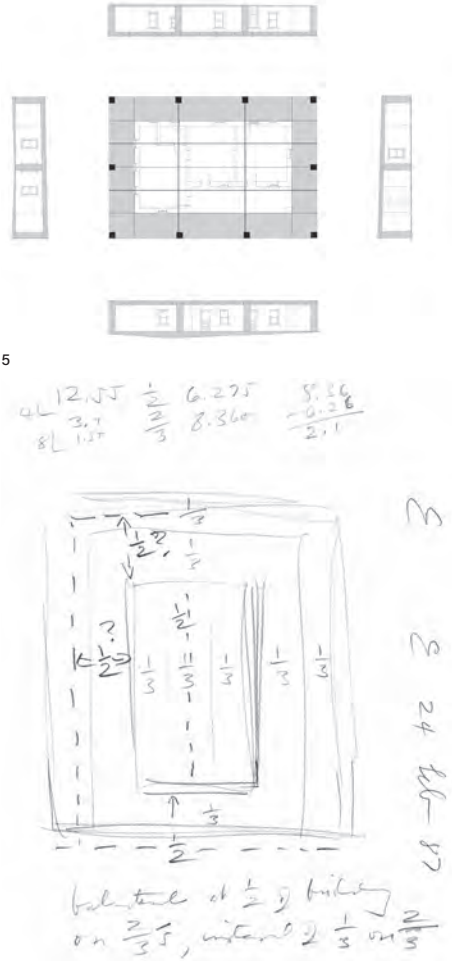
35

One of the few times Judd does mention Wittkower in his writing, he refers to him as a "philistine" for rejecting his proposed thesis topic on Ingres (Judd, "A Long Discussion Not About Masterpieces But Why There Are So Few of Them, Part II," *Writings*, 386). He was, however, appreciative of Wittkower's historical study on Bernini, which he called a "pretty thorough job" (Judd, "Jackson Pollock," *Writings*, 195).

from the building will divide the terrace – the balustrade will not be at the edge. One-half the width of the building, marked by a solid line of green granite, 50 x 50cm, will be superimposed on a broad plane of grey granite two-thirds of the width of the building.”³¹

The San Antonio cabin and Eichholteren projects serve to elucidate Judd’s larger architectural ideology and provide us with one means of more critically dissecting his architectural work. Judd’s insistence on the primacy of proportion and symmetry as fundamental organizing devices in his work would seem at first to be anachronistic in an era then dominated by the Modernist view that such historically-aligned referents were incidental, if not irrelevant; both were regarded as irrevocably bound to the retrograde traditions Modernism sought to break with (Le Corbusier, with his Modular, and his followers, remained one notable exception to the rule).³² Despite a brief resurgence in interest in proportion that followed in the wake of the publication of Rudolph Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* in 1949 and Colin Rowe’s extremely influential *Mathematics and the Ideal Villa* and *Mannerism in Modern Architecture* in 1947 and 1950, respectively, by the time Judd enrolled as a master’s degree candidate – under Wittkower – at Columbia in 1957, international interest in proportion was again on the wane. A referendum held that same year by the Royal Institute of British Architects on the motion that “Systems of Proportion make good design easier and bad design more difficult” was, in fact, formally defeated in a 48-60 vote, with Peter Smithson notably arguing that it would not contribute to architecture’s cultural significance.³³

Wittkower, however, continued to write on issues pertaining to proportion throughout the time Judd attended Columbia, delivering his last paper, “Le Corbusier’s Modular,” in 1961.³⁴ Although Judd never credits Wittkower with influencing his work, it is reasonable to assume that Judd was aware of the debate and Wittkower’s ongoing attempts to argue for the continued relevance of proportional study in contemporary practice, and he would undoubtedly have been introduced to his methods of proportional analysis.³⁵ In a note to himself written 5 January 1993, Judd demonstrates a sympathetic appreciation of the aesthetic power of proportion and, in language and tone, strongly echoes Wittkower’s own descriptive prose: “The façade of [Alberti’s] St. Maria Novella is a square, which is obvious. The distance between the base of the triangle and the line of its band is equal to the distance between the lower line of the band and the edges of the vaults. The temple front is square. The peak of its triangle marks both squares. The triangle and the band are equal in height. The volutes are each half the temple square, two fourths



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Judd, "Notes, 1993," *Writings*, 807. Compare Judd's description with Wittkower's analysis of the same church: "The central bay of the upper storey forms a perfect square, the side of which are equal to half the width of the whole storey. Two squares of that same size encase the pediment and upper entablature which together are thus exactly as high as the storey under them. Half the side of this square corresponds to the width of the upper side bays and is also equal to the height of the attic. The same unit defines the proportions of the entrance bay. The height of the entrance bay is one and a half times its width, so that the relation of width to height is here two to three..." (Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1971), 45-6.) Wittkower also notes that the "Proportions recommended by Alberti are the simple relations of one to one, one to two, one to three, two to three, three to four, etc," the same as those Judd favored: "...the fact is that we can see the simplest proportions, 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, and guess at more" (Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1983," *Architektur*, 177). A copy of Wittkower's book is in Judd's library in Marfa.

- 5 San Antonio cabin plan and elevations. Judd's modifications are highlighted. The grid expresses the primary underlying proportional skeleton. Drawings by the author from measurements taken on site. ©Judith Birdsong, 2017
- 6 Donald Judd sketch for Eichholzeren, 24 February 1987, pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 in Image © Judd Foundation Donald Judd Art © Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

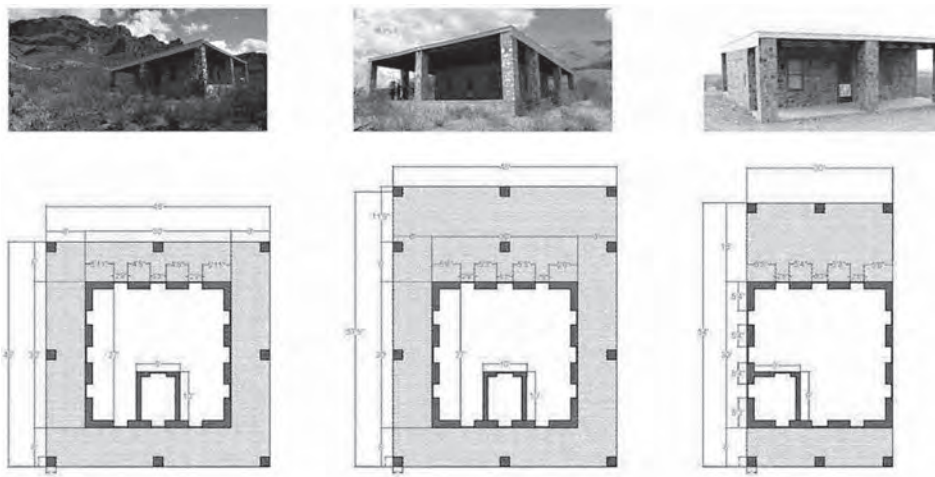
in the center and one forth on each side. And they are one-fourth high, right triangles of a square one-fourth the square of the temple.”³⁶

Judd conceives of proportion, however, in profoundly different way from that of Alberti for whom the interdependence of art and a *symbolically resonant* geometry was evidence of the harmonic confluence of the earthly and cosmic realms. Proportion so conceived, bound as it was to transcendental aims, is culturally constructed; it refers to that which physically absent but present by inference. Judd’s empties his proportional systems of any such associative content so that they can assume a pure and non-referential aspect. As a result, they become, in essence, a technical instrument and an effective means of ridding his artwork (and, presumably, his architecture) of any residual compositional effect, which he equated with lingering European formalism. And this is exactly how Judd employed it, as one of his many “mute” tools (together with proportion’s siblings, symmetry and grid) for delimiting space and organizing objects in space so defined. It finds its locus solely in the intellect and its justification in man’s ability to discern the logic anchoring the artist’s decisions, but it no related in any way to the external world.

Returning to the other cabins built by the Friedrichs after the completion of the San Antonio cabin, I believe we can find evidence of one important difference, for Judd, between mere “building” and architecture. But to do so requires a brief detour.

In its refusal of gesture or authorial signature – in the absence of the artist’s literal touch – Judd’s art work and that of many artists collected under the critically-prescribed umbrella of “minimalism,” occasionally suffered for the seeming effortlessness of its conception and birth. “I could do that” was the all-too-often dismissive reaction of a public not alert to the radical underpinnings of the movement; or to the nuanced refinement of joinery, materiality, proportion, placement, and execution that together, in Judd’s work, contributed to the success of the piece.

The uninitiated public was not alone in their insensitive assessment. In 1989, Judd brought suit against the Italian collector, Count Guiseppe Panza di Biumo, for fabricating a Judd piece without his input or authorization using a simple sketch by Judd that he had purchased on the open market. Judd was not one to keep such matters in the family (although he did call the need to go public “vulgar”); nor did he suffer fools lightly. Those he felt were guilty of sacrificing ethical responsibility to ambition or those that ran afoul of his strong held beliefs often felt Judd’s wrath at the end of the his pen. Judd authored an “opinion,” published in



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Judd, "Una Stanza per Panza, 1990," *Writings*, 656.

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Judd, *ibid*, 675.

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Judd, *ibid*, 632.

7 Orona, Baviza, and Herman cabins, Chinati Mountains State Natural Area. Photographs and drawings by Justin Fleury, courtesy Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (reprinted with permission). ©Justin Fleury, 2017

four parts in *Kunst Intern* in 1990 positioning Panza at the center of an impassioned polemic on art, power, the gallery system, museums, collectors, authenticity, and authorship. It is interesting for what it reveals about where Judd locates the “art” in the artwork.

Judd wrote: “The galvanized surface [of the unauthorized work] was very different from the first, very soft and delicate. The widths of the panels at the corners and ends were different because the room was different and because Panza never asked about these important decisions. ... Since to Panza the shape only has to get up off the paper, the nature of the material and of the surface and the details of the construction are all irrelevant. Panza does not even bother to inform himself of the intervals between parts, which were wrong in the four plywood works which he made for Rivoli and exhibited in Madrid. We got to a great deal of trouble to get a certain kind of plywood and the details of the construction are so unusual that the carpentry has become unique. But Panza doesn’t care; what I require is too expensive. Consequently Panza makes mock-ups, fakes. ... The worst aspect of the work in Varese was that the galvanized iron panels sat on a strip of wood because of the concave floor, confusing the intent of the work as a plane in front of another pane, the wall.”³⁷ In a personal letter to Panza, he is more succinct: “The technology and craftsmanship of my work is part of the art. Work made without my supervision is not my work.”³⁸

Materiality, details, the relationship of the artwork to its host space, interval, and craft all serve to distinguish a “mock-up” or “fake” from “art.” Can we likewise separate Judd’s “architecture” from mere building by peering into the divide between the original and the copy? That much of the work built in the 1980s and early 1990s failed to meet Judd’s criteria necessary for a building to claim status as architecture is clear in a statement again taken from his open letter to Panza: “Architecture [today] is not comprehensible, is not spatial, and is not even functional.” – implying, of course, that true architecture must, at the very least, be all three.³⁹

Beyond a formal purity and similar material palette, a close examination of the remaining three cabins (now named Orona, Baviza, and Hermano, shown in) almost immediately reveals the absence of Judd’s *comprehensibility* – the requisite proportional skeleton – that characterizes the San Antonio cabin and gives it its architectural authority. [7] The Friedrichs seem to have simply appropriated certain dimensions from the San Antonio Cabin – the eight foot wide porch, for example – and applied them indiscriminately to these new constructions without recognizing that they were derived from, and

43 Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987, *Architektur*, 196-8. Judd's rules are, in order, "The relationship of all visible things should be considered," Second, "...all visible things are important. As in art, contrary to some, there are no public and private types, nor in architecture should there be. The difference between buildings is in the function, not in the "style," and in whether they are big or small, not in whether they are grand or modest." "Three: the particulars of architecture are not a nuisance, but sources of good architecture. Failures of common sense are also aesthetically disagreeable, such as a waste of money or a disregard for the site." Four, "...the function of a building, one thing which separates architecture from art [is an interesting consideration from which new ideas for buildings arise]. Consideration of the function is enjoyable." Five: "Small Is Beautiful." Never make anything (politically as well) bigger than necessary." "Six, which should have been first: new land should not be built upon." "Seven: all buildings and cities should be agreeable and liveable." "Eight: as '*klein ist schön*,' ['small is beautiful'] so is simple. ...As to simplicity, to me symmetry is the given and asymmetry is the exception, caused only by reasonable particulars, such as the site or the function. ...And to have simplicity and symmetry, proportion is crucial; we see simple proportions. Much of the quality of a structure lies in these." Expanded definitions and variations on these appear in "14 September 1990," and "28 November 1990," in Judd, "Notes, 1990," *Writings*, 623 and 627, respectively.

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Judd, "Ayala de Chinati, *Architektur*, 60.

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Judd, *ibid.*

responsible to, a wholly different structure. That there is a *superficial* proportional division of space and the axial symmetry Judd favored can't be denied – Judd's love of quartered squares, which he employed in the design of his windows at the artillery sheds and characteristic pivoting doors, is certainly apparent – but the holistic, consistent, and recognizable order that Judd considered requisite is absent; the cabins do not make a “coherent, intelligent space.”⁴⁰ It is obvious from Judd's letter to Philippa that the Friedrichs, like Panza, were guilty of “badly duplicating” his work, operating without a deep and sympathetic understanding of his motivating forces, thereby debasing his ideas, and in his letter to Philippa, Judd dismisses them as “buildings,” well shy of “architecture.”

“I remember you saying how much you like the land and intended to protect it. Yet you've bulldozed wide roads everywhere, even alongside the old ones, with large drainage cuts, just as AJ Rod, the appalling redneck businessman from Houston, has done to his land. I'm ashamed that I told you about Mesquite.”

/ Excerpt, Letter to Philippa Friedrich,
25 August 1983, Donald Judd Texas
©2017 Judd Foundation

In the above-referenced photograph [2], Judd sits with his back to the house, looking out toward the hills beyond; he turns toward the landscape. This is, quite probably, the orientation any visitor would assume. Certainly, the unidentified guest beyond Judd sits looking in the same direction. Judd was ardent in his adoration of the land and in his defense of the environment, and he felt contemporary architecture was a complicit participant in the destruction of the earth; he once proudly declared, “I've never built anything on new land.”⁴¹

Judd wrote, “Here, everywhere, the destruction of new land is a brutality. Nearby a man bought a nearly untouched ranch three or four years ago, bulldozed roads everywhere so he could shoot deer without walks, and last fall died. In another direction a pair cut their land to pieces for no reason at all. Within a real view of the world and the universe this violence would be a sin.”⁴² I believe the pair he was referring to was the Friedrichs. This was written in 1987, the same year Judd first offers us his “rules” for building. Number six (which, as he says, “should have been first”) reads, “new land should not be built upon.”⁴³ He closes the same essay by reiterating, “All ideas, seemingly simple and easy, are difficult for people to understand. One of the most difficult is the one of

45 Judd, "Notes, 1990," *Writings*, 623. He was also remarkably prescient, voicing concern over the destruction of the ozone layer as early as 1989.

46 Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987, *Architektur*, 196-8

44 Judd, *Writings*, 496. On 14 September, 1990, he wrote "Order of importance: 1. Preservation of land;" again, on 28 November 1990, he reiterates, "Rules in order of importance: 1. Preservation of the land. Don't build." (Judd, "Notes, 1990," *Writings*, 623 and 627, respectively.)

47 Judd, "Art and Architecture 1987, *Architektur*, 197.

48 Judd, "Marfa, Texas 1985," *Writings*, 432.

49 Judd, "A Long Discussion," *Writings*, 175.

50 Judd, "Notes, January to August, 1991," *Writings*, 701.

leaving the land alone: Leave it alone or return it to its natural state.”⁴⁴ Judd refined his rules over time, but his concern for the land—and by extension, the environment—always topped the list.⁴⁵

Judd’s eighth and final rule reads, as ‘*klein ist schön*,’ [‘small is beautiful’] so is simple. ...And to have simplicity and symmetry, proportion is crucial; we see simple proportions. Much of the quality of a structure lies in these.”⁴⁶ The Friedrichs were thus guilty of violating two of Judd’s rules. In addition to “debasement” his ideas in the design of the later cabins (breaking rule eight), they were built on undisturbed land, far removed from one another, requiring the introduction of new roads and infrastructure as well as the leveling of the building site thereby grossly violating Judd’s first and most important rule. This, then, was the transgression the Friedrichs were most guilty of and explains the rancorous tone of the letter.

Given Judd’s insistence that art deny any referential inflection, it is no surprise that the architects he relentlessly condoned in his writing and lectures were the leading figures of then-current Post-modernist style: Philip Johnson, Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Robert AM Stern; or those, like Frank Gehry, who Judd thought were guilty of unnecessary and self-conscious formal indulgence. (“Forms’ for their own sake, despite function,” he wrote, “are ridiculous.”⁴⁷) At a time when the discipline was mired in theoretical debates over the locus of signification in architecture, Judd simply bypassed the argument altogether to produce built work that denied signification entirely. Judd was obviously aware he was operating in the margins: “In contrast to the prevailing regurgitated art and architecture, I think I’m working directly toward something new in both.”⁴⁸ The correspondence between his art and architecture is most clear here; he offers up both as an anchoring antidote to the prevailing crisis, and proportion and symmetry, commonly employed, provided him with the non-subjective means to this non-referential end. This didn’t relieve his architecture of functional considerations; on the contrary, he called function one of architecture’s “informative delights and not burdens,”⁴⁹ and mourned the fact that most architects had, in his opinion, relinquished responsibility to a building’s purpose in their pursuit of image-laden solutions. He derisively called them, among other things, “exterior decorators.”⁵⁰ Judd, however, qualifies what could have been mistaken for a determinist position, stating, “Form may not closely follow function, but my axiom is that form should never violate the function,” and thus neatly avoids being labeled a regressive functionalist. Whether Judd’s art, which he freed from relational bias through the agency of mute grids and proportional order, was engendered by his

“This should help teach them how to live.”

/ Donald Judd

- 51 The reasons behind Judd’s decision to give up architecture to become an artist are often quoted: “While I was in the army in 47, helping to occupy Korea, before going to college, my assignment to myself was to decide between being an architect or an artist, which to me was being a painter. Art was the most likely in the balance, but the decisive weight was that in architecture it was necessary to deal with the clients and the public. This seemed impossible to me, as did the business of a firm.” (Judd, “Art and Architecture, 1987, *Architektur*, 195).
- 52 For more on the causal relationship between Minimalist art and architecture, see Mark Linder, *Nothing Less Than Literal: Architecture After Minimalism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).
- 53 Jamie Dearing, email message to the author, August 5, 2017.
- 54 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Vision of Donald Judd*, ed. Marianne Stockebrand (Marfa: The Chinati Foundation and Yale University Press, 2010), 21.
- 55 Judd, “Art and Architecture, 1983,” *Architektur*, 177.

work under Wittkower while at Columbia, or whether his non-referential architectural works resulted from his artistic explorations remains to be seen. But it is tempting to imagine a scenario where Judd's early (and sustained) interest in architecture⁵¹, provided his art with the impetus necessary to help change the course of 20th century art.⁵²

I asked Judd's assistant, Jamie Dearing, what he remembered about the day he visited the cabin and took the photograph. He replied, "The day Don and I and the kids went to inspect his house, he seemed pleased. I assumed everything done there (up to that point) was his. I remember him saying something like, 'This should help teach them how to live.' Not said as an insult, but as a genuine expression of hope."⁵³ Exactly what Judd meant by this is hard to say, but when we teach, we attempt to explain, in words, or we demonstrate, by example. With the redesign of the cabin, Judd created "a microcosm that satisfied the demands of the intellect as well as the senses."⁵⁴ Recalling another quote from Judd: Proportion is "thought and feeling undivided, since it is unity and harmony, easy or difficult, and often peace and quiet. ...Proportion and in fact all intelligence in art is instantly understood, at least by some. It's a myth that difficult art is difficult."⁵⁵