

**Attractors in Thought**

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**George Kubler and Donald Judd**

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Also known as The Block, La Mansana de Chinati is Donald Judd's living and work compound in Marfa, Texas, adapted and reconfigured from former U.S. Army structures, now curated and conserved by Judd Foundation. The artist's library contains approximately 13,000 volumes in philosophy, art history, general history and science.

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Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, first edition. The mention of this work was first seen by the authors as a passage of reference in Kirk Varnedoe's *Pictures of Nothing*, Princeton, 2006.

3

Kubler, page viii.

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Kubler, page 37.

## PLANE 1

On a shelf of Donald Judd's library at La Mansana de Chinati<sup>1</sup> is a book by art historian George Kubler, *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things*.<sup>2</sup> A thin volume, this work develops an alternative framework for thinking about and experiencing the history of art. Counter to the practice of positioning art within the time and culture of the artists' lives in search of meaning, Kubler advances the idea of systematic observation of the thing itself, noting invention, replication and discontinuance relative to all things that are made, from tools to fashion. It's a disassembly of centuries-old assumptions of how to regard a work of art. Kubler's thesis is a rejection of art history based on biological, biographical and literary methodologies. Published in 1962, the work is also a poignant reminder of the unpredictability of a future the reader exists within now – the globalized artworld market, virtual reality and the commodification of everything ever invented into a consumer product or experience.

Kubler presents his remarks as a new mental model for encountering artifacts with new terms describing artworks that address “morphological problems of duration in series and sequence.”<sup>3</sup> The crux of his argument lies in the explication of *linked solutions* over time and their apparent *form-class*. Appropriating concepts from mathematics, anthropology, linguistics and other sciences, Kubler outlines the nature of the emergence of *formal sequences*, their development and degradation – “a historical network of gradually altered repetitions of the same trait.”<sup>4</sup>

The authors of this essay, while working together on an exhibition of Judd's architecture, encounter Kubler's writings and his term “*Prime Object*”; the term strikes the authors with the clear, resonant ring of the bell of recognition, a remarkable correspondence to Judd's work in architecture in the 1980's- 1990's. In Kubler's words:

“...Prime Objects and Replications denote principal inventions and the entire system of replicas, reproductions, copies, reductions, transfers, and derivations, floating in the wake of an important work of art... Prime objects resemble the prime numbers of mathematics because no conclusive rule is known to govern the appearance of either... The two phenomena now escape regulation. Prime numbers have no



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Kubler, page 39.



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Judd, *Specific Objects*, 1964, in Donald Judd Writings, pages 134-145.

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Donald Judd has been insufficiently credited with proposing essential aspects of the project in collaboration with Zwimpfer Architects. Archival materials at Judd Foundation support his primary role in the massing and exterior of the structure. Certain interior aspects are inarguably the result of his rules of spatial clarity. See Peter Merian Haus Basel, Basel, Birkhauser, 2002, page 23.

8

Raskin, page 65.

Peter Merian Haus Basel (Bahnhof Ost), Model Basel Switzerland 1992-1994 (project completed in 2000)

Donald Judd façade (Concept and Design) in collaboration with Zwimpfer Partners and Burgen Nissen Wenziaft

divisors other than themselves and unity; prime objects likewise resist decomposition in being original entities. Their character as primes is not explained by their antecedents, and their order in history is enigmatic.”<sup>5</sup>

Kubler cites works of art as examples of “*prime objects*”, and also classifies a large portion of historic examples of “prime objects” as buildings. He acknowledges the existence of architectural typology, in his term, *form-classes*. Judd likely encountered Kubler’s writings while a student of Philosophy at Columbia University.

Judd went on to physically create a new spatial art. In the spirit of Kubler he proposed an alternative understanding of the art object, at different scales, including landscape and architecture. Judd’s *Specific Objects* essay from 1964, and other writings that comment on problems of art history, style labels and criticism, seem to take positions reasonably attributable to Kubler as leverage for his own body of writings and constructed works.<sup>6</sup>

## PLANE 2

We use Kubler’s framework for “Prime Objects and Replications” to consider the most complete work of architecture by Donald Judd, the Peter Merian Haus office building in Basel, Switzerland (formerly known, while Judd worked on it, as the “Bahnhof Ost”).<sup>7</sup>

How this urban intervention came to be is not so interesting as its existence among lesser contemporary works. The configurational and formal aspects of this structure demonstrate the breadth of the artist’s thinking concerning habitable space, urban conditions and the sensation of surface effects. The building has both the appearance of a monolith and an assemblage of discreet volumes. Like many of Judd’s works of art, there is present “disparity”<sup>8</sup> within unity. The solid and void of the massing of the structure gives the expression of a closed series, within an overall object that may be one of a development of further objects in an open sequence. The predominant extension of the building is horizontal, but it’s also comprised of several vertically-oriented spaces within.

Peter Merian Haus is of a type, the multi-tenant office center, but breaks with this type radically. First, it’s not possible for a tenant to occupy a floor fully across the length of the building. There are six service cores with separate entrances, common facilities and courtyard-like spaces that join somewhat like a rowhouse. Second, the public can walk or ride a bicycle through the entire length of the building overlooking the depressed rail yard and connecting to existing streets. This horizontal space also connects to each entrance court to the six cores. Third, there are at each sixth part an internal light court that penetrates the



floor plates under large skylight-roofs. Fourth, there is no hierarchy of forms based on the center, or front or back of the structure; everyone can enter or leave the building according to their needs at several points.

All the exterior vertical surfaces are glazed with a subtly rippled blue-green tinted panel of varying transparency, depending on its location, and offset 5 cm outboard of the enclosing walls. The system is uniformly modular, but the effects are dynamic, atmospheric, changing in real experience.

Is Peter Merian Haus a *Prime Object* as George Kubler might have seen it? It has certain attributes and aspects that convince, but contemporary architecture in an urban context is a complicated proposition, with a multiplicity of functional and environmental pressures that affect our mental concept of the work and experience of the place it has established in Basel.

The authors believe that as he developed as an architect Judd evolved in his thinking of the object *per se* and its surroundings. This is consistent with the evolution of his critiques of contemporary, conventional relations in space of art objects and environments. Judd avoided the embellishment of traditional construction techniques and avoided the use of cutting-edge or experimental materials most viewers would have not seen. At Peter Marian Haus Judd's choice and juxtaposition of familiar contemporary materials within a three-dimensional grid presented unique combinations that are difficult to place in time.

### **PLANE 3**

The oldest surviving crafted objects are flaked and polished stones. There exist lacunae of hundreds of centuries in the known record of human-made objects. Collections of stone tools evidence incremental refinements and adaptations over millennia. New sciences such as paleogeology, climatology and genetics are revealing rapid and ever-increasing knowledge of the context of human existence and evolution hardly imaginable by Kubler writing in 1961. Kubler realized that the characterization of Western civilization as a process of periods of peak human achievement and progress had run its course. At the time of publication of "The Shape of Time", works of Abstract Expressionism were beginning to show signs of saturation and exhaustion. Artists of Judd's generation were either exploring other ways of producing imaginary space and signs, or making real objects of intentional material and actual space.

The evidence of time – the light of stars, organic life and death, day and night – is Form, Form in movement, Form in light, Form in shadow. Kubler presents the visual classification of made things, at different scales,

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Kubler, page 6.

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Judd, Donald, Donald Judd Writings, page 75.

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Raskin, page 65.

marking time, as a mental concept. The mental concept of still Forms and Objects as marks of time over a much greater span of recorded knowledge is of course, the subject of paleontology, archeology and cosmology.

Kubler points out that we have a reliable record of the evolution of objects and products of human invention expanding far beyond the two hundred year span of the narrative of western art history, and that all objects made by humans are first and foremost works of craft; in his view good artists understand this continuum and the best art demonstrates these facts. The imposed layering of meaning by recent art historians is unnecessary and only serves to distract from the objects themselves. The span of physical evidence of human craft, for example, is on the order of 200 times the length of the span of the past 10,000 years, the span of civilizations.

Kubler's critique of the biographical approach to art history, which tends to validate concepts of genius and prophecy, contrarily acknowledges the fact that some artists are successful and some not, regardless of their talent. By using the analogy of a railroad system, Kubler asks us to regard the products of an artist's life, not so much signifiers of creative dominance, but as the result of a fortuitous and contingent *entrance* into the "track system" of the artworld.<sup>9</sup>

Donald Judd had what Kubler would call a fortuitous *entrance* in time and place in New York. He was not the only one, but "*temperament, talent and position*" converged to his remarkable advantage. Around 1965, Judd had established "the concatenation that will grow"<sup>10</sup> in the fabrication of series and sequences of "boxes", "stacks" and "progressions." These works coexisted distinctively, and still do, within the incredible economic pluralism, globalization and densification of the artworld since that time.

To clarify the distinction between the biographical and the morphological approach to art history, Kubler states his goal of visualizing time. The emergence and recurrence of made things, their classification, their development and their end, is his field of encounter. Individual lives, specific dates and human events can never be completely documented or explained, only the things that remain.

In what seems, at first reading, a discursive speculation on the nature of time, we observe Kubler's repositioning of his thesis from the perspective of common sensory experience. Essentially, time seems to be nothing. We claim its existence only through signs. The *actuality* of time is not graspable.<sup>11</sup> Society constructs instruments measuring time, but time has no existence in and of itself, consciously, ontologically. Judd consciously arranged formal sequences that avoided content such as a narrative in time. Kubler set the framework for Judd's experiment with the thing that could be a work of art and architecture.



## PLANE 4

In his early thirties, Donald Judd was searching for a way to make art that was not a copy or derivative of the best art of his time. Whether or not it can be said he was aware of saturation or stasis in the dominance of the paintings of Abstract Expressionism and to a lesser extent sculpture, Judd wanted to make things that did not exist before.

As both an art critic and an artist, observing his contemporaries and by his own experimentation, trial and error, Judd began to understand a painting of his time as a three-dimensional object, weak but an object nonetheless. A new kind of painting could have a visible spatial structure within itself, not just the front surface, and a relationship to other surfaces around it in real space, not illusionistic space.

Judd was dissatisfied with the many conditions of making art and the business of art and art criticism. He could not help but be analytical and dubious of the a priori assumptions in the arc of Western culture and art as they were predominantly expressed. Judd knew that Pollock, Newman, and Rothko and others had made breakthroughs, but, in addition, they were misinterpreted by the museums and the critics. Judd had plenty of experience looking at modern and contemporary art, being a reviewer for art journals for several years.

His critical eye brought him to respectfully consider works which evidenced new qualities, some but not all using a new technique. Judd discovered that Form and sensation could be unprecedented as a unity, strongly present in some scale with the body, but not conclusive or complete, rather transitional and open-ended as a series of objects.

Judd wrote that in the early process of making painting more like three-dimensional works he had a revelation. He placed some of the works on the floor, and they seemed fine that way. He realized that walls, floors and ceilings were not mere backgrounds, but engaged environments.<sup>12</sup>

Two reinventions inherent in Judd's works of art are worth describing in relation to Kubler's definition of made things as potentially *Prime Objects* and their *Replications*. One, Judd created both "closed series and open sequences" *within* the body of the type (*form-class*). The one hundred aluminum works at Marfa, Texas are an example of this. Two, Judd developed several types of three-dimensional objects that do not appear to show signs of evolutionary change or refinement. None of the series Judd produced are more interesting than the previous iterations or the subsequent ones, thus denying the reading of them as developments in time at all.

- 13  
Kubler, George, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America – The Mexican, Maya and Andean Peoples*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962; *Building the Escorial*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.
- 14  
Summers, Introduction.
- 15  
O'Donnell, page 21.

**PLANE 5**

The *Shape of Time* did not revolutionize the writing of art history. But Kubler wrote other highly-regarded works on specific works of architecture that are consistent with the framework he established in the subject text, and lectured into the 1980's at Yale University.<sup>13</sup> One of his former students, David Summers, wrote his own magnum opus of art history, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, published in 2003.<sup>14</sup> The work is an elaborate, kaleidoscopic volume of almost 700 pages laying out his revisionist theory. A recent scholarly review called it "one of the most ambitious and compelling attempts to develop a new analytic framework for art-historical analysis across geographic and temporal boundaries."<sup>15</sup> We can detect the influence of Kubler in this more recent work by Summers, in the emphasis of key concepts, including the fundamental importance of the act of the making of things (*facture*) and the shift necessary in our point of view from mere visual analysis to spatial analysis (*historical practices*). Where Kubler is posing the object as evidence of real time, Summer is expanding the framework to regard the object in real space.

We are taking the liberty to expand the field of correspondences between Kubler's and Judd's thought beyond their lifetimes. The discourse on the critical reading of art and its history, including architecture history, continues, and the outstanding works, whenever their time of emergence, appear to be always new. We are also stepping out of the trap of biographical chronology of cause and effect, influencer and the contemporary influenced, by bridging another set of correspondences with the help of Summers. The filaments of thought and action connecting Kubler, Judd and Summers are not bound by time since they concern ever-present existential questions. The binders of these correspondences is architectural space expressed essentially.

The *Shape of Time* is a philosophical work. Kubler is presenting problems that pose the question of what is real and what is illusory. The language he uses to build his argument affects our perceptions. His concern is with the historical and pervasive use of specific analogous frameworks in the writing of art history. Kubler's alternative perspective extracts concepts from contemporary science and philosophy. He acknowledges that reality is ever-unfolding in the heuristics of the making of things. Kubler ends his essay at the cusp in his time of events of incredible diversity and technical complexity. The analogous frameworks that he employs ask the reader to reconsider what relation to current knowledge have things been and are things being made. The *Shape of Time* is a primer for taking the



long, wide view of what endures physically and conceptually, as expressed in the existence and quality of objects, including buildings.

David Summers consequent work *Real Spaces* is explicit in its references to contemporary philosophers and presents a vast array of case studies from all eras and diverse cultures. The relevant purpose of his project is to consider world art as manifestations of the reification of materials and space. His thesis presents the historical divergence of our perceptual awareness of space *per se* as either real or virtual. Summers emphasizes the importance of the body in the experience of real space and its engendering of the discovery and application of planarity. Judd's works are predominantly planar.

## PLANE 6

"3 January 1976

/ Judd, in Donald Judd Writings, page 283.

For a long time I've considered time to be nothing. Any time that you think of is only the relation or sequence of events, how long a person lives, human biology, or how many times the earth goes around the sun. There is no other time than this. If you remove all of the events there is nothing. Space, also, is nothing. There are things in it, variously related. If you remove these and the means of measurement between them, their phenomena, most importantly light-years, there is nothing."

Donald Judd used cylinders in several works of art and architecture in a variety of ways. Some of the early floor and wall-mounted art series incorporated segments of cylindrical space both as protruding and negative forms.<sup>16</sup> In every case, the cylinder or cylindrical segment is attached to a planar surface. One of the early outdoor works of art Judd had fabricated in New Canaan, Connecticut, is a thick ring of concrete where the top surface is level and the curved surfaces of the low cylindrical shape vary according to the sloped ground. The cylindrical volume of space is difficult to mentally measure relative to other shapes of space because the central generator of curved form is in space and not expressed on the surface.

The surface-generated plane of various proportions is Judd's primary *form-class* throughout his works. Walls, panels, floors, platforms and shelves of rectangular shape and depth give order to the perception and experience of a three-dimensional volume. He avoided, if possible, the construction of cubical space because of its implications of perfection and stasis.



Judd proposed the construction of objects that contained space one could observe freely and directly. The space could be imagined as accessible to a smaller version of oneself or actually walked through. What is distinctive in Judd's work is that any narrative, feeling, meaning or sign one might find while being in the space is in one's head, and there is only bare material and form configured in scale to respect the presence of a spatial concept within and around the object. The twelve anodized aluminum floor works, first installed in 1989 in Germany, are a set of examples of Judd's hollowing out of time by an uncomplicated containment of space. Though the construction of the works is clear, never hidden, the effects are complex. Large aluminum sheets are assembled as prisms only open at the top, with elements in each prism of the same material, some in different anodized colors, or sheets of colored Plexiglas intervening in various ways within the overall volume.

The work also proposes Thinness. The container and the dividing elements seem to be as thin as possible. The qualities that result – lightness, sharpness and delicacy all contrast with the prisms' scale. Thinness allows for the use of isotropic materials and quiet junctures. Thinness is present in many of Judd's works, notably the impossibly thin ensemble of concrete buildings in Marfa. All Judd's works are propositions in architecture. Realized as art and buildings in real spaces, they are contingent, hand-crafted, *Prime Objects* among all things beautifully-made.

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## CREDITS

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