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Oral history interview with Donald Judd, 1965 February 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Donald Judd on February 3, 1965. The interview was conducted by Bruce Hooton for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Donald Judd and Bruce Hooton have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BRUCE HOOTON: I don't understand the new geometric art. Norman Mailer complained the other day in the New York Times about the square look of things. You know, everything is simplified and square, and too simplified.

DONALD JUDD: Well, I really only know about myself, my reasons for doing it. They certainly aren't connected with the old geometric art. My work isn't geometric in that sense. One of the reasons, I guess, that my stuff is geometric is that I want it to be simple; also I want it to be non-naturalistic, non-imagistic, and non-expressionistic. The simplicity goes all the way back through my other paintings, almost to when I first started working.

MR. HOOTON: Where did you first work?

MR. JUDD: I was born in Missouri and lived around the Middle West, moved to Philadelphia during World War II--no, just before it, before Pearl Harbor. And then we moved to New Jersey and I went to the Art Students League.

MR. HOOTON: How long did you study at the Art Students League?

MR. JUDD: For about three years--three and a half years.

MR. HOOTON: With whom?

MR. JUDD: With Louis Bouché the first two years; one year with Louis Bosa; about a year with Will Barnet; and summers with several people--Marsh, Hale and Johnson. I don't know if you remember him; he used to teach contour drawing. I don't remember his first name; he's dead now. And Bernard Klonis. Yes, I went to school here. I began studying art in '48 or so, and then I moved here in 1953. Before that I commuted in from New Jersey to save money because I was doing both Columbia and the Art students League.

MR. HOOTON: Did you take a degree at Colombia?

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: In art?

MR. JUDD: In philosophy. I figured I had a major in effect at the League.

MR. HOOTON: You must...Reinhardt, when did you first meet Reinhardt?

MR. JUDD: A couple of years ago.

MR. HOOTON: Were you painting or working more or less the same way before you met him?

MR. JUDD: I don't remember being directly influenced by him. I admired his work, but also that of quite a few other people. One thing, I was a painter until maybe '61 or '62--I'll have to figure out the dates--and then I started doing three-dimensional things. The paintings are not exactly geometric, but it's there. Geometric art as such doesn't mean all that much to me. A lot of the people I admire aren't doing it. I don't feel the connection is that way.

MR. HOOTON: A drawing I saw of yours had a kind of inverted Stonehenge feeling. There was a certain monumentality even though....

MR. JUDD: It was blatant.

MR. HOOTON: What?

MR. JUDD: It is a post and lintel arrangement.

MR. HOOTON: There's no kind of philosophical point to the whole thing? I mean, what would one say if one decides to cut out certain things in the same way? One decides to throw paint; one decided not to throw paint; or to simplify things. I mean...what?

MR. JUDD: Well, I am not interested in the kind of expression that you have when you paint a painting with brush strokes. It's all right, but it's already done and I want to do something new. I didn't want to get into something which is played out and narrow. I want to do as I like, invent my own interests. Of course, that doesn't mean that people who, like Newman, still paint are worn out. But I think that's a particular kind of experience involving a certain immediacy between you and the canvass, you and the particular kind of experience of that particular moment. I think what I'm trying to deal with is something more long range than that in a way, more obscure perhaps, more involved with things that happen over a longer time perhaps. At least it's another area of experience.

MR. HOOTON: In other words, you're trying to lay the foundation for sort of thought. I mean, one might say that you try to kind of stop time for a minute, or stop certainly Abstract Expressionism in its lesser form of a great teaching gimmick across the country, because anybody can do it. It's like a great thought--anybody can throw paint.

MR. JUDD: Well, that can be said of drawing or anything. It depends on...anybody can do it if it isn't too good. But I'm not against Abstract Expressionism. I think it's just as difficult and just as good as other forms have been. As usual, it had a superfluous number of followers.

MR. HOOTON: As any group does.

MR. JUDD: Yes, and that certainly helped to run it down.

MR. HOOTON: It gave ammunition to people who were totally against it.

MR. JUDD: Yes, and it was accepted too rigidly and I think that...

MR. HOOTON: That's actually what killed it.

MR. JUDD: No, several of the main people failed. I think Kline's painting went down hill, and de Kooning's. Pollock died, of course. And Pollock, Kline and de Kooning are considered the typical Expressionists. But even if Pollock had lived and de Kooning had kept up his work, new things would have come along. Those people seem pretty tolerant. Now it's only some writers and followers who are rigid. Newman, whose work I think is great, and Rothko are not characteristically Expressionist.

MR. HOOTON: They include themselves.

MR. JUDD: And I don't think there's been any public reaction against them.

MR. HOOTON: Against Abstract Expressionism?

MR. JUDD: Well, against Newman and Rothko, or that...they've been very influential with a lot of people my age.

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MR. HOOTON: About the idea of simplicity?

MR. JUDD: Usually when someone says a thing is too simple, they're saying that certain familiar things aren't there, and they're seeing a couple maybe that are left, which they count as a couple, that's all. But actually there may be those couple of things and several new things to which they aren't paying attention. These may be quite complex. At the moment, when someone says it's too simple, they mean that it doesn't have the composition that the Abstract Expressionist painting, or Cubist, or whatever--going back--had. It doesn't have a lot of parts working against one another, a lot of colors working against one another. If it doesn't have this, it's simple to them. Now it may have other things which are really pretty complex. They may be read all at once. This is important to most of the best work going on now. It has to have a wholeness to it that previous work didn't have, but still, within that, it's not all as simple s you say.

MR. HOOTON: If you're going to do a box, the line has to join at the right spot.

MR. JUDD: Yes. Boxes are pretty simple.

MR. HOOTON: But I mean it has to join with something like...there's a Chinese phrase for it that I can't remember, but the totality which the line does--it has to complete itself.

MR. JUDD: The corners all have to join. Even in a box you have, after all, just on the top four edges. And there are four more down the side and four around the bottom. It really isn't all that simple. And that's just plain box. But one of mine has subdivisions in it--a trough is made of a lot of subdivisions. Well, those subdivision are progressive and the progression in there is really pretty complicated. It looks like a trough with a lot of arcs along it and it's very simple if you don't start to think about the progression and the number of arcs. But if you take that into consideration it's reasonably complex.

MR. HOOTON: Just what little I saw of that box show last night and the Whitney show--I hate to say that I was kind of impressed with both shows, and even the box show, what little I saw of it, was very impressive. I mean, it's kind of overwhelming, but you know the tremendous activity going on.

MR. JUDD: There's a lot of interesting things, pretty good work. I think if you say a lot of very good work you cut it down quite a bit, but if you say there's a lot of fairly good work....

MR. HOOTON: Fairly good work....

MR. JUDD: There really is an enormous amount. MR. HOOTON :And it's incredibly varied. I mean, the whole....

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: Did you see the Whitney show?

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: What did you think of it?

MR. JUDD: Well, it was better than usual. More current.

MR. HOOTON: I did too. It's silly to say this, but I think it looked liked what a Whitney Annual ought to look like, even though I may or may not like it.

MR. JUDD: Yes, that's about the first time it has....

MR. HOOTON: It's true. I really felt that too, but they need money now, you know. They've got to be good now.

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: I mean, I went to George's for a while last night. Went to Beacham--Bob Beacham--whose paintings I don't like too much.

MR. JUDD: I don't either.

MR. HOOTON: But his drawings I think are extraordinary and he has a whole drawing show that is worth looking at. They really are kind of interesting. I mean, they are really good. And then George pipes up and said he thought they were good too, and he said, "If America had 60 more years of peace, or 50 more years of peace, we'd produce an art that is overwhelming," and I think that is true.

MR. JUDD: Peace and money.

MR. HOOTON: Peace and money. Well, yes. Peace without depression. Well, that's not his problem either. He really is kind of interested in art; he's an art lover.

MR. JUDD: I very much don't think the supposedly simple work is simpler in quality. If anything, it's perhaps more complex in quality.

MR. HOOTON: In what way?

MR. JUDD: I certainly think it's stronger in quality. The strength is the one reason why they're somewhat simpler. They have to work all at once. The older painting--well, it does have an effect all at once, I suppose, but it's of a lesser intensity than a lot of the American work in the last ten or fifteen years. You only comprehend it after you look at it part by part. I think most of the best new work is intended to have much more impact at once. You certainly see things later. I think it's meant to be understood more as a single thing--from Pollock's paintings on to the present.

MR. HOOTON: Well, Pollock actually worked very simply and he worked very directly.

MR. JUDD: Yes. Pollock is not an ordinary painter; he's not an Expressionist in the usual sense. He's always been pulled in with them, but I think he's a much more radical artist--more than de Kooning. As far as the second

generation goes, I think they missed the whole boat on his nature and importance.

MR. HOOTON: Pollock?

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: What about Gorky?

MR. JUDD: Oh, he's a nice painter, but.... Some of the drawings are very nice, but I think he's a pretty old-fashioned painter. I don't think he did anything as unusual as Pollock. Pollock looks unusual and radical even now.

MR. HOOTON: Yes, there's no question about that. Well, a genius is a genius; there's only about five geniuses in every fifty years.

MR. JUDD: Not so few as that.

MR. HOOTON: Hopper may be one, and Homer one, and Eakins.

MR. JUDD: I'll take Hopper out--I'll leave the other two.

MR. HOOTON: What?

MR. JUDD: Hopper's a good painter, but take him out of that rank.

MR. HOOTON: Well, Eakins and Homer....

MR. JUDD: Eakins and Homer, I think.

MR. HOOTON: Eakins and Homer, Hopper, and maybe Pollock--there aren't many more.

MR. JUDD: Not Hopper.

MR. HOOTON: Not Hopper? He's out?

MR. JUDD: He's too late on that and also....

MR. HOOTON: You think he's not good?

MR. JUDD: I think he's good, but I think he was too late to do what he was doing and do it first rate, for a lot of reasons.

MR. HOOTON: There's a point in that.

MR. JUDD: He's a good painter and I think he's got a lot that is pertinent to American art generally and even to, oh, Newman, maybe, almost anybody. I think that sparseness and simplicity is pervasive. Not only Hopper, it goes all the way back to Homer and beyond. There's probably more in the American tradition than people give the place credit for. I think there are certain elements you could probably trace back, maybe as far back as--I've forgotten his name--Feke, I guess.

MR. HOOTON: Feke?

MR. JUDD: Or those people. Or Copley, especially something like Copley's portrait of Paul Revere where he made a right-angle triangle. The thing is blunt and relatively uncompromised compared to European work of the time. I think it would have been somewhat irritating to Europeans of that time.

MR. HOOTON: It didn't carry all the capitals.

MR. JUDD: Yes, it was too simple, too.

MR. HOOTON: I've always kind of defended Hopper in the sense that if one had to find a painter of, say, from 1910 to 1950 that really represented America, that really described America, say, 60,000 years from now, one would see in Hopper all the literary series in art too, I mean like Dreiser, Hemingway, Wolfe, Dos Passos, all the loneliness of America and the sparseness.... Hopper represented what literature talked about. Assuming that literature speaks the truth from time to time, then Hopper is it. And I always ask who are the writers that are describing what the Abstract Expressionists are about.

MR. JUDD: I don't think description is all that important as to art representing a period much later. For one thing,

you really don't understand very much about any period from its art. I think you overestimate that.

MR. HOOTON: Well, they either glorify it or attack it.

MR. JUDD: Well, I think even if you like it, you're bound to miss a great deal that was in it at the time.

MR. HOOTON: That's true.

MR. JUDD: You see it considerably pared down. You don't know its associations and what it meant in all sorts of ways. But especially, you see the force of it and, I think, something more complex than just description. Well, for example, Asia House has Chinese bronzes now.

MR. HOOTON: I saw them.

MR. JUDD: And they are thoroughly unintelligible as far as their reasons go. They don't say anything about China at the time; but they're extremely powerful things. Somehow there is something this powerful in the culture at that time; that's all you know. I think that's all you can deal with and I don't think the fact that Hopper shows what the place looks like is all that important.

MR. HOOTON: Very good.

MR. JUDD: I sort of...I like it; I have a certain nostalgia for it. I recognize very much in Hopper that it does look like the United States; it looks like the 30's and my first impressions of everything, all of which I have to deal with and which gets mixed up in my work and probably gets mixed up in everybody else's work too. But I think it can come out in more complex ways. I think some of the things I deal with Hopper probably has dealt with also, since it's somewhat the same environment and I have pretty strong reactions to what this country looks like. It looks pretty dull and spare, and you like this and dislike it and it's very complicated. I'd like to present this more forcefully than Hopper, but not as description. But I think you have to--whatever the environment looks like, it does enter into people's art work one way or another; it's very remote or it isn't. It's remote in my work but it has to have a certain degree of ordinariness. I admire work that is exotic, such as Bontecou's and Samaras', but I suppose I work in a way within limits of ordinariness. Those limits come from what's around you, and you know what the range is. I think an artist like Bob Morris may have this problem too; it may have something to do with what everything looks like--simple shapes, and....

MR. HOOTON: There's a certain validity in what you say--in the Cubist period the cube was really what artists were interested in, not the look of Paris, which is what really killed the school of Paris, even though it looked like Paris. In Hopper certainly a strip of road with trees couldn't be anything else than America.

MR. JUDD: Well, I think there are artists who are more or less contemporary with Hopper who are more relevant. Stuart Davis has more to do with what the United States is like than Hopper. But also you have the big problem that you don't very exactly represent the United States, or the culture. You're in it and it gets mixed up in what you're doing, but you're one out of the other 200 million and you only know little parts of it and I think no one is going to represent it in a very broad, grand way. Anyway the culture is not only American.

MR. HOOTON: I guess that comes from being literary in nature. Tolstoy, to my mind, represents Russia.

MR. JUDD: Tolstoy may not be showing that much of Russia at that time even. It's hard to tell. You tend to associate the quality of the period with what's lasted--what's still good. And that quality becomes the whole period. Whatever didn't get written about or painted just goes and...but I don't much like the idea of representing the United States in my work. It's just that you live here and you are involved in your sense of what's around you--your sense of what's ordinary, for example, that I talked about.

MR. HOOTON: Is that true of most artists you know?

MR. JUDD: Is what true?

MR. HOOTON: I mean, about your feeling--do you think they would all agree with that?

MR. JUDD: Well, I don't think anyone now would say that they're painting the state of the culture of America. I think that's too grand and pompous a thing for anybody to claim. You're only dealing with whatever you know, which is a very small part of it and later on it'll look like it has something to do with the period. Obviously, the artists have something to do with one another. They tend to set up certain common qualities among themselves.

MR. HOOTON: Did you meet then, after you started painting?

MR. JUDD: After I started painting?

MR. HOOTON: Well, I mean in this whole thing--Stella--I mean, for example, I remember few years back in '60 a kind of showing....

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: '60, '61?

MR. JUDD: I met him maybe....

MR. HOOTON: Your first show was just last year, wasn't it? Did you meet painters working in a similar manner before your show, like Frank Stella or Dan Flavin?

MR. JUDD: I might have met Stella four years ago, but I didn't especially know him. I got to know him somewhat in the last couple of years. I've known Flavin for about four years, and of course he didn't show until last fall. I don't know how it may look to other people, but I think their work looks pretty diverse. Stella is opulent, for example, some other...

MR. HOOTON: Opulent?

MR. JUDD: ...some other areas, you know I don't....

MR. HOOTON: Silver paint and...?

MR. JUDD: And the purple, in general, and the weight and opulence of most of his paintings, which I like very much but which is very alien to me.

MR. HOOTON: What do you think of Louise Nevelson?

MR. JUDD: Nice but nothing special.

MR. HOOTON: Quite an opposite to.... Do you like her son Mike Nevelson? Have you seen his sparse pieces of wood?

MR. JUDD: Well, they're all right. I don't think they're remarkable. There are some other people along that line. He's not too far from Gabe Kohn and he did those things a long time ago.

MR. HOOTON: No. That's true. Raoul Hague, what do you think about Hague?

MR. JUDD: Nothing special. I don't think they're unusual artists. Nevelson's, they're nice, I guess, is the word. I think they're good secondary artists. I don't know how to evaluate them.

MR. HOOTON: Pastiche in one way or another--sort of put together.

MR. JUDD: No, it's on the level, but I'm not interested in all that composition within the little boxes, and then the black monochrome is a little swank and easy. I like...I guess the things by Newman are the best around.

MR. HOOTON: That's certainly a switch from what I heard in New York in the Fifties. Newman was not mentioned as much as Pollock, de Kooning and Kline.

MR. JUDD: Yes, I know. I don't know too much about that. It's sort of interesting. Well, you see, I suppose he looked a little geometric. I guess that was against that. But again, I don't think...I don't quite understand the different attitudes, for example, toward him and Pollock. They probably thought Pollock was acceptable because it looked like Expressionism.

MR. HOOTON: Yes. And came out of surrealism.

MR. JUDD:Yes. And that Newman wasn't, and yet to me Pollock is just as radical and unlike Expressionism as Newman.

MR. HOOTON: I never thought about that before.

MR. JUDD: And I sure don't think Newman has anything to do with old-fashioned European geometricism, which I assume they linked him with. I think his development at that time was connected with Pollock's.

MR. HOOTON: You know they always say about Ad Reinhardt, who works in a purism manner, that he is a kind of Lutheran minister. Is there something like a certain morality involved in your attitude toward art?

MR. JUDD: Well, there's a morality in that you want your work to be good, I suppose. I think most of the art now

is involved with a denial of any kind of absolute morality, or general morality. I think most of us in one way or another are involved in ideas of a fairly loose world, however it's expressed, whether obviously as in Chamberlain or just accidentally, or, oh, like Newman. His paintings are so open, you know, that they can't be read in the old ordered sense that Mondrian and other European painters had. But I don't think that geometricism is any more moral or serious than loose painting, or works like Oldenburg's, or Lichtenstein's or Westermann's. I don't think there anything pure about being geometry.

MR. HOOTON: You remember Plato, of course, on art, about the representation of objects as being the death of culture, or death of civilization. So in that sense there could be a coincidental morality implied. Oldenburg making hamburgers and trying...because hamburgers we have, and tables, and they represent things and they had them and he wanted to do away with artists.

MR. JUDD: Well, I am extremely uninterested in Plato's idea of form, pure form. I don't think geometric art is...I don't like to call it that. I don't think it's any more pure than pop art or anything else. It doesn't have anything to do with purity. There's a certain type of quality involved that can't be gotten any other way. I haven't sufficient interest in objects or anything I can see around me to do what Oldenburg does. Obviously Oldenburg's interest in what he can see around him is more immediate than mine; he has to deal with that sort of thing. I like his work a lot but I don't have that kind of interest and I don't want to be descriptive or naturalistic in any way; Oldenburg isn't in the usual sense. So for the time being I am left with fairly geometric possibilities since they don't have any of these things. I can't tell, it might prove, I don't know....

MR. HOOTON: Yes.

MR. JUDD: The geometry is partly by default. I never worked that way; I never had anything to do with the usual geometric art. I didn't know that much about European development along that line--neo-plasticism, constructivism, or any of those things.

MR. HOOTON: I met a man in a show a long time ago in New York--three or four years ago--who came in, I mean I talked to him. He had a little shop in North Carolina, I think it was, and his family made furniture. He was the son of a wealthy furniture manufacturer whose name I don't remember, even his. And he was very open and straight and he started talking and he said, "I cracked up and I was in Connecticut in a mental hospital and they taught me...part of the therapy was making frames." And he said, "I knew when those two ends joined, I knew I found them." And he set up a frame shop, a little gallery, in North Carolina somewhere--Greensboro or something like that. As I say, is there anything to that, I mean, two ends join, is that...? Do you enjoy building your pieces--making a perfect joint?

MR. JUDD: Well, in any art there are a lot of technical things that you can get to like. Building is just skilled labor, I suppose. It's a lot of work. I don't mind other people building them, but the way things go together and are made is interesting to me; I like that a lot. I pay a lot of attention to how things are done and the whole activity of building something is interesting.

MR. HOOTON: When you do it actually do you feel the edges of the wood go together?

MR. JUDD: Well, its very exasperating when you can't get it right. Usually it's just work; occasionally fun. After all, the work isn't the point; the piece is. I've had a tinsmith make a few when I've gotten hold of some money. I am just as satisfied with their joints--maybe more so--as I am with mine. Also, I can't make as many as I could conceivably buy.

MR. HOOTON: Do you know the work of Ernest Trova?

MR. JUDD: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: What do you think of it?

MR. JUDD: I think it's...I didn't see the last show. I saw the one before that.

MR. HOOTON: It's obviously being sold--a lot of money in bronze.

MR. JUDD: It's expensive.

MR. HOOTON: A thousand dollars.

MR. JUDD: I can get a pretty large galvanized iron piece for $150.

MR. HOOTON: How does his work fit it? is that kind of surrealist?

MR. JUDD: Well, I didn't see this show. I saw the one last year. It was played up as pop art.

MR. HOOTON: I don't remember that one.

MR. JUDD: But so far no particular invention.

MR. HOOTON: It seems so easy.

MR. JUDD: I guess so.

MR. HOOTON: Even though it's complex and difficult to do, it seems like anybody could come in once you had the idea and do it. That's not true of really good art, I think.

MR. JUDD: Well, it's good if it's unusual. I don't know about difficult. Maybe it's difficult to understand important things. I don't think it necessarily has to be difficult to make. Obviously I think that's irrelevant.

END OF INTERVIEW

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