

Henrik Soderstrom
on *Donald Judd*
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To Detest Fervor Without Meaning

Donald Judd had a penchant for meaning - for meaning well clarified with fitting and appropriately scaled means. His sculpture is as concentrated a visual embodiment of this fondness as his writing is a clear expression of it. Everything is in its place, comfortable but not confined by convention. Pepe Karmel wrote for the *New York Times* that Judd's work could be described but not interpreted. [\[1\]](#) Rectangles sit inside of rectangular arrangements because they are rectangles. It makes sense. It is concise. It makes room for itself to breathe.



Donald Judd, *Untitled* 1965

(In general, rectangles become the dominant vehicle in Judd's work after 1965)

An equal air of self-contentedness punctuated Judd's attitude towards the public in his later life, when he moved to the ranching town of Marfa, Texas (previously known for a James Dean film shot there) and became, as the New York Times put it, "both the Medici and the Michelangelo of the small town" on fuel provided by the Dia Foundation. [2] "He didn't make any effort to increase a public awareness of the project," said Rob Weiner, who was Judd's assistant and friend. "If the public was to come, that was fine. He wanted people to see the art. But if they didn't come, that was all right, too." [3] Judd was adamant that unsuitable placement of an artwork could distort its meaning. His fitting solution in his own work was to be extremely intentional about context, and in his later life, amidst a successful career, he chose a revamped military base in Marfa as a self-contented gallery. Its lack of flash rings in tune with his work in that what is there is what is needed.

While meaning well clarified by means (meaning form, texture, and color) was something of an ideal for Judd, means without meaning created something ghastly and stupid. His reviews of art tear in to works that have "a great deal of technical proficiency but very little evident purpose" [4] and artists whose "vocabulary exceeds" their "knowledge of its meaning." [5]

Similarly, Judd put his foot on religion and nationalism as the source of elaborate and fervent conflict devoid of real meaning. Writing about wars fueled by nationalism, Judd sawed out the assertion that "as with the European religious wars, it will be hard to understand what it [the conflict] was all about. It will just have happened and millions, maybe billions will be dead." [6]

Here lies the source of Judd's intolerance for meaningless means. War, hatred, and violence lend a despicable power to meaningless fervor when placed in the hands of nationalism and religion. This, for Judd, is the epitome of a state in which rational thought has been squelched. In such a state, the scale of fervor or action has no checks and balances. "In solving a problem," Judd writes, "an individual should join with another person or several only as a last resort. They should join a somewhat

larger group in the same way and so on out to towns, counties, states or provinces. At no point should the power exceed what is necessary to solve the problems at that point.” [7] Scale should be appropriate to the task at hand. Appropriately, this could be said as easily of Judd's sculptures as of his socio-political ideals. A sculpture addresses the person looking at it. A person is between five and six feet tall. Brydon Smith wrote for the Independent in 1995 that even Judd's large works have a human scale, meaning that a person feels comfortable around them. [8] This is anything but fervor without meaning. It is meaning and means appropriately scaled to their purpose, which is rhythmically consistent with Judd's belief that art should not presume to describe human emotion, but should just be. Consistent progressions, boxes, and stacks were both a subject and a guide for Judd's writing and practice.

[1] Pepe Karmel “Remembering the Critic Who Was a Sculptor” *The New York Times*, February 10, 1995

[2] Arthur Lubow “The Art Land” *The New York Times*, March 20th, 2005

[3] Arthur Lubow “The Art Land” *The New York Times*, March 20th, 2005

[4] Donald Judd “In the Galleries” *Arts Magazine*, February 1964

[5] Donald Judd “Reviews and Previews” *Art News*, October 1959

[6] Imperialism, Nationalism and Regionalism, Donald Judd, October 1975

[7] Imperialism, Nationalism and Regionalism, Donald Judd, October 1975

[8] A Warm Body in a Box, review by Brydon Smith for The Independent, Published January 17th, 1995