

# SURFACE

ART

## Specific Objects, Enduring Influence: Architects, Designers, and Artists on Donald Judd

Bliss Lau, Jennie C. Jones, Zak Kitnick, Josiah McElheny, Lydia Cambron, and more discuss the manifold legacy of the famed sculptor and writer.

THE EDITORS

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Donald Judd, "Untitled," 1969, on view at the Museum of Modern Art's 2020 retrospective, "JUDD." Saint Louis Art Museum. Funds given by the Shoenberg Foundation, Inc. © 2020 Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In 1978, a group of 8th-grade students from Marfa Junior School visited Donald Judd at his home and studio in that small Texas town to interview him for a documentary they were making. They asked him how he gained recognition, prompting Judd to talk about his “first serious exhibition,” at the Green Gallery in New York, 15 years earlier. At the time, “a small number of people thought it was interesting,” the artist said, while adding that not many people follow contemporary art as it is. “Slowly, over the years, your reputation builds up. It’s a little mysterious to me.”

Today, of course, Judd’s influence is everywhere. His rigorously abstract art has informed high-end architecture and fly-by-night Airbnbs; lifestyle brands and self-help philosophies; and artists across disciplines. This season, the artist, who died in



Donald Judd, Corner Chair, 1994, in clear anodized aluminum. Courtesy Donald Judd Furniture. Copyright Judd Foundation.

1994, at the age of 65, is the toast of New York, where the expansive breadth of his work has been everywhere on view. The Museum of Modern Art has given over its whole sixth floor to a thrilling retrospective, and galleries all over town have staged shows: David Zwirner has pieces from his last 25 years, Gagosian a sprawling 1980 installation, Mignoni late drawings; and 192 Books woodcuts. The Judd Foundation, located in the artist's longtime SoHo home at 101 Spring Street (which he conceived as an artwork in its own right), is showing still more prints. These shows are, of course, all on pause right now.

To mark this focus on Judd, *Surface's* editors spoke with designers, architects, and artists about the effect that he has had on their work. — *The Editors*

### **Arlene Shechet**

Artist, who currently has a solo show at Pace in New York

When I went to art school, Minimalism reigned and if you were a sculptor, it was beyond question that all things would be on the floor. Thinking about it now, it's amazing how limited the conversations were regarding the actual ideas Judd put forth.

After school, in 1983, I began living in lower Manhattan and passed by 101 Spring on a daily basis. I swooned over the stately magnificence of the cast-iron building and its broadly windowed ground floor inhabited by shifting, almost ordinary, stuff. An old wooden desk would appear or a desk and a small Andre brick stack or an off-hand fluorescent fixture by Flavin. It was an unassuming evolving play of space, form and light, and it didn't feel "minimal" to me, it felt "right," and also, fabulously luxurious. The rugged, imperfect aesthetic it declared, especially as seen in Judd's early work, was immensely appealing and I soaked it up.

A dozen years ago I spent time in Marfa and surrounding towns and dug into the Texas version of Judd's world. Buildings, blankets, books, dishes, pots, more buildings, other people's artworks ... whole colorful worlds ... I began to see Judd as something of a grand-scale hoarder. I experienced his voracious hunger for places, trains, craft, color, pattern, and always, open space. He seemed always to privilege his desires and uncompromising vision. Gotta love that.

## **Lydia Cambron**

*Cofounder, Jonald Dudd, an annual exhibition of contemporary design*

For me, Judd's work being between art and design was exactly why we were discussing him—as an example of the kind of work we wanted to make space for within Design Week. Work that wasn't isolated to art or design (and from individuals that might not even identify as a designer) but that clearly drew from and influenced the field of design.

Chris pronounced his name as “Jonald Dudd” and we immediately knew that was the name of the exhibition! “JONALDDUDD” as a title gave us exactly what we needed—an icon and antihero of design to subvert the focus of Design Week, and the irreverent sense humor to set the tone for the exhibition.

## **Bliss Lau**

*Founder, Bliss Lau Studio*

I'd always admired Donald Judd's work, but a visit to 101 Spring was transformative. In 2010 I was invited to a Judd Foundation event called Food and Fodder. After a discussion led by my friend, the artist David Goodman, we were invited to tour the space.

That's when I was struck by the second-floor kitchen. When I look back 10 years later, I realize how deeply it has affected my perspective on design.

I immediately noticed the shelving structure he created for his flatware. There was this long, precisely designed narrow shelf with each fork and knife placed independently, perfectly aligned. I saw everything, each utensil on display, but at the same time all of the pieces disappeared into something beautiful and singular. This was kitchen organization, but I could've been looking at a peaceful Japanese garden.

Normally these would be purely functional items confined to a drawer or a cabinet, but Judd turned everyday flatware into a work of art intended to be seen and experienced. His elegantly simple decision reminded me why I love being a designer; to take the familiar and transform it into something unexpected.

For me, Judd's aesthetic goes beyond sculpture or installation, it enters into an intangible place that brings physical calm.

That slim shelf at 101 Spring taught me a lesson about intention. Whenever I design a new piece of jewelry or when I place one of my pieces on display, I'm always chasing that beautiful feeling of calm and serenity that Judd's work evokes.



Installation photograph of the Donald Judd exhibition in Tate Modern, 2004. © Tate, London 2017.

**Marten Claesson, Eero Koivisto, and Ola Rune**  
*Founders, Claesson Koivisto Rune*

We were first exposed to “real installations” of Donald Judd’s work IRL when in NY as exchange students from Stockholm at Parsons in New York in the ’90s. We had seen it previously, but mostly in permanent exhibitions together with other artists work in various museums. A compromise—according to Judd—we found out later.

Since we were studying architecture we were really taken by the space in his “sculptures” (he denied doing sculpture himself.) He’s maybe the best space manipulator in the history of contemporary art. And it’s not only what’s going on in

the space of the work itself, but also how the works relate to each other and to the larger room/space where it's placed.

His best artwork in our opinion is the "100 milled works" in two adjacent buildings in Marfa, Texas. The 100 large reflective aluminum "boxes" are not only reflecting the other boxes in the building, but also the room itself, the other (moving) visitors, and most importantly, the surrounding landscape on the two partitioned sides of the building, which have floor-to-ceiling windows. When you stand there it feels as if the landscape flows through the building. It's an amazing, almost out-of-body experience when you start noticing it. That alone is worth the long trip to Marfa.

Another part of his work that is maybe not so understood outside of the architecture and art community is his architecture. Both in his interiors and in his conversions of existing buildings. His placement of art, furniture and objects, and his way of creating tension/un-tension between walls, volumes, planes, and openings is extremely well done. This is something that's sometimes subtle and therefore almost impossible to experience in photographs (or in exhibitions of his artwork) and therefore is needed to go see in person. We learned a lot from that.

To us his work has been of great importance, and together with the influence of Japanese architecture, maybe the most influential for our own work in both architecture and design.

## **Josiah McElheny**

### Artist

In a lecture in 2003 at Dia [published in Artforum in 2004], I discussed how everybody talked about Judd's work being industrially produced, and how that struck me as very odd. Basically none of his work is industrially produced. Almost everything was made by art school-trained do-it-yourselfers, like woodworkers, or people who became very skilled by teaching themselves. The whole point of it is that it has the look of industrial culture, but it's made by hand. At that time, it had to be made by hand. What does it mean for it to hide its hand-ness or for that hand-ness to be missing, and why is it so important for us to believe that it's not made by hand? Or why is it so important to have that sense of labor missing? That is deeply embedded in the meaning of his work and the appearance of his work.

But things have shifted since 2003. Then, you really did not have commonplace 3D digital rendering or CNC routers. To make a simple, truly square piece of plywood,

up until 10 years ago, was actually extremely difficult. Simple geometry like a square seemed special when Judd was growing up. A square seems to have no specialness now. It seems like IKEA—it's boring. Whereas before it was emblematic of an effort of pairing down an almost spiritual way. We live in an age of digital reproduction, when two- and three-dimensional designs can be made with photographic-like reproducibility, with such "perfection," that Judd's "perfection" looks less unusual and more special at the same time. It looks more like everything else, yet it subtly diverges from what's being done. I think you can see its handmade-ness more now.

Judd was making this work in one age, and now these works are being exhibited in another age. We assume art is solid and stable, and then the world can suddenly make us see that the art isn't so solid. Today, labor is still there in making objects, but in the software, in the making of the machine itself and the operation of the machine. Labor has become so far distanced and so disconnected from the hand that it becomes even more dehumanized, if you will. The iPhone is the perfect example. People have been poisoned by the horrible solvents required to clean the back part of the screen—it doesn't look like it, but it's a handmade object. Labor never disappears completely. It only gets further obfuscated and hidden.

**Brian Volk-Zimmerman**

*Founder, VOLK*

What I have always admired about Donald Judd's body of artwork and furniture design was the simplicity of his forms and the confidence he had in rejecting decorative elements. The work achieved its beauty through order, proportion, and harmony. These concepts are what have proven most inspiring for my own work. Although my designs are certainly more decorative, my process is rooted in stripping away the non-essential in an attempt to arrive at the simplest iteration of each idea.



Installation view of "Prints: 1992" at the Judd Foundation, New York. Art: © 2020 Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image: Timothy Doyle © 2020 Judd Foundation.

## **Elizabeth Lowrey**

*Principal and director of interior architecture, Elkus Manfredi Architects*

Donald Judd's work has been part of my life since I can remember, well before my father [Austin Lowrey] was a visiting artist in residence at the Chinati Foundation and staged his installation work, *Coming Home to Marfa*, at the Locker Plant in Marfa, Texas. Judd's artwork, his spaces, and his furniture have had a profound influence on how I see things, particularly how light interacts with surfaces and how shadows create new dimensions. Judd's work also taught me that less is more, and that there is beauty in the negative space.

## **Thomas Kovachevich**

*Artist*

I always marveled at the refinement of his work—the thinking that he put in it, the attention to detail, the demand on the fabricator, even the spacing of all the screws. I



that the work is the work and doesn't have other meanings, and that he also wanted to avoid optical issues. But then, last night, at the MoMA retrospective, I'm going, "Wow." You look into some of these Plexiglass boxes, and it's so deep, you feel like you're looking into some infinite pool. I found so many illusionistic things that pleased me. People try to make a manifesto, and then reality contradicts them.

Even though I never met him, Judd's public demeanor—the demeanor that I would obtain from his writings—was a little scary to me. He seemed like a stern taskmaster and the kind of professor who would rap your knuckles. I always thought, "Whoa, this guy's kind of spooky." However, I was really taken with the elegance of what he did and his kind of thinking. I'm more intuitive and sort of emotional in my approach to art. He is more frontal brain, more rational, more like a thinker, which I admire. His work points out that the rational can be beautiful, like when you hear scientists say, "What a beautiful equation," or, "What an elegant solution." What comes to mind, right away, is DNA—the description and discovery of it. Watson and Crick's paper is one page long, very concise, and very elegant, which may be, in my mind, among the greatest masterpieces of minimalism.



Donald Judd, "untitled, 1980. Plywood, 144 x 960 x 48 inches. © 2020 Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Jennie C. Jones**  
*Artist*

My first encounter with Judd as a young art student was a fundamental consideration of object-hood. As a painter, the satisfaction of stretching a canvas with copper tacks, the thumping upon completion of it to hear the sound of toughness—that in itself was somehow enough. Judd prompted me to consider that it just might be. There are social and political ramifications to rejecting “subject” and embracing “object”—as an African-American woman, much more is at stake. Minimalism becomes a radical gesture empowering a refusal to sell my narrative or bodies.

Contemplating paintings as objects, not as windows into other worlds, is where I found resolution. That paintings create shadows with their physical presence on the walls they grace, that the edges might cast a bounce of light and hum when those side surfaces are not ignored. Juddish?

In a way, Judd’s influence on my practice might be an ability to pay attention to the spaces around a sculpture, the negative space. A marginal space observed by someone operating in the margins.

## **Stephen Vitiello**

### Artist

For me, the magic of Judd’s work was revealed when I first went to Marfa in 2002. I’d previously seen individual pieces in galleries but encountering the work in the artillery sheds, seeing the light reflecting off of the structures, seeing them change with the light was where I felt how alive the work could be. On that same trip, I was invited to make sound recordings in and around the Judds. The acoustics in the artillery shed are crazy. I realize I crossed any number of lines—but listening to the creaking and cracking as the metal expanded in the summer heat inspired me to actually put contact mics on the sculptures themselves. It was a bit of a joke about listening to the hushed voice of a minimalist master but it also connected to the work I had done in other spaces (including the World Trade Center) of listening to surface vibration and enjoying how the subtlest shifts of the environment can create sonic ripples through materials.

I returned to Marfa in 2008 and was invited to do an installation with Steve Roden as part of the Marfa sessions and to perform with Steve as well. We were allowed to make use of the artillery sheds again with the sworn promise not to touch the sculptures. We were far more respectful this time. The audience sat outside and listened to us and watched us through the glass. Our sounds were re-amplified

was privy too. As the sunset, we disappeared. The sound was again inspired by the beauty and power of Judd's boxes as well as the space that he had chosen to situate them.

## **Zak Kitnick**

### Artist

#### ZK on DJ

It used to be that the kings and queens were plump and the peasants were starving. Now the billionaires are rail thin and the less fortunate are overweight.

It's also the case that it's cheap to have a lot of crap, and there is nothing more opulent than a shelf with nothing on it, or a box with nothing in it.

I am not an art historian and I don't pretend to be, but it seems that Judd's influence here is undeniable.

While there were generations of direct influence, maybe what's interesting now is the influence on other parts of life,

how this minimal aesthetic has been incorporated, from the drug store to the venture-capital-backed salad bar, used to sell.

And how this aesthetic has been integrated into our homes.

When I look at a Judd sculpture, I have to remind myself, there was a time before 'form-follows-function' design was bastardized into a style.

I have to remind myself, there was a time before every American factory was converted into a museum whether Mass MoCA or Dia Beacon.

I also have to remind myself that he didn't make the sculptures, not because 'The Work Need Not Be Built' as Lawrence Weiner told us, but because somebody else could do it better (as Weiner's 1969 Declaration of Intent also allowed).

It was more like 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' as I understand it.

He was an ideas guy and he learned from looking, not making.

The results inspired other results, and this was the process.

His production was a very specific kind of industrial production, almost surgical grade.

Where a traditional factory-produced steel shelf would have all the makings, all the wear and tear of its own production, before it was all erased, before it was all painted gray, Judd's use of material and color didn't allow for this.

An anodized aluminum sculpture must be handled with care from conception.

But maybe what is most interesting to me is Judd's furniture, or his relationship to it.

In 1987 Kippenberger took a Richter painting, put four legs on it, made a table,

and in the process complicated systems of interpretation and value as they pertain to art and design.

He did it once.

Judd made sculptures that looked like furniture then furniture that looked like his sculptures, but were not.

He did it again and again with slight variations.

In this process, he never seemed content to let a sculpture be the least it could be, but always seemed content to let a chair be a (very good) chair.

But what do I know?

I'm guilty. I make sculptures, those empty shelves.

The ones always awaiting and negating supply.

Ones that examine the boundaries between art, décor, and utility.

Ones that look at the intersections of commodity production and architectural space alongside that of sculpture and design.

Ones that explore how these parallel worlds borrow from each other equally, acquiring and defusing each other's potential.

Judd solved some problems, left a few, and created more.

All I know is that I don't like the work.

I love the work.