

"Untitled" 1962

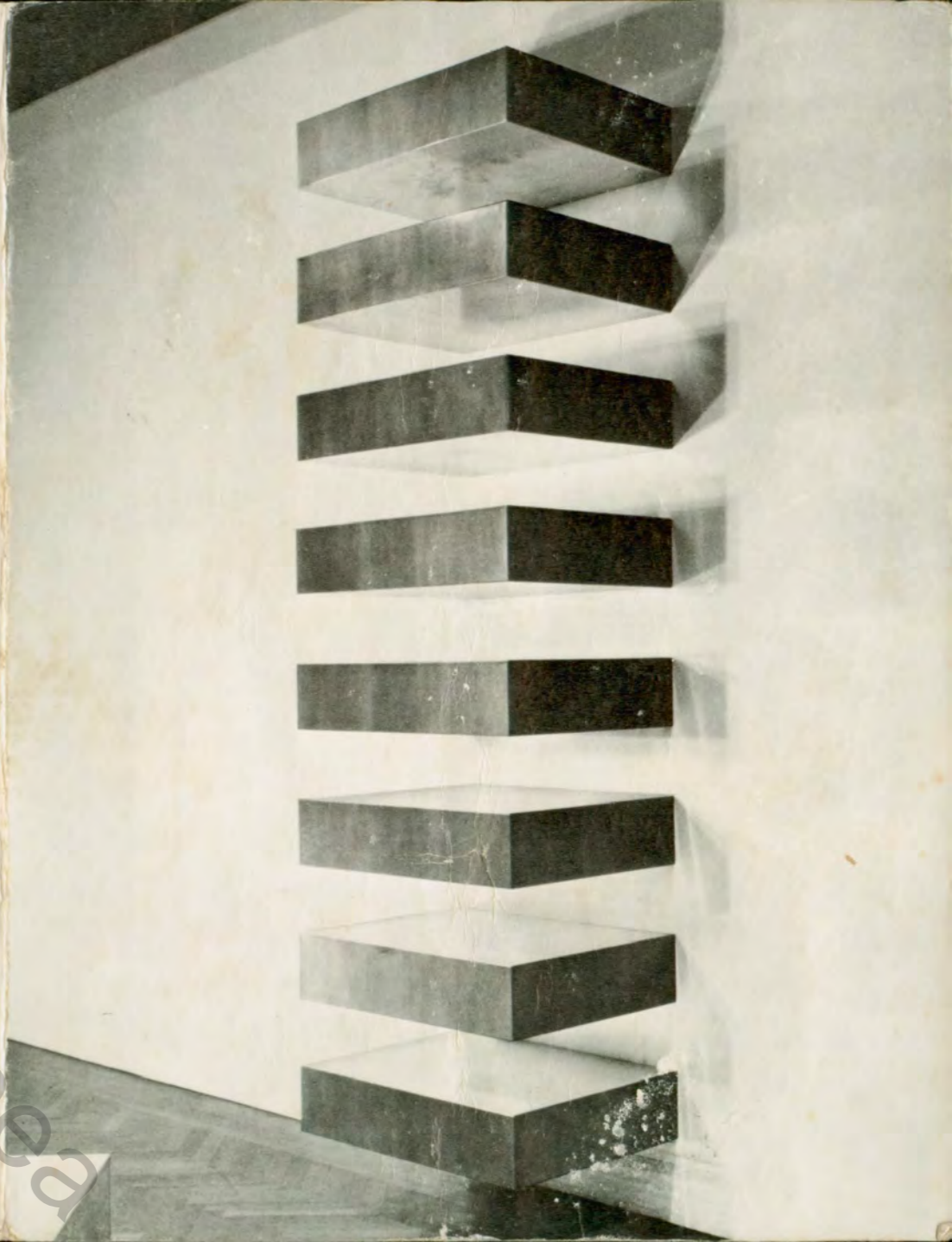


"Untitled" 1963

Cover: "Untitled" 1967

**BlumHelman** 20 West 57th Street, New York

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# DONALD JUDD

## Early Works

9 November—3 December 1983

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### Some Notes on Early Judd

Today, Donald Judd's early work strikes an invigorating, tonic note much as it did almost twenty years ago when it was first seen at the Green Gallery and later at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Then, as now, the crisp, clear and powerful shapes and colors of Judd's work offered a distinct and refreshing alternative to a prevailing taste for heavily textured, painterly art. Judd's work, through its own methods, demonstrates a way of making art every bit as personal as a more obviously expressionist idiom. His art of the sixties and later contains more than a few of what are now classic works in the modernist lexicon, key steps in the evolution of post-1945 art. In the present exhibition we can trace Judd's course as he emerged as a major artist whose work is predicated on the specific, physical qualities of three dimensions.

Like many artists of his generation, Judd began as a painter, and a very good one at that; had he chosen to continue, he would have been one of the best painters of his generation. But Judd was bothered by the inherent illusionism of painting, which seemed to him too restrictive. He found that it lacked the strength and the apparently limitless possibilities of what he termed the "actual materials, actual color and actual space of three dimensions."<sup>1</sup> He moved first into a type of relief combining painting and sand, and then added solid objects. In 1962 he made his first freestanding wood constructions, among them a rough-hewn, audacious piece consisting of two vertical sections joined by a length of pipe. By the next year, in order to eliminate the last vestiges of the anthropomorphic, always evident in traditional, vertically-oriented sculpture, he had done his first low-lying structures which were truly independent of the wall and the implied edges of a painting. These rectangular box forms—single, closed, relatively inert and often with a trough-like section cut from them—provided a basic format for his work that has continued in various permutations to the present day.

Since 1964 this format has become progressively lighter in feeling, more linear and tensile, with sharper distinctions of edges and shapes. He achieved this fine articulation to great extent by taking advantage of a wide range of industrial, non-art materials, with the pieces made by a commercial fabricator under his close supervision. By using transparent plexiglass, he could reveal the interior volume of the boxes, and, by the late sixties, some of the brass boxes were literally opened, making the work appear lighter than it actually is. This characteristic is an extension of an old American tradition that Judd saw, running from Copley to the Precisionists, in which there was a desire to reduce the sense of bulk. With increasing confidence, in the middle and late sixties, Judd broadened the scale of his work, extending it into a greater complexity of structure and effect. From the single structure, he began to make repeated units which at first were connected to each other and then stood as entirely separate

entities within a serial relation. With these sculptural developments, Judd felt he had overcome the illusionistic problems inherent in painting, and could move variants of the box structure back to the wall, engendering a whole family of works that ranged from single elements, including progressions, to the multiple units of the stacks, the cubes and, later, the open rectangles. Upon reflection, Judd's art shows a distinct and continuous formal evolution that has not always been immediately apparent.

Crucial to his art is an acute, finely-honed sense of color, which from the start accounted in large measure for the richness of his work. Strong color, acting as an agent of formal definition, sharpens the articulation of each part, and carries the piece over an extended area. At first, Judd applied color directly to the structure, but after 1963 he relied more extensively on the variety and contrast of hues and textures intrinsic to his materials. In the plexiglass and stainless steel boxes, or in the lustrous finish of the brass pieces, the color glows from within the material, thus fusing color and light in a single surface in a way paralleling the work of Dan Flavin and Larry Bell.

Color is not the only element that connects Judd's work to other, surprisingly diverse art of the early sixties that in fact shared similar concerns. In his extensive writings, for example, Judd speaks of his admiration for Oldenburg's work because the "usual subordinate shapes became the whole form;"<sup>2</sup> so too, he was struck by the structure of Lee Bontecou's three-dimensional work, writing that it was "co-extensive with its total shape."<sup>3</sup> The fact that di Suvero placed his sculpture directly on the floor without a pedestal appealed to Judd because it removed the piece from the realm of the ideal and placed it squarely in the known, tangible world. He always has thought highly of John Chamberlain's crushed metal sculptures, seemingly at opposite poles from his own work, because the "skin has a close correlation to the volume it defines."<sup>4</sup>

Several terms that now seem misleading and not fully accurate—Reductive, Minimal, ABC art come to mind—were commonly applied to Judd's art. But, in fact, there is patently nothing reduced, minimal or simplistic about the clarity, color or impact of these works. Judd's emergence in the sixties should be seen as part of an ongoing tradition, dating back to Seurat and Gris, that expunged the momentary and the transitory in favor of the non-painterly, attaining an art of the clear and concise statement. As such, Judd's art is a high and individual accomplishment that yields continued rewards through fullness of expression rendered with what Ingres termed "absolute exactitude."

—William C. Agee

#### Footnotes

- 1 *Arts*, September, 1963, p. 53.
- 2 *Arts*, September, 1964, p. 63.
- 3 *Arts*, April, 1965, p. 17.
- 4 *Arts*, March, 1962, p. 48.