



Artillery Shed, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

Donald Judd, The Project At Marfa

William F. Stern

Photography by Paul Hester

You can almost get to Marfa by train, taking the Houston to Alpine leg of The Sunset Limited which leaves Houston around midnight and arrives in Alpine the next morning. Alpine is 20 miles east of Marfa. By car the 200-mile trip from El Paso takes about three hours, traveling south along the Rio Grande, then east through the region known as the Trans Pecos and south again through the Davis Mountains. Either by train or car the journey to Marfa is full of the unexpected.

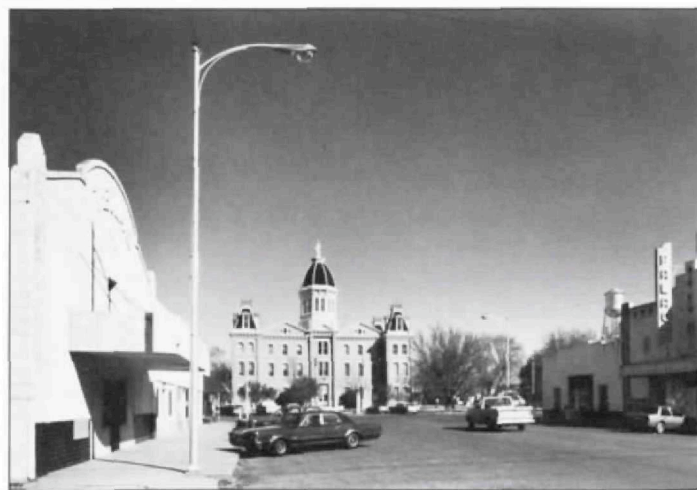
The land in this part of Texas is sparsely settled: Spanish colonials called it *despoblado*, the unpopulated place. The population density, 55,000 people in an area the size of South Carolina, is among the lowest in the United States. The land in the Trans Pecos is surprisingly green, not nearly so arid or wasted as the land of the Texas oil fields to the north. Limestone mountains poke out along the horizon plane of the spare landscape. The sky is perfectly clear, and in the dry air objects in the distance appear closer than they really are. An intense sunlight sharpens the focus so that every bush, rock, and flower stands out against the sky and earth, catching the luminous light and casting distinct deep shadows.

Marfa is the seat of Presidio County. Like its courthouse, the town seems bigger than its population of 2,500. It also seems suspended in another time – America before the era of instant culture and fast food. Its main street, Highland Avenue, is very wide with two-story commercial buildings from the '20s and '30s along sidewalks protected by projecting flat awnings. The Paisano hotel, built in the '20s Mediterranean rival style, was where the cast and crew from the movie *Giant* stayed during the filming outside Marfa. The 1886 courthouse with its slender tower and dome dominates the center of town. Marfa is an agricultural town, and there are a lot of warehouses. The Southern Pacific Railroad runs through town with a side rail to the Godbold Feed Mill grain elevator, the tall structure first seen when approaching the town.

Across the street from the feed mill is the Texas home of artist Donald Judd. In 1971, Judd came to Marfa to make a summer home. At the time he was living in New York City, in a seven-story Soho loft building where he also made and kept his work. He still spends time there. Judd came to Marfa looking for a place to raise his son and daughter, away from the crowded world of New York. He liked Marfa's relative emptiness, its detachment. Also, land and property were cheap.

Two years later, he bought a block of abandoned warehouses. He enclosed the warehouse block, making a compound for himself, his family, and his art. He

joined three brick-and-concrete warehouses to form an immense walled-in gravel court that looks like a Mayan ball court. The warehouses are segmented along their length into a series of rooms which function as separate entities: living quarters, studio spaces – with Judd's sculptures – and a library. Judd made much of the furniture for the Compound. A cluster of trees and a vine-covered pergola reside in one corner of the courtyard, the garden of the Compound. Near the garden an open hearth stands as a symbol of the welcome and plenty provided to family and guests. Judd likes the company of people; his generosity is apparent. The Compound is a prelude to the work nearby.



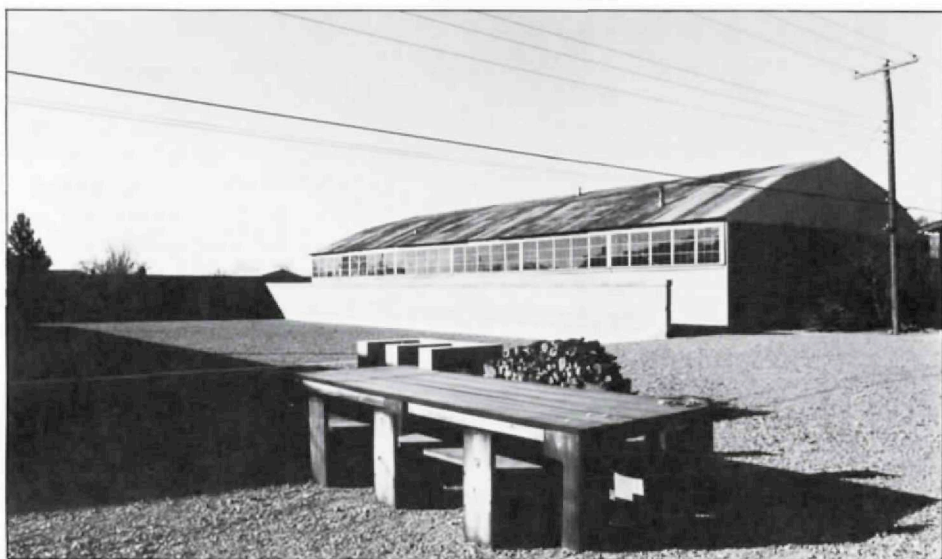
Highland Avenue, Marfa, Texas



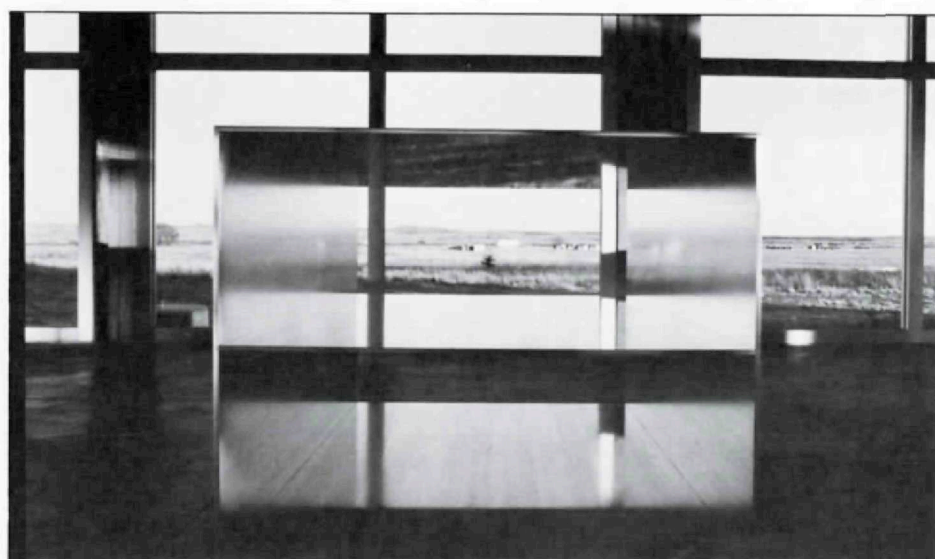
Garden, the Compound, Marfa, Texas



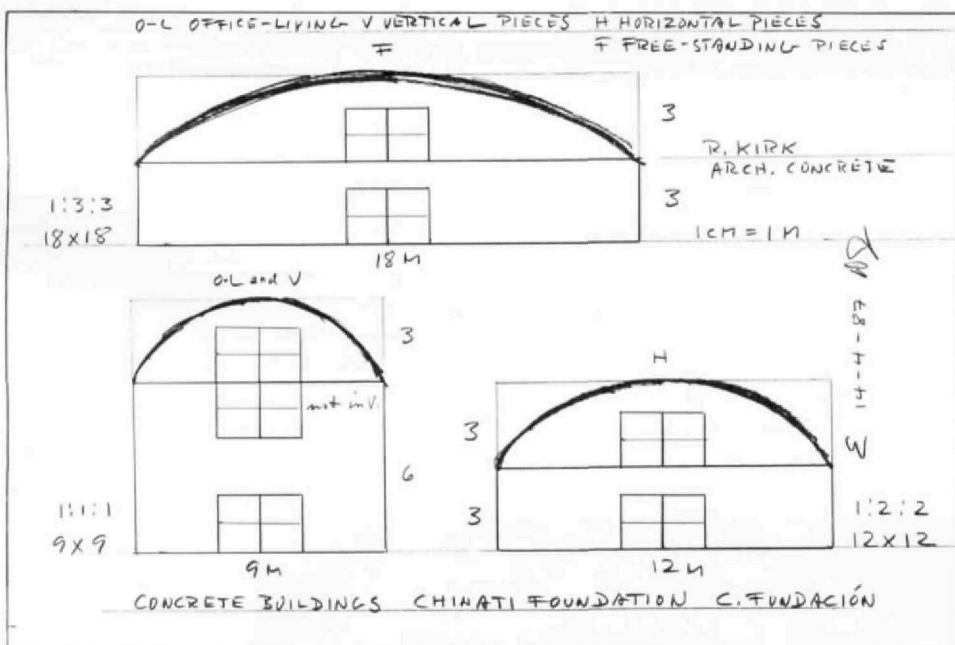
Interior of Artillery Shed with mill aluminum pieces, Donald Judd



The Compound, Marfa, Texas, home of Donald Judd and his family



Mill aluminum piece, the Artillery Shed



Elevation drawings for the Concrete Buildings, Donald Judd

Just outside of town is Fort D.A. Russell, a deserted army base, which served as a chemical warfare center and prisoner of war camp during World War II. Between 1979 and 1981 the Dia Foundation purchased 340 acres of the site, which included six barracks buildings, two artillery warehouses, and a gymnastic arena. Dia is a charitable foundation established in 1974 by Heiner Friedrich and his wife, Philippa de Menil Friedrich, the daughter of Dominique and John de Menil. The Dia Foundation was founded in part to support the creation of large-scale art works. The buildings and land around Fort D.A. Russell were purchased by Dia as the site for a sculpture and architecture project by Donald Judd. Dia also purchased the Wool and Mohair Building near the Compound to be renovated as an exhibition space. In 1986, the Chinati Foundation succeeded Dia as the owner of the completed work and to oversee future developments.

Initially Donald Judd planned the project for comprehensive installations by Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, and himself. Five groups of Judd's works were

commissioned by Dia, two of which have been fully realized: 100 pieces made from mill aluminum, installed in the Artillery Sheds and 15 concrete works installed on a half-mile stretch of prairie nearby. A sizable group of Chamberlain pieces have been purchased and installed in the Wool and Mohair Building. The Dan Flavin fluorescent light sculptures have been designed and will be installed in the six barracks buildings of the fort. Three additional groups of Judd's works are in storage awaiting construction of ten Concrete Buildings, which Judd has designed. The foundation owns the complete prints of Barnett Newman, a gift from Newman's widow, Annalee, which will be installed in the future together with Judd's collection of works by Carl Andre, David Rabinowitch, Larry Bell, Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, Yayoi Kusama, Roy Lichtenstein, John Chamberlain, Richard Long, Dan Flavin, and others.

Judd's work is as much architectural as sculptural. In the illustrated catalogue, *The Chinati Foundation, 1987*, he describes the relationship between the buildings and the art works as follows:

*The enterprise in Marfa was meant to be constructive. The art was meant to be, and now will be, permanently installed and maintained in a space suitable to it. Most of the art was made for the existing buildings, which were dilapidated. The buildings were adjusted to the art as much as possible. New ones would have been better. Nevertheless, in reworking the old buildings, I've turned them into architecture.*¹

Judd removed the wood floor of the concrete Arena building, filling the space between the concrete floor beams with gravel. The space inside the Arena is huge, formed by bare whitewashed concrete walls and a gently pitched truss roof. In this giant empty room, Judd gathers his guests for feasts and celebrations. Attached to one end of the Arena, a labyrinth of thick concrete walls forms a series of courtyard-like enclosures connected by brick and gravel paths. Views from the courtyard are framed by slits where the concrete walls come together, ordering the way we see the landscape beyond, as though through the viewfinder of a camera. Nearby, wild antelope graze silently.

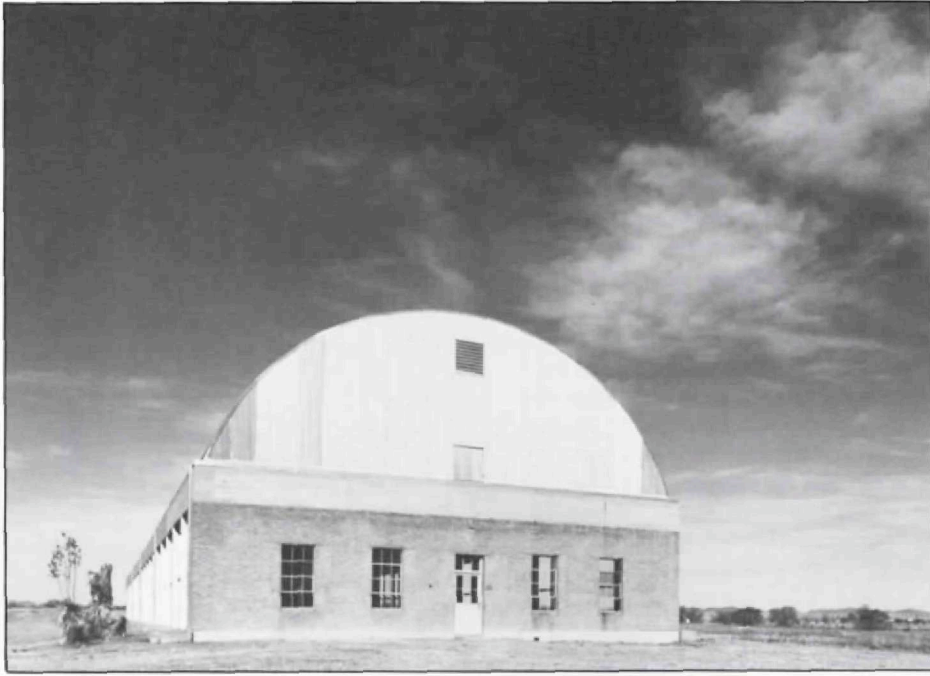
The Artillery Sheds, World War II armament warehouses, were substantially altered to accommodate the 100 mill aluminum pieces. The two long buildings are set end to end, one slightly skewed off axis to the other. They were constructed of reinforced concrete frames with red brick infill walls and a flat concrete roof. There were practical considerations in planning the conversion of these buildings from military warehouses to an architecture for sheltering the works of art. The old roof was not sufficiently watertight, so Judd added a prominently vaulted galvanized metal roof, not unlike the indigenous farm structures of the region. Along the length of the building he replaced the brick panels with large square window panels, each divided into four equal segments, framed in aluminum. The expanse of windows allows a view through the sheds, letting in light to

illuminate the sculpture pieces within. The brick end walls with their smaller windows have been left as Judd found them.

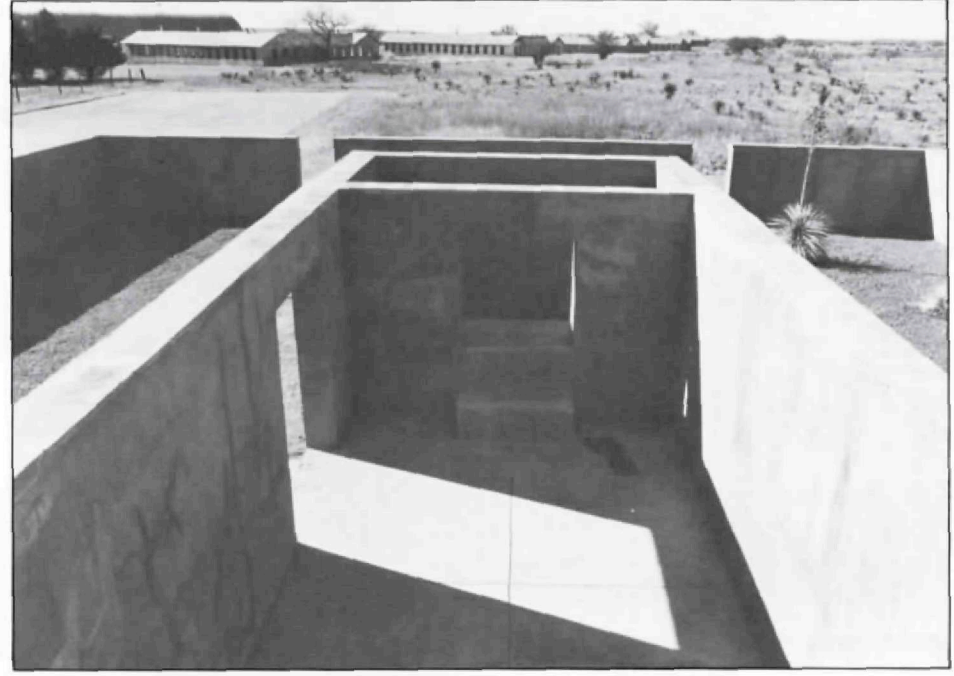
For Judd, the architecture is never separate from the sculpture and the practical soon yields to the poetic. The two sheds relate to one another as two powerful bodies on a flat plain in a striking formal arrangement. This same abstract relationship of identical units occurs between the six U-shaped barracks buildings nearby, making a grouping that modulates the scale of the larger sheds. Just below the Artillery Sheds and Barracks, Judd installed 15 of his large geometric concrete pieces stretching a half mile across a field. Viewed from different vantage points, the arrangement of these clearly formed elements continually recompose themselves into infinite combinations. It is a composition that includes buildings that have not been altered, buildings that have been changed for new uses, and the sculpture pieces specifically and permanently installed. There is a surreal tension between the land, the buildings, and what the land and buildings contain.

Whether he is making sculpture or building, Judd applies the same process. This is clearly revealed in his drawings for the proposed Concrete Buildings to be built to the west of the Barracks to house the remainder of his work. They are simple drawings which could just as easily be drawings for sculpture. They communicate the essence of the idea and serve as specification to the fabricator. The drawings are two dimensional, a reduced version of the architect's working drawings - drawings with measurements and notations. The measurements are metric with a mathematical exactness and logic essential to the idea. Like the sculpture, the ten Concrete Buildings have been designed to be built in repetition, in three mathematically proportioned sizes. The finished work will form an ordered grouping around a rectangular shaped open space.

The Chinati Foundation, 1987



Artillery Shed, one of two armament storage warehouses remade by Judd for the mill aluminum pieces

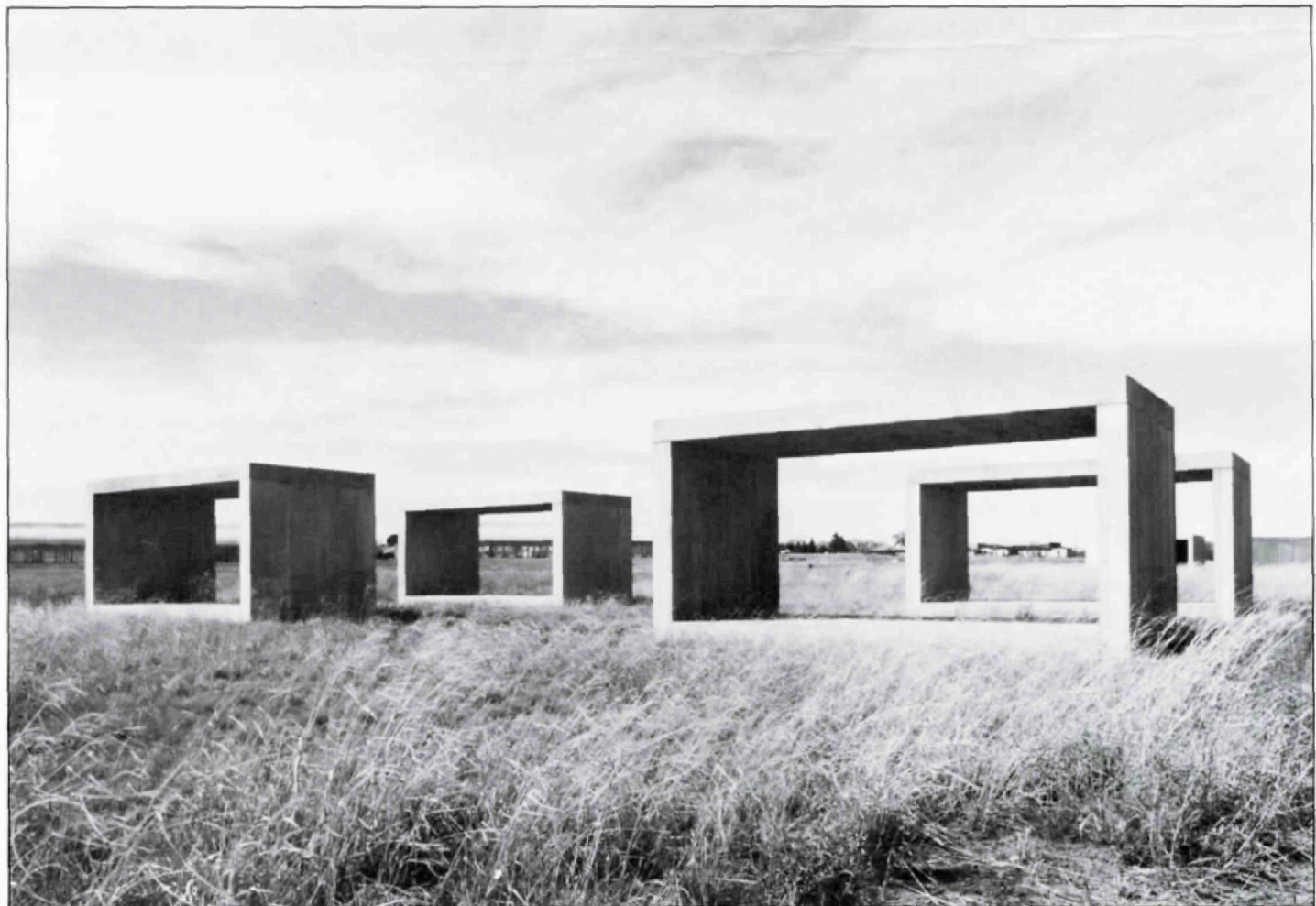


Arena courtyard looking towards the Barracks



The Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

The mill aluminum pieces in the Artillery Sheds are first seen from the outside through the expanse of glass windows, the window pane making a veil between the inside and outside, slightly obscuring the work within. The effect is illusory. The impulse is to walk around the buildings before entering. Inside, above the square brick portal that separates an antechamber from the warehouse space are words, written in German, "Zutritt Für Unbefugte Verboten," which translate "Unauthorized Persons Forbidden." The message is a startling reminder that 45 years ago this place of splendid peace and quiet was a prisoner of war camp for German soldiers. Between the bays formed by square concrete columns, and laid out in rows of three abreast, are 50 box-like rectangular pieces made of a dull reflective aluminum. Each piece measures 41-inches high, by 51-inches wide, by 72-inches long, and were fabricated from sheets of 1/2-inch mill aluminum at the Lippincott foundry in Connecticut. Each unit is set in precise position within the score lines of the polished concrete floor. Mill aluminum is an untreated aluminum with a pristine, fragile surface. The sheets of aluminum have been cut into plates – the plates fastened together with flush-mounted screws that come almost to the edge. The overall form of each piece makes or occupies the space defined by a rectangular box. Because the pieces have been executed in variations, each presents a slightly different sense of spatial enclosure depending on which of the six sides are open and which are closed. Interior space is either left as void or is cut into sections by the plane of an additional aluminum sheet which divides the space horizontally, diagonally, or vertically. This effect is varied when the floating aluminum sheet tilts or when two sheets are introduced to the space within. What gives these pieces their distinct power and energy is sunlight which passes through the windows, interacting with the highly reflective surfaces to make color. At the brightest time of day the color is silvery white, but at sunset the pieces take on a shimmering

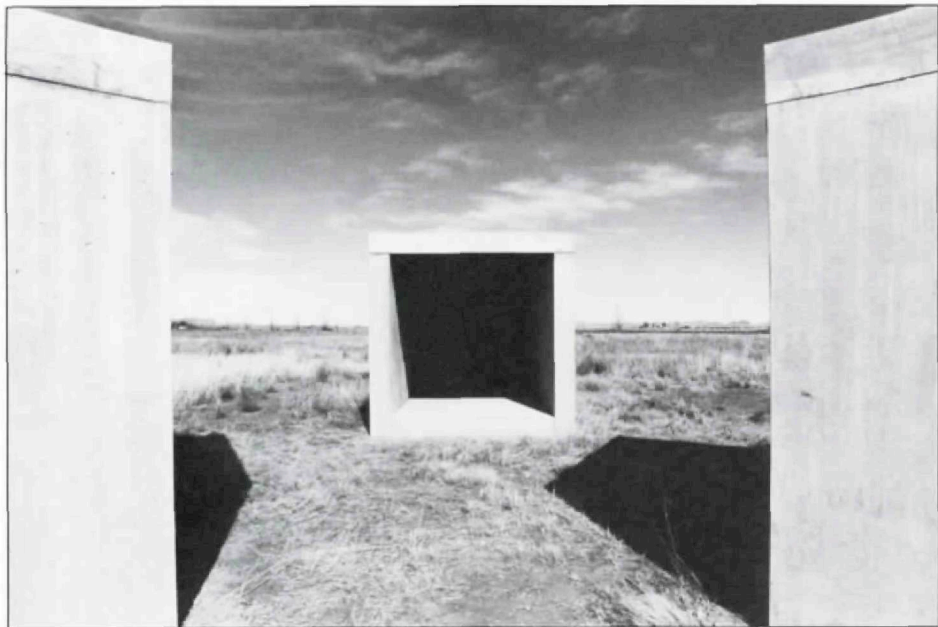


One of 15 groupings of the concrete pieces, by Donald Judd, near the highway from Marfa to Presidio

transparent yellow hue. The light also makes dark shadows which sharpen the perfectly crisp edges. Like a mirage it can all disappear, or like a magician's box the space dissolves into infinity. What is seen in the first Artillery Shed is also seen in the other Shed, but it does not look the same. The experience is relentless and exhausting.

Below the Artillery Sheds in a field near the highway from Marfa to Presidio are the 15 concrete pieces. Seen from afar the pieces appear cradled in the underbrush and tall grass. The numerical reference of 15 refers to 15 groupings composed of individual units. Like the mill aluminum

pieces, each unit occupies the space of a rectangular box measuring 5-meters long, by 2.5-meters high, by 2.5-meters wide. Variations between units depend on which of the six sides are open and which are closed. Each piece is made up of a grouping of two to six units. The arrangement of units within each piece ranges from linear to circular formations. The units abut one another or slide by each other, or are turned end to end the long way or the short way. The pieces are precise but not nearly so delicate as the mill aluminum sculpture nearby. There is an irresistible urge to walk into the clear space within, to touch the smooth milky-gray concrete walls of this shelter.



Concrete piece

The weight of each concrete unit must measure in the tons, but each appears nearly weightless – seeming to levitate ever so slightly above the ground. Where the slabs meet one another there is a groove between the abutting slabs, making a shadow line that separates and lifts the slabs, further relieving the sensation of weight. The unobstructed sunlight makes such deep, black shadows that the mass seems to disappear, leaving only the sharp outline of the edge, furthering the illusion of weightlessness. The changing light makes for constant flux.

The arrangement of the concrete pieces has a primal quality, overpowering in its totality and exacting in its order. There is an underlying monumentality and also a strange intimacy to the work. The whole experience evokes changing and contradictory sensations, at once fulfilling and at once mystifying.

At Marfa Donald Judd is realizing the ideas he has espoused through his career as an artist. In the catalogue he states:

*It takes a great deal of time and thought to install work carefully. This should not always be thrown away. Most art is fragile and some should be placed and never moved again. Some work is too large, complex, and expensive to move. Somewhere a portion of contemporary art has to exist as an example of what art and its context were meant to be.*²

A measurement of our judgment and knowledge of past civilization is through its art and architecture. That judgment, according to Judd, is best served when:

*The art and architecture of the past that we know is that which remains. The best is that which remains where it was painted, placed, or built.*³

In a sense Donald Judd has made a new kind of museum – perhaps one like Andre Malraux's "Museum Without Walls." It is an unusual example of so large and complete a collection housed outside the traditional museum setting. He is not alone, however, in trying to make art for a specific place, art which will never enter the commercial marketplace or the traditional museum.

Similar kinds of undertakings have been realized through important works by Robert Smithson (*Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970), Michael Heizer (*Complex One*, Nevada, 1972-1976), or Walter De Maria (*Lightning Field*, Quemado, New Mexico, 1974-1977), and others. Federal, state, and local public works administrations, as well as private building developers, frequently set aside a budget for commissioning site-related art work. But the enterprise at Marfa is the largest non-commercial, permanent art installation in a contemporary context, and it is still only partially completed. The work has been supported entirely through private sources, first the Dia Foundation and now funds raised through the Chinati Foundation.

At Marfa Judd is fulfilling his ambitions – to make a large body of work for a place that he found and built upon. Marfa will probably always be a bit inaccessible and out of the way. Going there is a kind of a pilgrimage, but that must have been intentional as well. Part of the experience of being at Marfa is getting to Marfa, and getting to Marfa means leaving the familiar behind and traveling as in an adventure to something new. ■

Notes

- 1 *The Chinati Foundation, 1987*, essay by Donald Judd.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank *The Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd, and William Agee* for providing factual information and for personal insights.

Additional Sources

- 1 Michael Ennis, "The Marfa Art War," *Texas Monthly*, August 1984.
- 2 Peter Applebome, "Out Where Texas Is Texas-Sized," *The New York Times*, 18 October 1987.



One of six identical barracks buildings, future site for Dan Flavin sculpture