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Kunst in Wien – Monument/Counter-Monument

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Donald Judd, *Stage Set*, 1991

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Donald Judd, *Stage Set*, 1991

Stage Set is an object or installation by Donald Judd located at Stadtpark, Vienna. Originally it was designed and built in 1991 for his exhibition *Donald Judd: Architecture* at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna. It was exhibited there until 1993. In 1995 after the death of Donald Judd the installation was given to the City of Vienna and moved to the Stadtpark in 1996 [Slide 1 and 2].

The installation is quite monumental. It is built of a steel frame, measuring 7,5 meters x 10 meters x 12,5 meters with 6 panels originally made of synthetic textiles in primary and secondary colors (red, yellow, blue, black, green and orange). Each panel measures 10 meters x 2,5 meters. Two of the six panels are positioned lower than the other four. The distance between the panels is also 2,5 meters [Slide 3].

The transfer from the inside of the museum to the outside resulted in several conservation problems. The textiles lost their brilliance and the material was changed to tarpaulin in 2012, which is durable and does not fade in the sunlight. The steel frame was painted to keep it from corroding.

Originally the installation had a front and a back, since you could enter the exhibition room only from one side, facing the red panel [Slide 4]. You could walk around it, but could not get a look at it from a distance. It was more a “space inside a space” compared to the current outside location. According to Peter Noever, who was director of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst at the time and who commissioned the work, called it “Judd’s artistic intervention in the baroque-rococo-classicism section of the MAK’s permanent collection”.¹

Currently the installation is located on a pathway close to a bridge going over the Wienfluss [Slide 5]. In a way it “mirrors” the frame of the bridge. Sometimes it is called a connection or “gate” between the first and the third district of Vienna, but this was certainly never the intention of the artist.

The overall impression is of a backdrop or scenery like on a stage in a theatre. One has the feeling that the panels could be lowered, and when walking underneath it, it does feel like being on stage. The title “*Stage Set*” seems quite fitting. But it can also be interpreted as a reference (or pun) to Michael Fried, who was very critical of Minimalism (which he called Literalist art) in general and of Donald Judd in particular. In his essay “Art and Objecthood” he argues that Minimalism is essentially theatrical, even in competition with theater. He writes: “The presence of literalist art is basically a theatrical effect or quality - a kind of *stage presence*.”² Considering that Judd rarely gave descriptive titles to his objects, “*Stage Set*” could be read as a belated answer by Judd to Fried. An answer in the sense that he had succeeded in creating an “independent” art form that was neither painting nor sculpture, and maybe that he had created his own “stage”.

Minimalism or better Minimal-Art was a visual arts movement that started in the sixties and early seventies of the 20th century. It was considered a reaction to Abstract Expressionism and had its center in the USA. Three dimensional objects and object art were the dominant form, its main protagonists are Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Tony Smith and Frank Stella. There was an emphasis on objectivity, geometric non-relational forms, impersonal gestures, a reduction to so called *Primary Structures*. In 1965 Donald Judd writes in *Arts Yearbook 8*: “The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.”³

Minimal Art was and is a controversial art form. The opposite of “expression”, it was considered very “male” and close to architecture by some. Anna Chave understands it as a “.....cool display of power.”⁴ By using industrial and commercial materials it was linked to business, the establishment and the political economy. Chave argues that the highly simplified, abstract configurations were not neutral, but coded with (masculine) meaning.⁵

Part of this demonstration of power could be size and monumentality. In regard to *Stage Set* size changes the relationship to its viewer, you can walk underneath it and not just look at it. The viewer is not passive, he or she can change perspective. “It is this distancing that makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question an object.”⁶ Again Michael Fried makes a connection to theater: “Theater and art were looking for a different relation to its audience.”⁷ [Slide 6].

Donald Judd (1928- 1994) is considered one of the founding artists and main representatives of Minimal Art, although he himself rejected that label. After serving in the military in Korea he studied painting, art history and philosophy. He started out as a painter, but eventually, after moving towards abstraction, he turned to three-dimensional objects around 1963. At that time he worked as an art-critic, which led to his famous essay “Specific Objects” (1965), in which he formulated his ideas about art away from painting and “European” influences. In it he writes: “Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.”⁸ [Slide 7]. This is interesting, because there is a connection to Rosalind Krauss’s reflections in “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), where she tries to define what sculpture has become in the modernist period.

Judd soon started to use industrial materials like stainless steel and Plexiglas, leaving the production of his “Stacks” and serial boxes to commercial businesses. His work is often perceived close to International Style architecture as it deals with simple forms, color and material in space.

Judd died in 1994, so *Stage Set* is a late work, but it brings together, or playfully reflects and repeats, many characteristics of his earlier work: he uses industrial materials, works with repetition and progressions, with volumes and the space in between. He also uses identical sizes and shapes to avoid hierarchical relationships [Slide 8]. “In checking hierarchy, Judd believed that art acquired the singleness, the unified *aesthetic* power that was lacking in Western art.”⁹

Donald Judd was a politically conscious person and often included political and philosophical statements in his catalogues and essays. He wrote about his own art and what he wanted to achieve with it. “Any art involves philosophical, social and political attitudes.”¹⁰ From what I understand he did not believe, that his “specific objects” could directly influence peoples understanding of a political or social situation. But he did think that art should trigger interaction “with both the site and the viewer” and “expose how we acquire knowledge”.¹¹ Owing to his study of empiricism he believed that we learn through sensory experience by testing what we see against what we know. Judd also included an anti-war-essay in the catalogue for his exhibition in Vienna. In it he writes about the failure of war in general and the Gulf war in particular. He raises issues about the state of the world after 1989. It is this text that places *Stage Set* in a global setting and a post-1989 period. Judd makes some connections to art, but not to his own work.

Stage Set was a commissioned object by Peter Noever for said exhibition. In that sense, it was site-specific, since it was designed for a particular place and time. It’s content or “meaning” did

not have a definite connection to Vienna and in that way it could be placed anywhere. Because of the mentioned anti-war essay the object becomes more global than local and loses site-specificity. The removal from its original location to the outside is yet another indication of its loss of site, sitelessness and homelessness. It ties into Rosalind Krauss's definition of *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* very well: "[.....] one crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential. It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declare its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic." ¹² [Slide 9]. These two readings of different historic time frames may seem contradictory, but the first one refers to content the other to form.

As the title of the exhibition *Donald Judd: Architecture* suggests, it was about Judd's connection to architecture that was of interest here. Peter Noever writes in the catalogue for the exhibition, that he thinks Judd is producing architecture, even though he is strictly speaking not an architect. I have said earlier that Judd's objects have often been compared to the International Style Architecture. Superficially this comparison makes sense, they look alike. Both are clean, efficient, rational and work with volume and space. But there are other connections as well. Krauss compares sculpture, landscape and architecture in her essay and puts them in a complex relation and context. Again, Judd's *Stage Set* fits into that context of landscape and architecture. It is not quite "Land Art" yet, but after its placement to the outside it certainly deals with its natural surroundings. Maybe it is a transition or crossing to "Land-Art" [Slide 9] ?

This would make sense considering Judd's "art-colony" in Marfa/Texas, which he designed using existing structures. There he wanted to show "art in its architectural and natural habitat".¹³ Judd had been critical of "improvised" gallery exhibitions and museums, where works of art travelled long distances and were shown for a limited amount of time. With the help of a foundation Judd bought a former military base and started his own exhibition space. In huge interior spaces as well as enormous outside installations he installed his own work as well as work from other artists. "Gerade dort ist nachvollziehbar, welche räumlichen Impulse von seinen streng geometrischen, gleichförmigen, in Negativ und Positiv ausgeprägten Volumen, mit höchster Präzision verarbeiteten Metallobjekten ausgehen. Nicht die container als Objekte, sondern die Objekte in Bezug auf die Wiederholung und Kontinuität von Zwischen- und Leerräumen, bewirken eine Neuordnung von Raum."¹⁴ (It is not the containers as objects, but the objects in relation to the repetition and continuity of space in-between space and room that causes space to be rearranged.)

Judd's art-colony is still used as an exhibition area today, combining inside and outside. Because of its history, maybe *Stage Set* is doing that too.

Notes

1. Peter Noever, noever design, new strategies, design/media/curator art and architecture
<http://www.noever-design.com/again-in-focus-donald-judd.html>
2. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", University of Chicago Press (1967), p. 155.
3. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects", Arts Yearbook 8 (1965), reprinted in "D. Judd, Complete Writings" Gallery Reviews (1975) Halifax, p. 184.
4. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", Arts Magazine (1990), p. 44.
5. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", Arts Magazine (1990), p. 45.
6. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", University of Chicago Press (1967), p. 154.
7. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", University of Chicago Press (1967), p. 163.
8. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects", Arts Yearbook 8 (1965), reprinted in "D. Judd, Complete Writings" (1975) Halifax, p. 181.
9. David Ruskin, "Specific Opposition: Judd's art and politics", Art History, Vol. 24, No. 5 (2001), p. 690.
10. David Ruskin, "Specific Opposition: Judd's art and politics", Art History, Vol. 24, No. 5 (2001), p. 702.
11. David Ruskin, "Specific Opposition: Judd's art and politics", Art History, Vol. 24, No. 5 (2001), p. 685.
12. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", October, Vol. 8 (1979), p. 34.
13. Rudi Fuchs, "Donald Judd - Architektur", Österr. Museum für Angewandte Kunst (1991), Katalog, p. 68.
14. Peter Noever, "Donald Judd - Architektur", Österr. Museum für Angewandte Kunst (1991), Katalog, p. 9.