

**Judd; Irwin; Oursler**

New York

by JAMES LAWRENCE

THE ABILITY TO FOCUS on what we encounter is a necessary condition of sustained inquiry, but it is only the beginning. In addition to our perceptions, we also possess the apperceptual capacity to incorporate the implications of those perceptions into the self. This gives experience its continuity, which in turn gives us the capacity to learn. Artistic conventions rest on this capacity. Conventions also rely on consensus, a shared agreement about meaning that trumps – or even determines – the immediate response of an individual. Mid-century anxiety about totalitarianism and social coercion prompted scepticism of consensus, scepticism that led directly to significant innovations in Abstract Expressionism and successive movements. In addition to political and philosophical concerns, it is easy to see why artists might wish to create works that can breed familiarity without contempt. Given the right conditions, the viewer can ‘make it new’ from moment to moment. A great deal of post-War art represents various positions in the continuing debate about what those conditions might be.

The exhibition *Donald Judd: Colored Plexiglas*, at L&M Arts, New York (closed 25th April),<sup>1</sup> showed how attention to the deepest reserves of inherent properties can blend snappy immediacy with contemplative allure. Nine of Judd’s lucid objects quickened the stately gallery space, allowing complex harmonies to develop without sacrificing individual tones. The theme of the show helped in this respect, not only by focusing attention on the particulars of colour and light, but also because Plexiglas thoroughly suited the principles that Judd espoused. Plexiglas accelerated the departure of depictive conventions from his mature style. The material made apparent the sharp distinction between applied and intrinsic properties, most notably in relation to colour. Coloured Plexiglas is tinted during the manufacturing process, and this given colour suited Judd’s distrust of artifice.

Artists began to carve, twist and paint acrylic glass shortly after its invention in the early 1930s. Judd, on the other hand, preferred it in its ‘found’ (that is, factory-produced) sheet form and merely cut it to size. He first used Plexiglas in an untitled floor piece from 1963 known as DSS 38 (Fig.81).<sup>2</sup> Flat red oil paint and rich violet – colours from opposite ends of the colour spectrum – and contrasts of reflected and transmitted light enrich the ostensibly straightforward construction. The Plexiglas element is entirely visible or entirely obscured. No view reveals only part of the Plexiglas: it is all or nothing. The low profile of the work invites concerted attention by drawing the line of sight downwards and away from the horizontal, synoptic view. Each of Judd’s objects



80. *Verizon*, by Tony Oursler. 2009. Aqua resin and gesso, video projection, 61.6 by 165.1 by 130.8 cm. (Exh. Metro Pictures, New York).

seems to occupy fully the time that the viewer devotes to it.

Over time, Judd began to use Plexiglas as a surrogate for paint. He layered two different sheets to produce a third tint and used opaque sheets as a backing field. One key difference between paint and Plexiglas is a matter of tense. Paint implies potential, the composition that it might become. Plexiglas, however, arrived in Judd’s studio fully realised as a substance. Viewers are free to engage directly with a real object in real and present space instead of being distracted by the artist’s actions and choices in an unknowable past. Judd’s preferred materials reinforce a sense of perfect-tense completion. The viewer begins with what is present and proceeds accordingly.

Despite the visual crispness of Judd’s objects, they never seem entirely immaculate. Where there is a space or void, as there is between the elements of a ‘stack’ piece or inside a floor-box, the urge to explore the object visually becomes inseparable from the need to find an appropriate physical position from which to do so. Judd was craftily aware of the conflict between desire and taboo. He once suggested that the unpainted Douglas-fir plywood he favoured invites a caress the way a baby panda does. The plywood wall-box in this exhibition possessed that invitingly warm surface, but Judd’s tongue-in-cheek point makes sense because it acknowledges the connection between the instinct to touch and the concomitant judgment about whether or not to do so. For Judd, judgment required direct



81. Installation view of *Donald Judd: Colored Plexiglas* at L&M Arts, New York, featuring (from left to right) Untitled (1966; DSS 89), Untitled (1963; DSS 38) and Untitled (1988).



82. Installation view of Robert Irwin: *Red Drawing White Drawing Black Painting* at PaceWildenstein, New York, featuring (from left to right) *Black painting with blue edge* (2008–09) and *White drawing* (2008–09).

engagement without recourse to habits that might or might not be valid.

Robert Irwin has also devoted his career to a deep investigation of viewership, but his approach differs from Judd's in its focus on the nature of perception. A little more than a year after Irwin first exhibited a geometric field arrangement of fluorescent tubes as part of a retrospective in San Diego,<sup>3</sup> the exhibition *Red Drawing White Drawing Black Painting*, at **PaceWildenstein, New York** (closed 28th February), tested the approach in a dedicated space. Upon entering the gallery, viewers encountered an expanse of white fluorescent tubes arranged with fragmented geometry on a temporary wall (Fig.82). Behind that wall, at the back of the gallery, a similar arrangement in red fluorescent tubes dispensed a volcanic glow. Black paintings on metal, hanging perpendicular to the fluorescent murals, served as assertive objects or reflective surfaces depending on viewing aspect.

The fragmented geometry of the fluorescent tubes succeeded in deterring stable visual readings. In keeping with Irwin's Abstract Expressionist roots, the fields of lights hinted at boundlessness. They are too insistently present to foster the kind of perceptual wandering that Irwin provokes when he employs scrim and other restrained materials. Configurations of fluorescent tubes inevitably invite comparisons with the work of Dan Flavin. Irwin manages to preserve atmospheric effects that Flavin's installations tend to overwhelm. Instead of the thermal barrage and incessant electrical hum of Flavin's larger pieces, for example, Irwin's installation offered a more delicate blend of sensory stimuli that varied impressively as one roamed the gallery. Whether or not this approach possesses

the lasting value of Irwin's earlier practices depends on whether such a generalised sensory blend can be parsed or otherwise given some kind of meaningful structure. There is no doubting the validity of the project as a whole. The real question is whether the fluorescent installations genuinely condition a given space in a way that tells us something that we do not already know. At this point, the results are intriguing rather than earth-shaking.

A lively exhibition of recent works by Tony Oursler raised more troubling questions about the nature of experience. *Cell Phones Diagrams Cigarettes Searches and Scratch Cards*, at **Metro Pictures, New York** (closed 11th April), comprised fourteen mixed-media pieces that trenchantly exposed the grim vacuity of widespread compulsions. Video projectors superimposed images of smouldering cigarettes onto PVC tubes standing as high as the visitors who wandered among them. A giant model of a cellphone (Fig.80) disgorged fragments of conversation reminiscent of the nonsense that private conversations become when overheard in public. A few wall pieces took their cues from internet searches and the disjointed layering of browser windows on computer screens. A dialogue, delivered by two miniature figures projected separately onto an architectural model of a house, asserted the importance of human contact.

The common thread was the erosion of the public-private distinction and the attenuation of social bonds as a result of technology and systems that claim to revive them. Gambling with scratchcards is different from a day at the races, a cellphone conversation is seldom private and advice that helps an individual does not withstand generalisation. Human contact

requires more than the facile stimuli and explanations that minor vices and self-help bromides can offer. Oursler's humane sense of humour kept the potential cruelty of this exhibition in check. Nonetheless, the crowded yet eerily barren signification on display was difficult to dismiss as cultural lampooning.

Like the Pop art from which it takes its formal cues, Oursler's show had a pronounced element of satire. Effective satire threatens to undermine values that, when examined, reveal their intrinsic flaws. Effective art is no less intrepid in questioning the interpretive and perceptual habits that bolster our sense of self in the world. As with satire, the quest for useful values must be made over and over again as the world continues to change. The phenomena that Oursler explored point to a seismic shift not only in social relations, but also in the experience of public and private states of being. As we struggle to understand isolation, solitude, ubiquity and connectedness in this environment, artists such as Judd, Irwin and Oursler help us to find the appropriate terms. That is a good start.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Ballantine, who worked as Judd's assistant for many years, curated this exhibition; a catalogue with an essay by Ballantine is forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> DSS numbers identify all works by Donald Judd executed up to 1974. These numbers refer to entries in the incomplete catalogue raisonné that accompanied the exhibition *Donald Judd*, at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in 1975. The letters derive from the initials of the contributors to this catalogue: Dudley Del Balso, Brydon Smith and Roberta Smith. Examples of DSS 38 were executed in 1963, 1969, 1975 and 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Reviewed by Christopher Bedford in this Magazine, 150 (2008), pp.139–41.

## Yves Saint Laurent

Montreal and San Francisco

by LYNNE COOKE

WHEN, IN 1983, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, staged a retrospective of the work of Yves Saint Laurent, it was the first time that the venerable institution had devoted a solo show to a living designer. That the French couturier was then a mere forty-seven years old made the event even more remarkable. Hailed a genius in the accompanying publication and press release, Saint Laurent had had a meteoric career from the moment he assumed charge of the Maison Dior at the age of twenty-one, following the premature death of its founder. Saint Laurent's celebrated first collection for Dior in 1958 was greeted by crowds dancing in the streets, for he had supposedly single-handedly rescued the couture industry from demise. (At that moment the Maison Dior accounted for more than fifty percent of the trade's international sales.) A brief stint of compulsory military service led to a nervous breakdown, compounded by his dismissal from Dior.