

# SENSUAL REALITY: THE AFFECT OF REPRESENTATION AND THE EFFECT OF EXPERIENCE

SPIKE WOLFF

Carnegie Mellon University



Figure 1: Donald Judd, 100 untitled works in mill aluminum, 1982-1986, Chianti Foundation. © 2017 Spike Wolff.

## 'FOR ME IT IS JUST REAL'

In response to a question raised in an interview, asking Donald Judd to describe the site at Marfa, Judd replied, 'Well, Rudi here thinks it is utopia but for me it is just real'.<sup>1</sup>

One can discuss, in great detail, the intellectual merit, academic theories, and art historical relevance of Donald Judd's works at Marfa. It is in some ways quite simple to access a logical reading of the work, but the only true understanding is through ones perceptual experience, over time. This is the real – the reality of experience, the physicality of immediate sensation, the synthesis of thought and feeling.

The objective, as with all of Judd's works, is to create perceptual experience. (This is not a matter of casual perception; the detail of the work is in taking the time to experience it.) One of the primary targets for Judd was for the work to both occupy and define space. Towards this, the work was created in response to its context, its scale and material a direct response to the landscape, lighting conditions, and physical context of the buildings; all works installed at Marfa were specifically constructed for this place. The relationship between the art and the architecture is singular and cannot be broken; Judd thought of himself as much an artist as an architect and recalibrated the buildings to act in relationship with the works to be installed.

The boxes at Marfa [Figure 1] are at once static and dynamic, definite and infinite, objective and subjective, material and immaterial. The sensing of these oppositions is a phenomenological experience, where material dematerializes and object is displaced by the space it creates. The visual ambiguity of the object, through the disruption of the linear syntax of its reading, allows for a new perception of space over time.

In experiencing the boxes at Marfa, one is both here and nowhere. The break down of boundaries is achieved through the exquisite crafting of a perceptual dialog between the affect of representation (the image) and the effect of experience (space).

## 'ART IS NOT THE REFLECTION OF REALITY, BUT THE REALITY OF THAT REFLECTION'<sup>2</sup>

Maurice Blanchot explains the duality of opposing conditions of image and perception through his analogy of the cadaver. [Figure 2]

Blanchot posits that the cadaver exists formally as the image of the original object – object as object, visually identical to the original. Simultaneously, the object also acts as a representation of something else, something other, in this case, the person as he is remembered, thus representing the negation of the object.

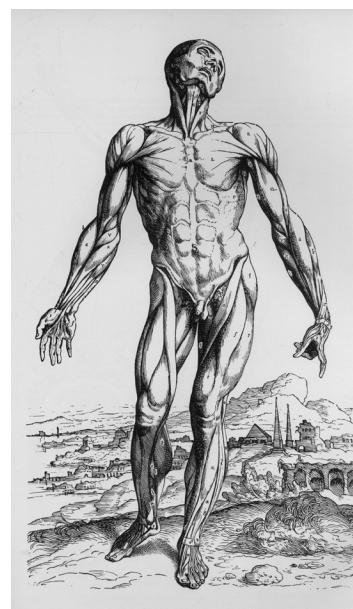


Figure 2: Andreas Vesalius, Plate 24 from *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, c. 1543, reprinted in *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co, 1950).

Through the example of the object (the cadaver), there is a perceptual (or formal) reading of the object, and an intellectual (or symbolic) reading of the object. But, in these two versions of the imaginary, there are really three. This third thing refers to what happens in-between the two; it's not about a synthesis to resolve oppositions to a singular condition, but of parallel conditions allowing for a multiplicity of readings. It is the experience of the coexistence of these two conditions – the coexistence of the difference, the simultaneity of presence and absence – which reveals the structure of the object.

Or, as Blanchot puts it, the object, 'no longer disappearing in its use, appears'<sup>3</sup>.

So, what about architecture? We see this dynamic, between the affect of representation and the effect of the experience, this transience of ambiguity between something both existing and not existing, in the work of both Gordon Matta-Clark and Mies van der Rohe.

**'DOESN'T THE REFLECTION ALWAYS SEEM MORE SPIRITUAL THAN THE OBJECT REFLECTED? ISN'T IT THE IDEAL EXPRESSION OF THAT OBJECT, ITS PRESENCE FREED OF EXISTENCE, ITS FORM WITHOUT MATTER?'<sup>4</sup>**

Matta-Clark transformed static closed conditions of architecture into dynamic volume, towards his objective of ambiguous space. [Figure 3]



Figure 3: Gordon Matta-Clark, Conical Intersect, 1975. Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © 2017 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

'... my sense of space has evolved far beyond most people's notion of what it's about... how visionary or how speculative... and the fact that I use things that are real does not detract from the importance of speculation...' <sup>5</sup> 'It's not about using sculptural ideas on architecture, it's more like making sculpture through it. So it seems there's always been a constant relationship in my work between architecture and sculpture... a sense of the ambiguity of a structure, the ambiguity of a place, and that's the quality I'm interested in generating in what I do. To some degree that's the aspect I think of as sculptural, a vigorous transformation process that starts to redefine the given.' <sup>6</sup>

Matta-Clark exposed architecture's language in order to work within and against that language, to destabilize static conditions of space.

'... I'm dealing with architectural structure as a reality... It's like juggling with syntax, or disintegrating some kind of established sequence of parts... the piece is a way of imposing a presence, an idea; it's a way to disorientation by using a clear and given system...' <sup>7</sup>

Through the interior drawing of the Barcelona pavilion, one can read Mies van der Rohe's intentions of the experience of the space. [Figure 4] The drawing expresses not the material reality, but the perceptual intentions of the architecture – the reality of our experience. What is more real, the physical muscle of the onyx wall, or ones perception of its surface as it dissolves into its own reflectivity? Which is more real, the object or its reflection?

Gordon Matta-Clark and Mies van der Rohe are really after the same thing, subverting the elements of architectural language in order to destabilize perceptual stability through the ambiguous reading of space.

Matta-Clark had his chainsaw, Mies, his cigar.

Presence and absence, representation versus experience – it is only in this difference, in the ambiguity of coexistence, that allows for the sensuality of the real.

**'MARFA IS TWO SIX PACKS FROM EL PASO'**<sup>8</sup>

So, where does this leave us? For now, in Marfa. [Figure 5] Why did Judd pick this place? The landscape, the sky, the light...

The sensuality of our immersion into the physicality of presence can allow for the experience of, as Aaron Betsky puts it, 'the architecture of boundless nothingness revealed'. <sup>9</sup>

There are potentialities that exist through speculation, through our intellectual understanding versus a belief in the mystery of possibilities.

To some, the Marfa Mystery Lights suggest the supernatural, to others, something rational that has been distorted, causing it to seem unfamiliar. As suggested by the visitmarfa.com website: 'The official Marfa Lights Viewing Area is located 9 miles east of town on Highway 90, towards Alpine. Bring an open mind.'

This anchoring in the physicality of the now in order to release ourselves into the more seductive possibilities of difference; the consciousness between what we know and what we do not understand; discovering the sublime in the mundane, the otherness in the everyday; the space

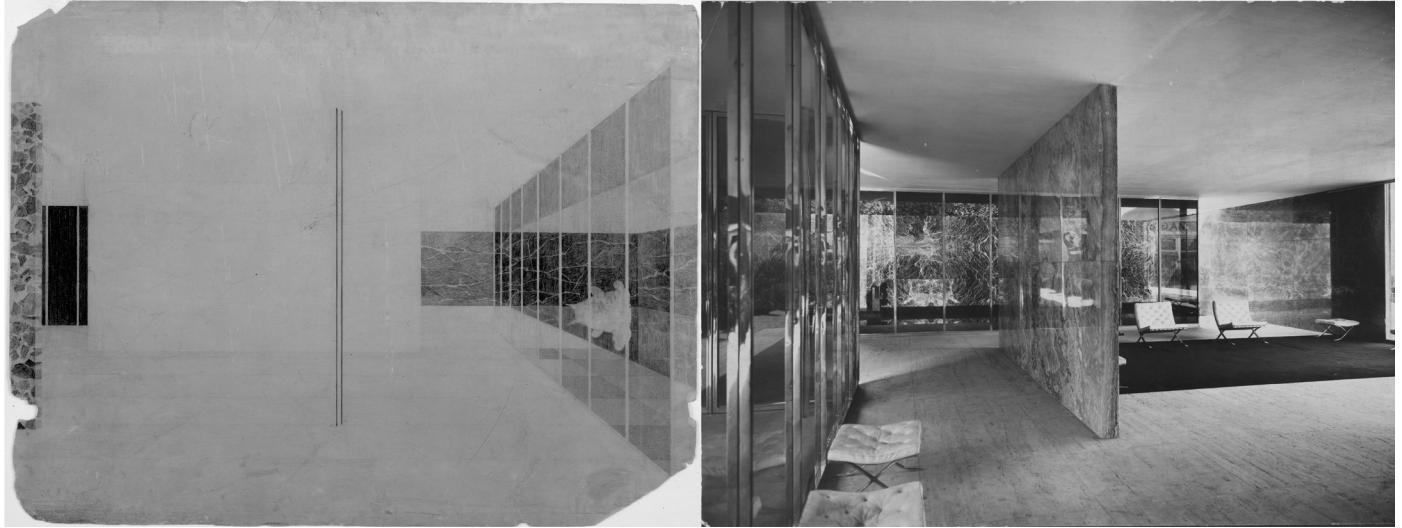


Figure 4: Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig, Barcelona Pavilion (interior perspective, c. 1928-29 © ARS, NY, Mies van der Rohe Archive/ photo, c. 1929 © ARS, NY, Berliner Bild-Bericht). © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

between thought and feeling – this is when architecture reveals itself – in the moment of space between affect and effect.

Sublime: a fancy word to describe a spiritual effect at the edge of consciousness, that which is seen but unseen. That perceptual presence which can only be experienced, but is difficult if not impossible, to quantify, to explain.

A condition that appears in the space between oppositions, between here and nowhere, between representation and experience. Challenging our realms of phenomenal perception, dislocating conditioned ways of seeing to affect a sense of indeterminacy between physical and perceptual space. The experience allowing for a transience of fixed perception and the fluid interplay between the rational and the visceral, revealing the exquisite ambiguity of the sublime.

Or, to state it more directly, and to the point:

**'CAN'T YOU JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP ABOUT WHAT IT REMINDS YOU OF AND SIMPLY EXPERIENCE THE THING, FOR ONCE!?'**

Lawrence Weschler, in a recently published essay about Robert Irwin's installation at Marfa's Chinati Foundation, writes: 'Damn Irwin: He positively hates it when I free-associate like this (through the coming on 40 years of our friendship, much of our relationship has devolved to our looking at some common object and my saying "That reminds me of..." and his vesuviating, "Can't you just shut the fuck up about what it reminds you of and simply experience the thing, for once, plain and direct!?").<sup>10</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. Rudi Fuchs, "Donald Judd (Artist at Work)", in Donald Judd, edited by Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 17.
2. Jean-Luc Godard, "La Chinoise", (Paris: Athos Films, 1967), in the film, Kirilov (played by Lex de Bruijn) states 'L'art n'est pas le reflet du réel, mais le réel de ce reflet.'
3. Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary", in *The Gaze of Orpheus*,

translated by Lydia David (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), 84.

4. Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary", *The Gaze of Orpheus*, 81.
5. Gordon Matta-Clark, from "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark", interview by Judith Russi Kirshner, in Gordon Matta-Clark (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993), 392.
6. Gordon Matta-Clark, from "Splitting", interview by Liza Bear, in Gordon Matta-Clark, 376.
7. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Splitting", 376.
8. Unidentified; though widely attributed to Donald Judd, original source unknown.
9. Aaron Betsky, *Architecture Matters* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 63.
10. Lawrence Weschler, "At Long Last", *Modern Painters* (Winter 2016-17), 73, [http://lawrenceweschler.com/static/images/uploads/Irwin\\_in\\_Marfa\\_Modern\\_Painters.pdf](http://lawrenceweschler.com/static/images/uploads/Irwin_in_Marfa_Modern_Painters.pdf)



Figure 5: Clouds, near Marfa Texas © 2017 Spike Wolff.