

The House That Judd Built

26.04–08.06.2024

The fact that Donald Judd (1928-1994), one of the most renowned figures in post-war American art, developed an extensive relationship with Switzerland over several decades, has not been of much interest within thematic and monographic exhibitions to date. Rather, retrospective examinations of his work provide insight into the influence he exerted on the art of the 20th century, particularly within the context of so called Minimal art. The former military base in Marfa, Texas, which was converted into a permanent site for the artist's works and has recently become a place of pilgrimage for an enthusiastic art scene, also appears to overshadow any transatlantic endeavours by the artist. However, the Annemarie Verna Gallery in Zurich was the inaugural European gallery to represent Donald Judd and one of the first to provide him with an exhibition platform for his *specific objects* from the early 1970s onwards. Through the gallery he encountered the furniture manufacturer Lehni, based in Dübendorf, a municipality in the canton of Zurich. The company with its high standards in regard to materials and workmanship – it could be considered the very pinnacle of Swiss perfection – was one of the few capable of fulfilling Judd's exact requirements. Subsequently, Lehni and the Aargau-based company Alu Menziken each became close production partners, with whom Judd entrusted the manufacture of his series of works informally known as *Swiss Pieces* or *Menzikens* respectively. It was during these production and exhibition-related stays that Judd set out in search of a home of his own in Switzerland and came across the Eichholteren property in Küssnacht am Rigi in 1986.

The journey to Eichholteren, as it still is today, begins with a drive through a densely populated area along the shore of Lake Lucerne. It is an area in which the individual dream of a private home is valued higher than a coherent landscape. You pass countless conglomerations of houses and artificial allotments, all of which give little hint of the rural charm of this hilly area. The property is situated in a remote location, on a broad meadow plateau with access to the lake. It was constructed in 1943 as a hotel and Swiss inn and for approximately forty years served as a venue for Sunday walkers from the surrounding area, offering them the opportunity to take a break with a view of the Mount Pilatus. Upon first viewing the then empty property in 1986, Judd succinctly described it as «a Swiss farmhouse gone wrong». Within the compositional structure of the building and its relation to the surrounding landscape, however, he must have recognised the potential for architectural exploitation. Judd promptly opted to reconstruct the house in accordance with his vision and to utilise it as a residence during his extended stays in Switzerland.

The reconstruction was conducted in stages between 1989 and 1994 with the assistance of the young Zurich architect Adrian Jolles. The photographic documentation of the finished building was done by the photographer duo Franziska and Bruno Mancina using a 4x5" large format camera. In *marytwo*, these architectural views, which have previously only been published in select publications or exhibited partially in Judd retrospectives, are now being exhibited for the first time in their entirety in the exhibition *The House That Judd Built* in the form of a nineteen-part series of large-format inkjet prints. The art-historical value of these photographs is significant, especially as the tragedy of the story lies in the fact that, as speculated, Judd never became the owner of the property and a further change of ownership after his death could not be prevented. Therefore the photographs provide a visual representation of an architectural work that has not fully survived in its original form and allow Judd's design principles to be understood, at least in part.

«A Swiss farmhouse gone wrong».

Quoted from Nicholas F. Weber, Donald Judd's Swiss Retreat, in: *Architectural Digest*, September 1991, p. 78.

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The decisive factor is that Judd did not negate the existing structures, but rather modified them in order to merge the history of the hotel with his own. The exterior of the building remained unaltered, with the addition of a terrace constructed from natural stone, which artificially raised the building to distinguish it from the surrounding terrain. The finely crafted windows were retained and all the more celebrated in the interior, particularly on the first floor, by removing the side walls of the former hotel rooms. The subtraction of the transverse walls also served to emphasise the additive arrangement of the load-bearing plaster wall segments, which, corresponding with the windows, rhythmically accentuated the restored spacial volume. The architectural order system was therefore dismantled, with its inherent modularity becoming the subject of study. A series of transverse, neutral spatial units were constructed, each of which was deemed equally suitable for living, work and the installation of the works in three dimensions. The result was a Gesamtkunstwerk that allowed for a finely tuned dialogue between architecture, furniture design and art. Additionally, the wooden floor and ceiling on the first floor received an identical surface treatment, resulting in a reflection that visually extended the low room height. This is the point at which Judd's affinity for ambiguity becomes evident. It would be wrong to assess his principles as a purely concrete-constructive formalism within the context of modernist tradition. In order to direct the viewer's perception in a playful manner, Judd meticulously alternates between the creation of simple volumetric bodies and the illusionistic blurring of their material boundaries. He himself had once expressed the thought: «A form that's neither geometric nor organic would be a great discovery.» His aestheticised pragmatism and the associated handling of the materials result in the generation of atmospheric effects that do not leave sacred associations unnoticed. The light that permeates the entire room and the seemingly weightless tectonics suggest a meditative stillness. The strict lack of ornamentation and the purist arrangement of the furniture may be indicative of an ascetic rigour. In any case, these fixed parameters raise questions about the suitability of the setting for a domestic environment. Perhaps it manifests a moral attitude, such as a commitment to a good, hard-working life. Or perhaps it is rather a commentary motivated by formal aesthetics, with which Donald Judd succeeded in breaking with the petty Swissism of Eichholzeren, only to reaffirm it in a purified manner.

Simon Baumberger, April 2024
(Translated by Jack Pryce)

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«A form that's neither geometric nor organic would be a great discovery.»
Donald Judd, Writings, edited by Judd Foundation, New York 2016, p. 194.

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