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RESOURCE AND RESPONSE
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

RESOURCE SERIES

THE SCULPTURE OF CARL ANDRE

Resource/Response is part of Sheldon's ongoing Resource Exhibition Series. Resource/Response explores current issues and ideas addressed by contemporary artists. The Resource Series is made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.
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OF STEEL AND BRICK AND ORDINARY THINGS: The Sculpture of Carl Andre

photo: Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

Aisle, 1981, redwood timbers, 36 x 300 x 36", overall

Developing during the years when Minimalism prevailed, we knew more what sculpture couldn't have—figuration, personal touch, history—than what it could . . . For the most part, our sculpture gained its own identity and took flight only at the moment that we scrapped, one by one, the reductivist tenents of Minimalism.[1]

Wade Saunders

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64 Steel Square represents Carl Andre's first use of modular units of steel. Dating from 1967, it reflects nearly all of the tenents of Minimalism which Wade Saunders and his generation of sculptors (who are now gaining prominence) have labored to abandon.

Precisely as the title* indicates, the work is a square of steel plates, each measuring, with minor variations, eight by eight inches. Those dimensions, squared, produce both the size and the form of the completely installed work.

The blunt, arithmetical logic of the work is underscored by the conspicuous absence of the artist's hand: it is not carved or welded or, in some overtly skillful way, shaped. Instead, *64 Steel Square* is simply uncrated and arranged in a format which reiterates the shape of its component parts. Those parts themselves were obtained from an industrial scrap yard. Although each has accumulated its own rusty/encrusted patina, there is no assigned order of juxtaposition; any arrangement is regarded as successful as any other.

That the 64 plates may be installed in any of thousands of different arrangements within the boundaries of the square emphasizes the sculptor's indifference to traditional levels of artistic control. Further, it points to the non-relational character of the work. That is, the work not only relates to nothing but itself, but also has no composed internal relationships. The steel plates are simply those steel plates. There is no intention to exploit the quality of the encrusted surface patina, or to arrange the elements of the work in a balanced and harmonious composition. Instead, the plates are merely put on the floor, one next to another, in repetitious sequence.

Today, nearly two decades after its first installation, *64 Steel Square* carries with it a certain elegance that seems classical in its restraint. When it and works related to it first were shown, however, the impact of its reductive character was extraordinary. A number of critics worried that, given such a limited vocabulary, the artist had virtually nowhere to go without emptily repeating himself or, worse, undermining the spare premise of the work. Others, undoubtedly finding Andre's work (especially those made of ordinary firebrick) as a kind of ultimate multiple which anyone could duplicate, complained that it was unsellable—and uncollectable. Time has shown that Andre was by no means out of options and that, indeed, it was eligible for collecting. *64 Steel Square* now must be seen as an especially succinct paradigm of the artist's total output and the style of Minimalism; it also seems an icon of its era.

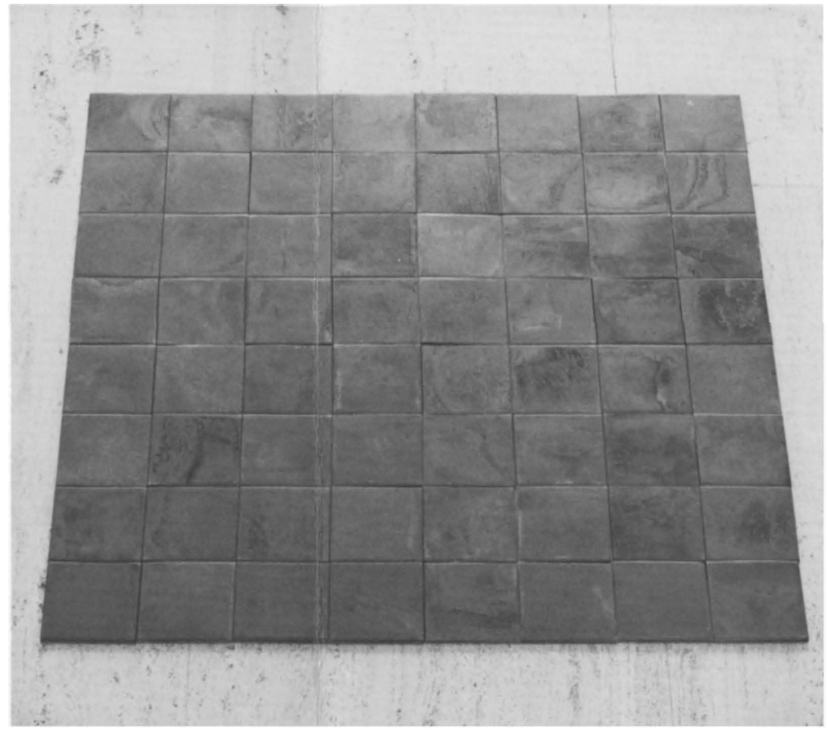
If all of the reductive qualities of the work combined to displace nearly every traditional aesthetic quality from the art object itself, they did not serve or suffice to remove such objects from the Modernist tradition. Minimalist sculpture generally was acknowledged to bear a formal relationship to the austere geometries of Constructivism and De Stijl. The widespread use of found objects—or materials off the hardware store shelf—tied Minimalism to Dada, and especially to the example of Marcel Duchamp, who had already shown, with his snow shovel titled *In Advance of a Broken Arm* and his urinal titled *Fountain,* that anything could be art. What Minimalism demonstrated, after Duchamp, was that the continued use of found objects to create radical art required a specific context in order to be seen as art.

The required context was gallery or museum space. There, the viewer was not (likely to be) a casual onlooker or passerby, but a thoughtful observer.

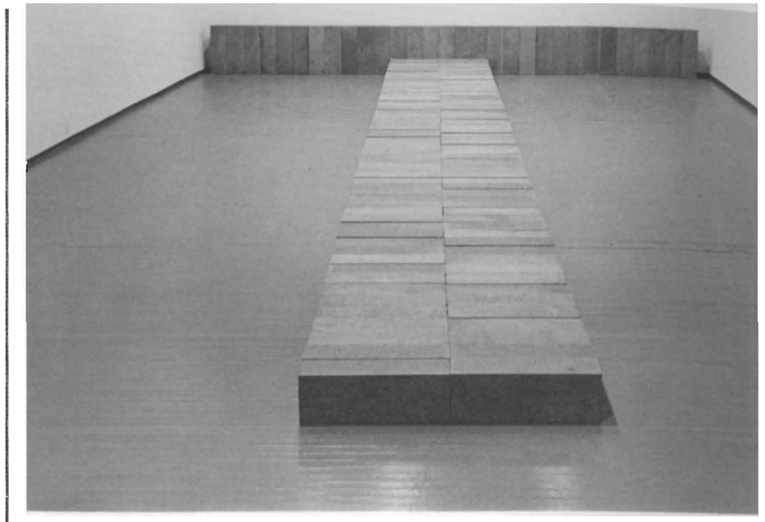
Unlike Duchamp, however, the Minimalists did not evince an ironic attitude toward the viewer. They wished to confront the gallery or museum visitor with a perceptual challenge. For many, including Donald Judd, the effort was to generate a very clear gestalt—a thoroughly unified object or situation in which the configuational whole, and not color or texture, or some other specific characteristic or element, dominated. For Andre, the issue of sculpture came to rest upon creating what the artist called a "cut in space."

He came to this radical notion of sculpture with the same speed that we associate with the rate of change in contemporary art. Andre was born in 1935 in Quincy, Massachusetts, a blue collar town of shipyards and granite quarries, but also the birthplace of two presidents, John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams. Andre was educated there until the end of his sophomore year in high school. He then attended one of the most elite and ac-

This work has been shown under three titles. At its installation at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art it was presented simply as Untitled. At the Guggenheim retrospective exhibition of 1970, the work was titled Steel Piece. *In the traveling exhibition curated by David Bourdon, the title was more completely descriptive:* 64 Steel Square.



64 Steel Square, hot rolled steel, ⅜ x 64 x 64" Collection Jan & Ingeborg van der Marck



A Memorial to After Ages, 1983, Quincy granite, 18 x 180 x

You're getting rid of things that people used to think were essential to art. But that reduction is only incidental. I object to the whole reduction idea, because it's only reduction of those things someone doesn't want.[2]

Donald Judd

ademically rigorous of New England preparatory schools, Phillips Academy at Andover. From Andover he went briefly to Kenyon College and then to the U.S. Army.

In 1957, he went to New York. He did not enter art school, but became closely associated with younger members of the New York art world. He was a friend of Barbara Rose, then a graduate student in art history. He shared the studio space of Frank Stella—and was profoundly influenced by him. The most powerful influence on Andre, beyond Stella, was the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi.

Andre's earliest work, completed in the late Fifties, was vertical in structure and perhaps most directly suggests the repeated, identical shapes of Brancusi's *Endless Column*. By 1960, Andre concluded, under the acknowledged stimulus of Stella's ideas, that by cutting into or carving into his wooden material he did not improve upon its original quality. He came to see the block of wood itself as a cut into the space which it occupied. Working, typically, with western Red Cedar, he constructed increasingly simple shapes which were inserted into—and thereby cut into—the space of the gallery in which they were installed.

For a period of four years in the early Sixties, Andre worked on the railroad in New Jersey. He collected a wide assortment of objects and assembled them in now lost objects—perhaps influenced directly by the Art of Assemblage exhibition which opened in the fall of 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition, developed by William Seitz (Stella's instructor at Princeton), traced the ample and diverse tradition of assembling images and objects from often disparate sources into a single work of art.

That tradition, which extends form the Café Zurich to Louise Nevelson's stuido, from the *Merzbilder* of Kurt Schwitters to the Combine Paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, shares with Andre's version of Minimalism, however, only the process of assembling.

Andre's definitive and extended use of the assembly process emerged in a series of exhibitions held at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York in 1965 and 1966, in the landmark "Primary Structures" show at the Jewish Museum in 1966, and at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles in 1967. Andre's *Lever*, a row of 137 firebricks assembled face to face to draw a long line of fired clay blocks across the installation space at the Jewish museum, exemplifies the flat, instantly clear yet perplexing character of all of the works shown in this period.

Works such as *Lever,* the boxes of polished metal and plexiglass by Judd, and the simple configurations of flourescent fixtures by Dan Flavin were quickly understood to be a reaction against the expressive, gestural quality of abstract expressionism as it was widely taught and practiced by the end of the Fifties. In such articles as that in *Art in America* by Irving Sandler in 1965, such minimal works were also linked with the cool use of found imagery that stamps the Pop canvases of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol.

Like Pop, Minimal art was indeed cool. It was even labeled Cool Art, as well as ABC Art, reductive art, literal art, the New Art of The Real, and Specific Objects. The (w)holisic character of the work of such artists as Tony Smith, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris, as well as that of Judd, Flavin, and Andre was understood to be profoundly influenced by painters such as Kenneth Noland, Robert Ryman and Stella. Stella, in fact, made an observation which was so widely quoted it contines to seem nearly the motto of Minimalism:

> My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object . . . All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion . . . What you see is what you see.[3]

This highly reductive attitude had not emerged overnight. The Bauhaus had insisted that Form must follow Function and that all purely decorative elements in architecture and furniture, for most conspicuous examples, must be deleted as superfluous. The Constructivists, most notably Malevich, and the De Stijl artists, most notably Mondrian, had reduced their abstract art to austere geometric arrangements of flat shapes on canvas or clean rectilinear constructions in three dimensions. The Bauhaus and the European *avant garde* movements insisted that their art contained fundamental moral, spiritual, and social values, however, while the new generation of reductive artists of the 1960's insisted that all of their art was contained, quite precisely, in what one took the trouble to see.

In this, their art had been predicted by the most influential critic of the pe-

riod, Clement Greenberg. In this critic's view, the course of art since Jacques Louis David had been reductive in outline. The illusion of pictorial depth—the suggestion of three dimensionality on a two dimensional surface—had been gradually erased. Steadily, art was moving toward its defining characteristics—which were, for painting, flatness and the shape of the support, or the edge of the canvas.

It was in this general context that Andre's work took early shape. As the illustrations of his recent work show, he has continued with remarkable consistancy. *Aisle* provides a cut in space; rather than a negative or open space between pews or pillars, it is a volume that cuts into the open gallery space around it. The configuration of the work itself reiterates this cut by containing an open volume within itself. *Sulculus* is a work which illustrates its arcane title in an arrangement of polished blocks of quarried granite; the title and term means, simply, a small groove or furrow, which is precisely what the stone outlines and thereby creates. *A Monument to After Ages,* quarried from his hometown of Quincy, recalls *Lever,* yet, at the same time, is much more clearly a towering shaft tipped ninety degrees to rest flat on the floor.

About such works as these, Andre once observed,

> My work is atheistic, materialistic and communistic. It's atheistic because it's without transcendant form, without spiritual or intellectual quality. Materialistic because it's made without pretension to other materials. And communistic because the form is equally accessible to all men.

At other moments, however, Andre has offered remarkably poetic metaphors for his own work. In an extended interview in *Artforum,* he insisted that sculpture should be like a road, insofar as it should not have several specific vantage points from which should be viewed to best advantage. Rather, like a road which may disappear and reappear, but is endlessly the same ribbon of pavement, sculpture should have no special vantage points; it should always be precisely what it is.[4] Elsewhere, he noted that the art which was of chief inspiration to him was that of such artists as Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. It was such art as theirs, filled with revolutionary and undiluted intentions, that aspired to ends which, in Andre's view, made art worth doing.

In the late Sixties, Greenberg found Minimalist work too clearly the direct expression of an idea: "Its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered."[5] Michael Fried insisted that the work of the Minimalists was inexhaustible simply because there was nothing there to exhaust.[6] Something, that is, cannot be taken from nothing.

It remains, however, that an entire generation of sculptors have had to work diligently to scrap, "one by one, the reductivist tenents of Minimalism." If the blank, chessboard configuration of *64 Steel Square* now seems the surface on which the endgame of Modernism was played, it also seems the focus of reaction which has propelled contemporary art into Postmodernism and the proliferation of styles and attitudes which will, with luck, propel art into a fruitful future.

Donald Bartlett Doe

***Sulculus*, 1981, granite blocks, 30 x 18 x 18"**

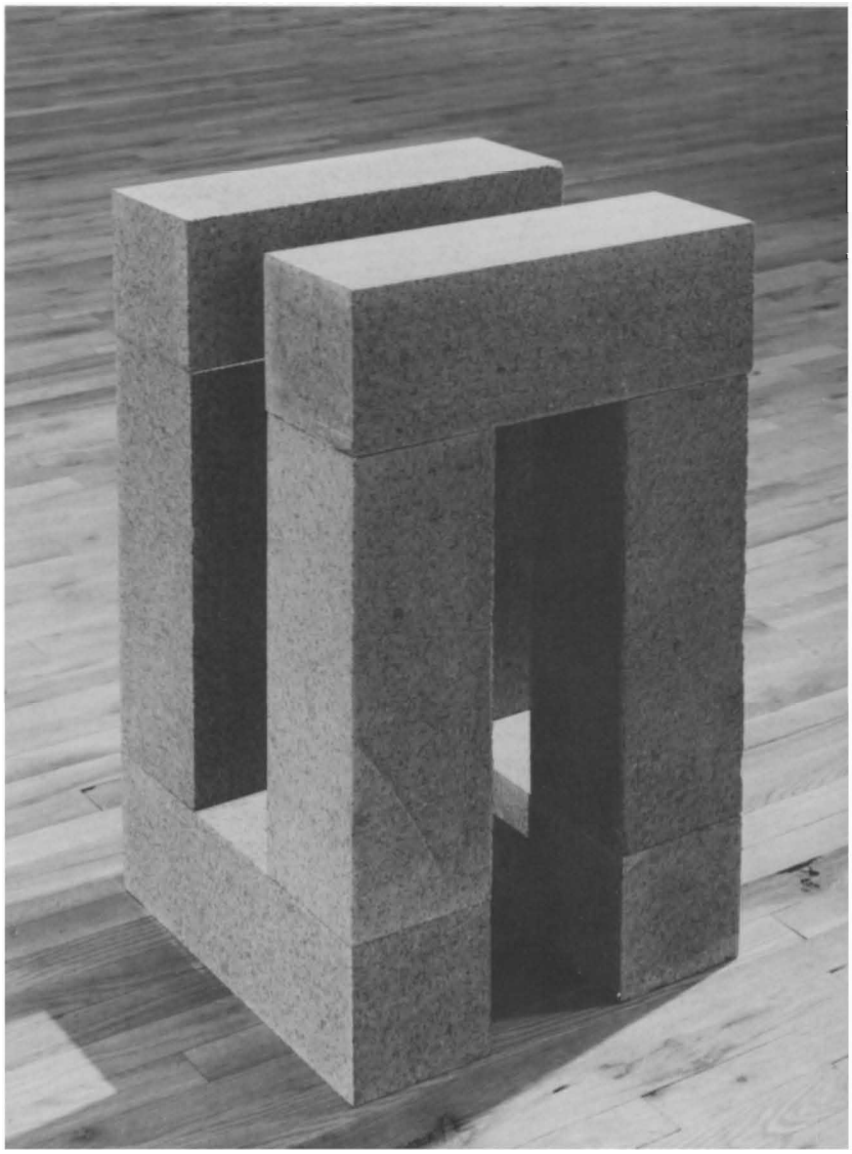


photo: Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

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Footnotes

1. Wade Saunders, "Talking Objects: Interviews with Ten Younger Sculptors," *Art in America,* November, 1985, p. 111.
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6. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art,* ed., Gregory Battcock, p. 144.

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