

MINIMALISM
&
BEYOND

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MNUCHIN GALLERY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mnuchin Gallery is proud to present *Minimalism & Beyond*. The gallery has a long history of exhibiting some of the finest examples of Minimalist art, including the world’s first-ever exhibition of Donald Judd stacks in 2013, and the group exhibition *Carl Andre in His Time* in 2015. For over 25 years, we have been privileged to live alongside works by many of the artists in this show, including Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, and Frank Stella, in addition to Judd and Andre. Over this time, we have noted the powerful impact these works have had on the generations of artists who followed, and the profound resonances between these landmark works from the 1960s and some of the best examples of the art of today. Now, in this exhibition, we are delighted to bring together these historic works alongside painting and sculpture spanning the following five decades, many by artists being shown at the gallery for the first time.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts of the Mnuchin team, especially Michael McGinnis. We are grateful to the generous private collections that have entrusted us with their works and allowed us to share them with the public. We thank our catalogue author, Pac Pobric, for his engaging and insightful essay. We commend McCall Associates for their catalogue design. And we thank our Exhibitions Director, Liana Gorman, for her thoughtful and thorough contributions.

ROBERT MNUCHIN SUKANYA RAJARATNAM MICHAEL MCGINNIS

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A MINIMAL LEGACY

PAC POBRIC

In the photograph, Donald Judd looks appreciative, but vaguely apprehensive. He's in the background with his son, Flavin, and it's 1987. They're standing on the street, looking into Paula Cooper's gallery at a show by Robert Gober, his second with the dealer. In the foreground, right in front of Judd, is a sculpture of a baby's crib slanted in a curious, unsettling manner. Behind that, out of the photographer's view, Judd can see another, even more menacing work, *Two Partially Buried Sinks*, 1986–87, which look like tombstones on a patch of earth and grass.

Why this perverse fascination with sanitation? Whatever was so filthy that it needed so much cleansing? The work set a disquieting mood and “you didn't need to know about art history” to understand it, as Zoe Leonard later said.¹ But knowing the history as Judd did, it was impossible not to see parallels between his work and Gober's. Paula Cooper, who represented both artists, saw the affinities immediately, and she made sure to highlight and press them. In 1985, at Gober's first solo show with her gallery, she installed an untitled stack sculpture by Judd in the back room. Closer to the front, Gober had his own stack work, *The Ascending Sink*, 1985, which, like Judd's piece, was carefully crafted and finished. Critics saw the resemblance too, and used old, established language to describe the younger artist's new work. Here's how John Russell put it in the *New York Times*: “Minimal forms with maximum content are what Robert Gober's sculptures are all about.”²

Standing outside the gallery on Wooster Street that late-October day, Judd had reason to wonder at Gober's show. Their names were now intimately tied. Whatever Gober did would reflect back on the Minimalist master, which would give any artist—especially an established one—cause for concern. On the one hand, there were grounds for optimism. Gober's work was strong, elegant, and mildly evasive, which were qualities Judd admired in the artists he wrote about favorably. But how to make sense of such a sinister feeling? Was the funeral Gober arranged at Paula Cooper's gallery also the close of the Minimalist moment? A few days after seeing the exhibition, Judd complained privately in a notebook that forefathers tended to be buried altogether too hastily. “They were not considered when they were alive,” he wrote, “and dead, they are not considered.”³



1. Donald Judd and son Flavin Judd viewing the exhibition *Robert Gober*, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, October 1987

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In art history, there are no definitive breaks, only pauses, reconsiderations, new arrangements, and magical, counterintuitive realizations. Today we have little faith in the overheated millenarian rhetoric of the 1980s that reached its feverish peak in “the end of history” celebrated by Francis Fukuyama. With the benefit of hindsight, a healthy respect for liberal pluralism, and a skeptical attitude towards all closed narratives, we now see that old ideas can never truly be banished for good. Often, for long periods and in peculiar ways, traditions animate culture in hushed tones. Gober did not bury Minimalism in 1987, nor did he intend to do so; quite the opposite. Instead, his second show with Paula Cooper proved that the conversations inaugurated 20 years earlier by Judd, Frank Stella, Carl Andre, and Robert Morris, among others, were still flexible, active, and open to thoughtful adjustment.

Minimalism—that “Pandora’s Box,” as Irving Sandler put it in 1967—has remained elastic.⁴ More so than any other post-war movement, it continues to enliven serious contemporary art (whereas Pop art has an altogether more frivolous progeny). We find a Minimalist heritage in Roni Horn’s preoccupation with simple grace and in Adam Pendleton’s belief that repetition (“one thing after another,” as Judd put it) can yield unexpected insights. Rashid Johnson’s concerns with formal and social structures are fundamentally Minimalist, especially in installations like *Antoine’s Organ*, 2016, which is built largely of black steel, fluorescent lights, and stacks of books on black culture and history. Cady Noland—who is along with Gober one of the great perverters of Minimalism—nonetheless often employs



2. Rashid Johnson, *Antoine’s Organ*, 2016, black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, monitors, rugs, piano, 189 × 338 × 126 ¾ inches (480.1 × 858.5 × 321.9 cm)

its reductive vocabulary in the service of her often baleful work. And David Hammons—perhaps the movement’s richest inheritor—has not only perfected the minimal understatement, he has shown that humble forms are projection screens for seemingly far-flung concerns. Felix Gonzalez-Torres has done the same.

These artists have not simply found new pathways beyond Judd, Stella, Andre, or Morris; they also force “encounters and collisions” with the earlier work (to use Glenn Ligon’s phrase) that demand new ways of seeing what we thought we already knew.⁶ Gober pointed to something in Judd that is now unavoidable: that one layer beneath his neat, crisp, seemingly self-absorbed work was an insistence on cleanliness and purity. The sinks make that explicit.

Ligon, in a similar way, is intensely focused on amplifying the hidden implications of historical forms. His installation *To Disembark*, 1993, includes wooden sculptures that are not structurally dissimilar from Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961. Each work has a recorder inside that plays audibly. But while Morris’s sculpture emphasizes his presence through a three-hour recording of how the thing was made (we can hear him sawing and hammering the box into shape), Ligon’s pieces recall Henry Brown, an American slave who escaped his captors by concealing himself inside a cargo container in 1849. Ligon later said: “I became fascinated with the idea of this box as the container for the body, but also the idea that if he had spoken, it would have been the thing that would have given him away.”⁷

These works—like Urs Fischer’s gentle jab at Dan Flavin with *Colorful Personal Ecstasies*, 2014, a wax candle fashioned in the shape of a fluorescent light—reflect on and enlighten

one another, which allows us to re-shuffle the deck. This is different than tracing a clear and direct heritage. It would be impossible, in any intelligent way, to draw a straight line from Minimalism through every single person in this exhibition; there are too many tendencies at work in the recent art, and Minimalism, anyway, is too varied—which is exactly what makes it such a deep reservoir. New thoughts can always come to the fore, but rarely as a result of immediate influence. Consider On Kawara, whose lifelong silence about the meaning of his art makes it practically impossible to say he drew anything from Judd, Andre, or Stella. Yet date paintings like *May 21, 1985* unearth something the orthodox Minimalists knew implicitly, but largely brushed aside: that time can be an explicitly Modernist concern.

Influence is too flimsy a category to make sense of these reflections. What’s more, many of the artists here—especially the younger ones—absorbed Minimalist ideas largely second-hand, through intervening movements like Conceptualism (Sol LeWitt looms large here). Others respond more richly to different styles: consider the Abstract Expressionism of Jack Whitten or Agnes Martin, or the Cubist legacy of collage in mixed media paintings like Mark Bradford’s *Dream Deferral*, 2009. Recall the steep debt Fischer and Jeff Koons owe to Pop, which also drives so much of Yayoi Kusama’s work. And what would we do with decorative paintings like Rudolf Stingel’s *Untitled*, 2004, with its opulent gold flowers? What about Christopher Wool’s *Untitled*, 1995, which looks like the scrawl of a graffiti artist on the run?

Influence is an invisible category; who knows where inspiration comes from? So let’s set aside the tired, old, nineteenth-century problem of genealogy and ask, instead, some structural questions about Minimalism and beyond to see what the new work rings out from the old.

THE PRESENTLY ABSENT HAND

In 1995, the New York artist Paul Dickerson went to interview the sculptor Charles Ray for *BOMB* magazine. “As I was getting off the uptown #6 train,” he wrote, “I spotted Charles Ray buying subway tokens at the booth. He was looking just like one of his self-portrait sculptures. We were both heading to meet each other at the ’95 Whitney Biennial to see his new sculpture and to record a conversation between us over lunch.”⁸

Ray’s work at the show that year was *Puzzle Bottle*, 1995, a wood figurine of Ray standing awkwardly inside a corked glass bottle like a model ship. The sculpture is diminutive, just over one foot tall, but the figure is fairly well rendered and neatly painted,



3. Bruce Nauman, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail (Back View)*, 1967, plaster with wax, 26 × 24 × 3 ½ inches (66 × 61 × 9 cm)

enough to see Ray’s face and eyes. He looks mildly anxious in his brown glasses, collared shirt, and blue jeans, as if he’s just realized what’s happened and that it won’t be so easy to get out.

Dickerson admired the sculpture and noticed its nervous energy, but he couldn’t quite understand it, nor the rest of Ray’s work. At lunch, he stumbled over how to articulate himself and asked the sculptor about Jacques Lacan and the idea that “the gaze overrides perception.” Was that what this was all about? Ray demurred: “I haven’t read Lacan,” he said, insisting that his art was about something else. The *Puzzle Bottle* and everything before it had nothing to do with “my experience,” he explained. Psychologizing the work wasn’t useful. “I just want to create an event,” he said. “The work is a verb, the active agent”—and a restrictive one too, considering the nervous man in the bottle.

Ray’s sculpture would have looked good next to Bruce Nauman’s *Henry Moore: Bound to Fail (Back View)*, 1967, which was on view at the same time in his 1995 Museum of Modern Art retrospective. Like the bottled man, Nauman’s wax-over-plaster cast of his own back with his arms tied behind him is all about active restriction. Both works have a sense of humor; both make playful use of language; and both artists have a Minimalist pedigree. (Ray told Dickerson that Donald Judd was an artist whose work



4. Cady Noland, *Bloody Mess* (detail), 1988, carpet, rubber mats, wire basket, headlamp, shock absorber, handcuffs, beer cans, headlight bulbs, chains, and police equipment, dimensions variable

“made sense” to him. “I ate all that stuff up.”) But what explained Ray’s and Nauman’s distinctly representational styles when the orthodox Minimalists had pressed so hard for pure abstraction?

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Judd and Stella set a radically anti-figurative tone in 1964. In their joint radio interview with Bruce Glaser on WBAI-FM that year, they sparred and disagreed, especially on the weight of tradition (which Stella carried uncertainly and Judd rejected out of hand), but they settled on a shared conviction: that it didn’t matter who made the work, only that it existed exactly the way it was. They had little appetite for the subjectivity that was loaded into every one of Willem de Kooning’s brushstrokes, which constantly reminded viewers of the painter’s former presence. “It’s like handwriting,” Stella said of gestural painting. “And I found that I just didn’t have anything to say in those terms.” He didn’t aspire to leave his signature on the picture; he just wanted “to keep the paint as good as it was in the can.”⁹

Judd and Stella were particularly adamant about erasing themselves from their work, but they were not alone. Carl Andre, who shared a studio with Stella and the photographer Hollis Frampton from 1958 to 1960, had a similar antagonism towards composition; he also wanted to leave little trace of his hand in his art. For *Spill* (*Scatter Piece*), 1966, he



5. Richard Serra, *Scatter Piece*, 1967, rubber latex, metal, and wire, approximately 24 × 300 × 300 inches (61 × 762 × 762 cm)

let gravity and chance decide the shape of the work by dumping 800 plastic blocks from a canvas bag onto the floor. Richard Serra made his own *Scatter Piece* the next year by throwing rubber latex, metal rods, and wire across his studio floor.

These drastically anti-figurative strategies were fruitful; they cooled the overheated energy that had animated de Kooning and Franz Kline. The new work was more still; it was intellectually and formally simpler; and it forestalled questions of psychology and artistic intention, which the orthodox Minimalists considered frivolous. “Art excludes the unnecessary,” Carl Andre wrote.¹⁰ Amended and technologically updated, these tactics are still useful: Wade Guyton’s paintings, which he makes from borrowed images on large-format printers, are driven by the same motivation of subjective erasure. In a picture like *Untitled*, 2006, there is nothing of Guyton except the single letter “U,” as if the fire in the painting has burned any other reference to the artist at hand.

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But even in the early 1960s, there were criticisms. In the first place, not every artist associated with Minimalism wanted to disappear. Anne Truitt didn’t; she carefully hand-painted her sculptures, which drew the admiration of Clement Greenberg (who was otherwise a devoted anti-Minimalist). Nor was Tony Smith interested in voiding his existence. Although he often coated his works in austere black paint, the curious polyhedrons he fashioned



6. Robert Morris with *(Untitled) Box for Standing*, 1961, pine, 74 × 25 × 10 ½ inches (188 × 63.5 × 26.7 cm)

from wood or bronze could never have been readymade; clearly, an artist's mind had been at work here.

Others—Robert Morris chief among them—made an even more fundamental claim: that no matter how apparently absent the hand, no matter how reductive the gesture, some trace of subjectivity would always remain. There was always a ghost in the machine; after all, someone had to have made the work with some set of ideas and purposes. Works like *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, literally contain his intention. So does *I-Box*, 1962, a small box with a door that opened onto a picture of Morris standing nude. These were still sculptures, Morris insisted, but the problems they addressed had expanded. “The object itself has not become less important,” he wrote in 1966. “It has merely become less self-important,” which gave him all the justification he needed to use some of his other works as props for performances.¹¹

Morris shares much with Stella and Judd, but his figurative tendency was anathema to them. It is difficult to find the latter two artists in their work, but with Morris, there is never any question as to his presence. It is the same with Ray. Long before the *Puzzle Bottle*, Ray realized he would always be somewhere inside his art. So instead of fighting it, he embraced the nervous energy of his body and made his work a matter of movement and delay, especially in pieces like *Phantom Limb*, 1981–85, where he confined himself to a Minimalist box. That work, like Morris's *Untitled (Box for Standing)*, 1961, is full of productive ambiguities, but about one point both are abundantly clear: here is the artist, right inside his work, trapped by what he has made.

PAIRING SINGULAR FORMS

In 1990, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his partner, Ross Laycock, went to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles to see Roni Horn's solo show, *Surface Matter*. In one gallery, lying humbly on the floor, was *Gold Field*, 1980–82, a thin, four-by-five-foot sheet of pure gold, like a luxurious piece of tin foil.

“How can I deal with the *Gold Field*?” Gonzalez-Torres later wondered. “I don't quite know.” Neither he nor Laycock were familiar with Horn's work, which only heightened their quiet shock at the “gentle and horizontal presence of this gift. There it was, in a white room, all by itself, it didn't need company, it didn't need anything.” He went on: “It is everything a good poem by Wallace Stevens is: precise, with no baggage, nothing extra.”¹²

Gonzalez-Torres could have used the same words to describe his own work. Like Horn, he also had a taste for understatement; his art also requires a degree of patience, and benefits little from a distracted glance; and as with Horn at her best, Gonzalez-Torres is brilliant at quietly bringing out what remains unsaid—which is precisely what he admired about *Gold Field*: “Roni had named something that had always been there.”

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Judd, Stella, Morris—whatever their many disagreements—shared an anti-compositional style and a sensibility for singular forms. Judd used the term “wholeness,” whereas Morris stressed that overall shape was “the most important sculptural value.”¹⁴ The result was the same: a conviction that integrity was important. The work—no matter its look or size—should always be greater than the sum of its parts. Even sculptures made of many pieces, like Judd's stacks, were meant to be read holistically. “To me the piece with the brass and the five verticals is above all *that shape*,” Judd told Bruce Glaser of *Untitled (DSS 55)*, 1964.¹⁶

Gold Field partakes of this tradition, which is what Gonzalez-Torres saw when he said, “It didn't need company, it didn't need anything.” The work was independent, complete, and distinctly anti-relational—hence its lonely installation in an otherwise spare white gallery, which was exactly Horn's intention. Here's how she put it: “I wanted to put the gold out there, self-sufficient, purified to the fullness of what it is and laid out on the floor—not as an accompaniment to some other idea, but just in itself.”¹⁶

All of which makes Gonzalez-Torres's appreciation of *Gold Field* somewhat curious. He tended away from singularity. He made work in editions, often in unlimited quantities. Installations like “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*), 1991, are made of an unlimited number of

individually wrapped candies; whatever gallery visitors take away will later be replaced. His works rarely include just one formal element; almost always, there's some relationship between parts. "*Untitled*," his 1991 billboard photograph of an empty bed with crumpled sheets, has two pillows with two impressions. And perhaps his most beautiful and elegant work, "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–90, is pointedly made of a pair of perfectly synchronized clocks. While one will inevitably slow and fail before the other, it will then be repaired or replaced, rendering the work infinite.

So what did Gonzalez-Torres see in that simple sheet of pure gold? What did he draw from its seemingly self-contained presence? "A new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty," he wrote. "Waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved to a place of the imagination."¹⁷

It's important that Gonzalez-Torres did not see the work alone. His epiphany in front of *Gold Field* was combined with Laycock's, so that an otherwise singular aesthetic encounter became a joint collision. The sculpture didn't need company, but it suddenly inaugurated a new line of confluence between partners. Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock looked, reflected, discussed, and came to a deepened understanding. "Ross and I always talked about this work, how much it affected us," Gonzalez-Torres wrote. "After that any sunset became 'The Gold Field.'"¹⁸

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In a sense, *Gold Field* is something of an anomaly. Much of the rest of Horn's work, as Gonzalez-Torres would have seen in her exhibition, is made serially, not singularly, which forces comparative considerations. She is interested in difference and repetition. She wants to know, is it possible to make one thing the same way twice? Her *Untitled* (*Flannery*), 1997, has the refined, reductive style of a Minimalist sculpture, but it dispenses with absolute wholeness in favor of plurality. The two cast blocks of blue glass that make up the sculpture need to be considered individually, apart, and then in relation to one another; they can't be seen as above all *that shape*. Horn's concerns were largely alien to the orthodox Minimalists, who were more absorbed with problems of overall shape and finish. But her work—even *Gold Field*—stresses that relationships are unavoidable, even in seemingly holistic, non-relational work.

This cathartic realization enriched Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's shared experience of the sculpture; it opened an unexpected bridge between lovers in a moment of mutual difficulty. "In the midst of our private disaster of Ross's imminent death, and the darkness of that particular historical moment," Gonzalez-Torres wrote, "we were given the



7. Donald Judd at 101 Spring Street, New York, 1982

chance to ponder on the opportunity to regain our breath, and breathe a romantic air only true lovers breathe."¹⁹

By the time Gonzalez-Torres saw Horn's show in 1990, Laycock was running out of time; the next year, he died of complications from AIDS. By then, Horn had grown close to the couple. Gonzalez-Torres made a candy piece in her honor, "*Untitled*" (*Placebo—Landscape—for Roni*), in 1993 and Horn returned the tribute the next year by reconsidering *Gold Field* and doubling it. Her sculpture *Gold Mats, Paired—for Ross and Felix*, 1994–95, has not just one but two sheets of pure, annealed gold, one atop the other. "When Roni showed me this new work she said, 'There is sweat in between,'" Gonzalez-Torres later reported. "I knew that."²⁰

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In 1966, the art critic Rosalind Krauss realized that, despite Judd's stated intentions to the contrary, his work was both illusive and allusive—that it was never quite what it seemed and that it always implied things outside of itself. An aluminum work at the Castelli Gallery that year looked to Krauss as if it were mounted on the wall from one part; in fact, she saw, it was installed from another, which "reveals one's initial reading as being in some way an illusion." The works in the show reminded her of Renaissance architecture, "a situation one knows from previous experience," which meant the sculpture was already historically relatable and not wholly self-sufficient.²¹

Later, long after she had abandoned Judd, Krauss remembered her argument as a complaint, but it wasn’t at the time she made it. Judd’s work, she said, had “beauty” and “strength” and will never “desert meaning.”²² She wasn’t denigrating the Castelli show. She simply wanted to give the artist a gentle nudge. Wasn’t Judd’s sense of his own work limited? How could he truly avoid all allusions and illusions? How could any artist? All works of art are open to new arrangements and reconsiderations, whereupon they look different in a new place, as Judd’s stack did in the back gallery of Goyer’s first show with Paula Cooper.

Judd was often intractable, but in his own way, he knew Krauss was right. A few days after seeing Goyer’s second show with Paula Cooper, and after complaining about how young artists tended to forget their forefathers, he sat in his Spring Street studio and reflected on the scattershot nature of his notes, which he had been trying to reorganize. The idea was to impose some sense of continuity on his thoughts. But then he thought, “Why should my writing be more organized? It’s not a story; it’s not educational; it’s not expository. It’s a falsification to make it seem these. And the quality of being a story is complete.”²³ Yet completeness was a lie. The notes were not closed; they could be rearranged, amended, discarded, elaborated. Ideas are always open to revision; the deck can always be re-shuffled.

NOTES

1. Zoe Leonard quoted in Claudia Carson and Paulina Pobocha, "Chronology," in *Robert Goyer: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, ed. Ann Temkin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 139.

2. John Russell, "Art: Jan Hafstrom Opens Season of New Names," *New York Times*, October 4, 1985, accessed July 9, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/04/arts/art-jan-hafstrom-opens-season-of-new-names.html>.

3. Donald Judd, *Writings* (New York: Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books, 2016), 480.

4. Irving Sandler, "Gesture and Non-Gesture in Recent Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 311.

5. Judd, *Writings*, 141.

6. In 2015, Glenn Ligon organized the exhibition *Encounters and Collisions* for Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool.

7. Ligon quoted in "Glenn Ligon Reframes History In The Art Of 'America'," *NPR*, May 8, 2011, accessed July 9, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/08/136022514/glenn-ligon-reframes-history-in-the-art-of-america>.

8. All Ray and Dickerson quotes from Paul Dickerson, "Charles Ray," *BOMB*, summer 1995, accessed July 9, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1867/charles-ray>.

9. Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," interview of Frank Stella and Donald Judd, edited by Lucy Lippard, *ARTnews*, September 1966; reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 157.
10. Carl Andre, "Preface to Stripe Painting (Frank Stella)," in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2000), 193.

11. Quote from Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 234.

12. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A.: 'The Gold Field,'" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 150.

13. Ibid.

14. Morris quoted in Michael Fried, "Absorption and Theatricality," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 119.

15. Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 155.

16. Roni Horn quoted in Louise Neri, *Roni Horn* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 34.

17. Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A.: 'The Gold Field,'" 150.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 151.

21. Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," in *Minimalism*, 212.

22. Ibid., 211–12.

23. Judd, *Writings*, 482.