

Marfa, Texas

I have a complex on a city block in Marfa, Texas, because I wanted to be in the Southwest of the United States and be near Mexico and also to have room for large permanent installations of my work as well as room to install work by other artists. The idea of large permanent installations, which I consider my idea, began in a loft on 19th Street in New York and developed in a building I purchased in the city in 1968.

I lived in Dallas for two years as a child and knew, as everyone did, that the West, which is the Southwest there, began beyond Fort Worth. The land was pretty empty, defined only by the names in the stories about Texas by J. Frank Dobie, as the names in the Icelandic sagas substitute in that country for the monuments that don't exist. In late 1946 I and four other soldiers went by bus from Fort McClellan, Alabama, to Los Angeles, where we inveigled a ride from the Army Air Force to San Francisco in order to be shipped to Korea to pester the world. This was the first time that I saw the Southwest, unfortunately according to the days and nights of the bus. Since everyone knows that nothing is accidental and that everything is fully planned, it's not surprising that I sent a telegram saying: DEAR MOM VAN HORN TEXAS. 1260 POPULATION. NICE TOWN BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY MOUNTAINS-LOVE DON 1946 DEC 17 PM 5 45. This part of the Southwest, except for El Paso and Las Cruces – where the bus stop was a shack enclosing a gum machine – has not changed much since then. But then Tucson was a town and Phoenix a nice small city. We spent the night in Phoenix and went riding at sundown not far from downtown. In August 1963 I traveled three days on a Greyhound bus, I believe for 25 dollars, from the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York to the bus station in Tucson to visit my sister, who lived there, and my parents, who were spending the summer. The main event, even the only one, on this trip was that the first night at three o'clock somewhere in Pennsylvania a man came aboard and collected my pillow and charged me fifty cents for another. I loved the land around Tucson, chiefly because you could see it. In regard to vegetation temperate means immoderate. During the summer of 1968 we drove from Colorado through Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. I was looking for a place, but one not much more than a campsite. The next summer we drove down the gulf coast of Baja California, which is excessively perfect in its lack of vegetation, inland at Bahia San Luis Gonzaga to the Pacific. The road was so wonderful that a day of driving eight hours resulted in eighty miles. Having come across water, beer and food we stayed a month in El Rosario with Anita and Heraclio Espinoza, whose place was famous as a base camp for botanists and paleontologists. Each of the two following summers we stayed a month in El Rosario and a month camped out fifty miles inland on Rancho El Metate, a Spanish grant to the Espinozas. The campsite was among palms on an arroyo with a pool near a very low mound, which had been the mission of San Juan de Dios de las Llagas, founded by Junipero Serra limping north to begin San Diego and Los Angeles. In 1970, in relation to a slight slope to the arroyo, I worked out a large piece for the land of Joseph Pulitzer in St. Louis. It's a rectangle of two concentric walls of stainless steel, the outer one level and the inner one parallel to the slope of the land. Since this is related to the land on which it is placed it is a reasonable asymmetry. A month of camping in the sun leads to the idea of a small house. I made sketches of two possibilities for Arroyo Grande, several miles away, and had thought of one for Rancho El Porvenir, a valley like a blade near El Rosario. The latter was to have been triangular to fit the valley, and to have had concentric adobe walls. It's a precedent for the complex in West Texas. But once the idea of a house grew beyond a shelter to include some art, being in Mexico became impossible since it would be hard to get the work into the country and impossible to get it out again. Also I had an argument about long hair with the Mexican officials at the border in Tijuana. Nixon had recently met with Echeverria. I suspect that he asked Mexico to help keep the hippies home, something he could not legally do from his side.

Each year on the way to Baja I drove through different parts of Arizona and New Mexico. Southern Arizona was becoming crowded and I thought New Mexico too high and cold. Looking at maps, I saw and remembered that Southwest Texas wasn't crowded. I flew to El Paso in November 1971, and drove to the area of the Big Bend of the Rio Grande in the Trans-Pecos. In addition to my developing idea of installations and my need for a place in the Southwest, both due in part to the harsh and glib situation within art in New York and to the unpleasantness of the city, I had set a deadline for finding a place. Bill Agee, then director of the Pasadena

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Art Museum, where I had an exhibition in 1971, had agreed to ship a large piece the museum had borrowed anywhere in the Southwest within a year. Also the new and old pottery I had bought in the Southwest was spalling in the humidity of New York, and the cacti I had collected were dying. The area of West Texas was fine, mostly high rangeland dropping to desert along the river, with mountains over the edge in every direction. There were few people and the land was undamaged. Since then there has been considerable careless development near the Big Bend National Park, which became the cause of the destruction of some land around it. This is the fault of Brewster County, which could have controlled the situation. I saw a lot in the middle of nowhere bulldozed bare of all rocks and desert vegetation to provide a yard for a house suburbanly designed and placed. I chose the town of Marfa (pop. 2,466) because it was the best looking and most practical, and rented a small house, thanks to the help of Mae Adams, now Firstbrook, who worked at the motel. Three months later, a friend, I, and my son, who was soon to eat his fourth birthday cake lost with his elders in Baja, drove a truck full of art to Texas and unloaded it into the house and garage. During this time I rented the east building on the city block in which to store the large piece. We spent the summer of 1972 in the little house. In 1973 I bought the east and west buildings, World War I airplane hangars on the edge of town that had been moved into town in the thirties by the prescient Army to make Fort D.A. Russell, later partly a prison for captured Germans. A sign in one of the artillery sheds reads: DEN KOPF BENUTZEN IST BESSER ALS IHN VERLIEREN.* In 1974 I bought the remaining quarter of the block. (Also I went to Australia, where perhaps I should have gone in the first place.)

The buildings were not habitable. We lived in an even smaller house on the edge of town but one with a view of fifty miles around. Toward the end of our stay in this house I built a room across the side with the greatest view. The outside wall, with a door flanked by windows, became an inside wall, with the door and windows as openings. The inside of this new inside wall was the same as the other side. If you looked back after going through the door you could see where you had gone to. This was an accidental, recognized, and encouraged reference to San Sebastiano in Mantua by Alberti, the only time I've referred to anything, a practice I consider unnecessary at best by those alien to a time or a place. The buildings and the land in town were in bad shape. I concentrated on the east building and began to install work there in 1974. The installation of the south room took about a year and was the basis for the room of old pieces in the exhibition I had in 1975 at the National Gallery of Canada. The city block is between the main highway – U.S. 90 to “back East” – and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks and, unhappily, next to a cattle feed mill. Following the ideas for El Porvenir and the circumstances I began to build a nine-foot wall of adobes around the block. The side along the highway was the most important to close. It was built out of old adobes from Marfa, the lower part from the Toltec Motel and the upper from the Virginia Hotel, one of the buildings that began with the town, 1883 or '86 – the date is in dispute. This building was torn down by its absentee owners and the lot is still vacant. As in most American cities and towns, there is little concern for old buildings. In Russia the past is fully remembered and in the United States it is fully forgotten. By 1976 there were a bedroom and a kitchen in the east building and the installation of the north room was complete. Since then the west building has been completed, a studio first and then an installation in the large south room. The narrow room in the middle is the library. All of the installed work is mine, so-called “early”. I haven't gotten to the recent work or to that by other artists, all of which is still in storage. It's a lot easier to make art than to finance and make the space that houses it.

In 1979, in accordance with my idea of permanent installations, I agreed to have the Dia Foundation come to Marfa and purchase the land and main buildings of Fort Russell on the edge of town, to make permanently maintained public installations of contemporary art. My idea was to have large, careful installations of my own work, pieces made for the place, and smaller, but still large, installations of the work of Dan Flavin, also to be made for the site, and the work of John Chamberlain. Later it was planned that the complete prints of Barnett Newman would be permanently shown. I didn't want to make a comprehensive collection of contemporary art or even of the artists whose work I liked, imitating the museums. I had in mind, though, originally, one piece each outside by Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Claes Oldenburg and Richard Long, and inside, the two very dark rooms that Larry Bell constructed in his studio in Venice, California, and in The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1969. Within the city block, in addition to the two large buildings, there is a smaller two-story building, the office of the Quartermaster Corps, with two children's rooms and the necessary domesticity. I've built two small adobe buildings nearby, symmetrically placed, one a bath and the other an office. There is a large vegetable garden. Next to it there is a structure, part green/dog/chicken house. Next to the children's building is a pergola and a pool, both built by

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Celedonio Mediano, who has built everything. His brother, Alfredo Mediano, takes care of the art, a serious matter not sufficiently so regarded by those reputedly interested in art. On the other side of the building, in line with my daughter's room, is an alley of green grass and seven plum trees with purple leaves. She wanted a yard. The rest of the block is covered with slightly rosy gravel from nearby. There are to be two more fair-sized buildings, east and west, for paintings (mine and others), and, to the north, a complex of four small adobe buildings centered around a pond. Between the two large buildings on the south side is being built an inner wall that slopes slightly with the land there. The rest of the area is level, as is the outer wall. The two walls and two areas, one sloped and the other level, make a work, I suppose both art and architecture, although usually the distinction is important. The inner wall is twelve feet in from the buildings, the module throughout. The adobes are now made on the site. The discrepancy of the walls is related to the idea developed in Baja for the piece in St. Louis. In the summer there are twelve cottonwoods around the pool, which in the winter become an elevated thicket. There is also a courtyard with a small garden of plants that stay green all year. The winter is bleak. This place is primarily for the installation of art, necessarily for whatever architecture of my own that can be included in an existing situation, for work, and altogether for my idea of living. As I said, the main purpose of the place in Marfa is the serious and permanent installation of art. I insist on this because nothing existing now, despite the growth of activity in museums and so-called "public art", is sufficiently close to the interests of the best art. Museums are at best anthologies and "public art" is always adventitious. But I also insist because the idea of permanent installations is in turn becoming debased. If it is, it's the end of a serious effort beyond the making of paintings and objects in my lifetime. Due to the prior existence of the buildings my interest here in architecture is secondary. If I could start over the two interests would be congruent. But I've carefully tried to incorporate the existing buildings into a complete complex. They are not changed, only cleaned up. Whatever nice but rudimentary ideas that were there, such as the clerestory, are taken to completion. It's very important that all the structures work together, be "meek and bold" among themselves. The old buildings should not drag down the new or the new denigrate the old. The conflicts you see everywhere between old and new are avoidable. Marfa is made mostly of adobes but the town had forgotten that when I started using them. It was the obvious material. Sixty miles away in Mexico they still make adobe buildings. I've employed two men continuously for years, always legally, which is the only solution to the so-called "wetback" problem. The wall and the small buildings are not hokey imitations of New Mexican pueblo architecture or, I think, associative in any way. Dirt is the material available on the spot, a movable spot, like God's Little Acre, that will eventually end up as the pond. The work is done according to the capacities and interests of the people who live in the area. What is possible to do is perhaps second to what exists in the scale of ultimates.

The walled enclosure is against the belated strip city, still growing decades after the fashion. It's against the idea of the suburban house on its lawn, particularly in the Southwest, where water is scarce and the weather requires enclosures. The place is related to the buildings built to the line of the street around courtyards in dry regions everywhere and especially in Chichimeca, as the Aztecs called the north of Mexico and the Southwest of the Estados Unidos. Symmetry is important; there are no "creative" or irrelevant odds and ends sticking out. A departure from symmetry has to have a good reason. The enclosure is not pretentious, as even the best recent architecture is. Some artists are aware of the problem of false importance and true pretentiousness and resist it; architects cultivate this appearance. Proportion and scale are very important. In contrast to the prevailing regurgitated art and architecture, I think I'm working directly toward something new in both.

* It is better to use your head than lose it.

Donald Judd, 1985

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