

I Bought a Little City

Rereading historical legacies of American Minimalist Sculptor Donald Judd and his work in Marfa, Texas

Giles Bailey



Giles Bailey Still from video collaboration with John White, 2015

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I BOUGHT A LITTLE CITY

SO I bought a little city (it was Galveston, Texas) and told everybody that nobody had to move, we were going to do it just gradually, very laid-back, no big changes overnight. They were pleased and suspicious. I walked down to the harbor where there were cotton warehouses and fish markets and all sorts of installations having to do with the spread of petroleum throughout the Free World, and I thought, A few apple trees here might be nice. Then I walked out this broad boulevard which has all these tall thick palm trees maybe forty feet high in the center and others on both sides, it runs for blocks

we had moved out, guy by the name of Bill Caulfield who worked in a sale-tobacco place down on Main Street.

"So what kind of a place was it like to live in?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "not too bad. Uh-huh."

"Maybe with a veranda on three sides," he said, "so you can sit on it and look out. A screen maybe."

"Whatcha going to look out at?"

"Maybe some trees and, uh, the lawn."

"So you want some ground around the house?"





The research installed at CCA
Glasgow, 2015 *Bought a Little City*

STATEMENT

I Bought a Little City (2014-16) is a research project that uses performance, video and printed matter as way to introduce a new critical relationship with the historical legacies of American Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd and his work in Marfa, Texas. From this point of departure, it invites audiences to reflect on how the narratives that make up familiar or canonical histories might be re-evaluated and constructed in different ways.

Using the text of a short story by American writer Donald Barthelme that coincidentally echoes and caricatures Judd's narrative, the research explores the ways in which ideas of place-making, representations of landscape and storytelling might be brought into a unique, hybrid relationship. It examines questions about the roles that tourism, capital and gentrification play in the construction of cultural heritage and art history.

It also uses unique attributes of time-based media to identify previously unexplored links between Judd's impact on the city and a cultural economy built partly upon tourism and a growing transient population of cultural worker and interns.

The project was presented in the form of an installation at the Centre for Contemporary Art Glasgow (13 November 2015 to 10 January 2016) and a performance in Kunsthalle Basel on 8 November 2014.

These paired Bailey's performance of the text of the Donald Barthelme story from which the project takes its name as a monologue with a short narrative video developed in dialogue with John White, an Art History student at Brown University and intern at Judd's Chinati Foundation. This video cast John as a tourist/explorer/researcher figure visiting a town in search of a minimalist history, however all his encounters are with sites that, though they share physical characteristics with works from this canon, are not officially designated 'art'.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project's core questions are:

- How can new historiographic methodologies be introduced through hybrid critical performance practices?
- In which ways can expanded performance practices question the roles that tourism, capital and gentrification play in the construction of cultural heritage, and develop new methods for understanding them?
- How can the unique attributes of time-based media (performance, film) identify previously unexplored links between Judd's impact on the city of Marfa and a cultural economy built upon tourism and a growing transient population of cultural workers and interns?

The Aims of the project are:

- * To break new ground in performance-making as a tool for critically reappraising art histories.
- * To build upon experimental practices of performance-making to explore the ways in which ideas of place-making, storytelling and representations of landscape might be brought into a unique, hybrid relationship.
- To encourage audiences to consider new critical relationships to the practice of Donald Judd by experiences and subjective positions. The research resists Judd's rigid assertions in *Specific Objects* that '*Three dimensions are real space... A work needs only to be interesting. Most works finally have one quality.*' and proposes an alternative that is layered, complex and multivalent, as well as being willfully '*partial and scattered*' (Judd, 1965).

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project 1:

To bring together poetic and 'gonzo' journalistic, information- gathering approaches to reportage alongside a collaging principle in which different sources and material are assembled to create a new whole. The project does this firstly by narrativising conventionally unassociated elements of the Judd story that emerged during the fieldwork conducted in Marfa as moving image and performance. This fieldwork included:

- * Identifying sites in the town that had the formal character of minimal sculptures.
- * Collaborating with Chinati Foundation (contemporary art museum located in Marfa, Texas founded by Judd) intern and Art History student John White to acquire a vantage point on the city from a cultural worker in the Judd institutions. Our video work, which came from this collaboration, is described in the next slides.
- Mapping a constellation of information, elaborated in the accompanying poster series that serve as 'footnotes' detailing poetic associations that enrich the Judd/Marfa narrative with poetic detail.



Still from video collaboration with John White (2015) - Here John studies a pile of building materials in Marfa that resemble a minimalist sculpture of the type included in the collection of the Chinati Foundation



Video collaboration with John White (2015) - Here John studies derelict shed as if it might be a public artwork (alluding to historical precedents such as Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970))

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project 2:

- To combine the narrative of Judd's work in Marfa and its impact on the city with the short story by Donald Barthelme after which this project is named. Published in 1974, close to the time at which Judd adopted Marfa as a site for his life and work, the story describes an unnamed and fabulously wealthy protagonist who buys a city and begins to make a series of absurd changes with impulse to somehow improve it. The research presents Barthelme's text as a performance to invite comparison between the two narratives, enabling the consonances and dissonances between the two to open the Judd narrative for reappraisal. The work of Judd and Barthelme have not previously been considered in relation to one another.



Still from video documenting the performance of the Donald Barthelme text included in the CCA Installation (2015)

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project 3:

- To present a two-part moving image work alongside this performance as part of an installation. This video was made with Chinati Foundation intern and Art History student John White. John contributed insights into the working context of the Foundation and his art historical knowledge of the Judd legacy informed the content of this work. The video casts John as a tourist /explorer/ researcher figure visiting a town in search of a minimalist history. However, all his encounters are with sites that, though they share physical characteristics with works from this canon, are not officially designated 'art'. This film was projected on the reverse of two roadside billboards. On the front of these are two obscure texts that relate to dialogues with a poet and an archivist who live in Marfa and have a close relationship with the city.

The project installed at CCA Glasgow
(2015)

Giles Bailey / *I Bought a Little City*



Marfa is a city in the high desert of the Trans-Pecos in far West Texas, between the Davis Mountains and Big Bend National Park. It is the county seat of Presidio County.

The city has acquired a reputation as a tourist destination for art audiences. This is largely due to the impact of Donald Judd following his move there in the early 70s to establish studios and set up the Chinati Foundation to present his collection of significant minimalist art works. His influence on the city and the particularities of his personality are made apparent when visiting the city. It is also possible to visit his studios and living spaces at sites across the town. Other galleries opened as a consequence of this grown audience including Ballroom Marfa, Rule Gallery and the Ayn Foundation.

Judd is widely celebrated for his contributions to American Minimalist art and the critical discourse around it. Upon moving to Marfa he bought considerable real estate in the city and constructed a distinctive and personalised living and working environment that is now a popular heritage site.

An invitation to develop this project into an exhibition at the **Centre for Contemporary Art Glasgow** provided an opportunity to expand the performance documentation with further work.

In both 2015 and 2016, CCA won the award for Best Cultural Venue in The Glasgow Awards highlighting the quality of the impressive programme presented by the venue and its partners. This broad and experimental programme encourages a diverse audience to experience the arts, with 334,511 admissions to the venue in the past year.

***I Bought a Little City* extends the research across several fields of creative practice. Here Bailey provides context to the way these are uniquely brought together and hybridised within the project.**

Poetic journalism

A field of reporting practice without claims of objectivity, often including the reporter as part of the story via a first-person narrative. Looking to the practices of writers and performers such as Spalding Gray (who coined the descriptor 'poetic journalism' in 1987), Jill Johnston and Joanna Pocock. Informed by these practices, *I Bought a Little City* brings together accounts of experiences and disparate material to produce a new narrative around Judd and Marfa, Texas. It foregrounds a subjective path through this material and makes meaning on terms that embrace open interpretation, inviting audiences to take their own new critical positions.

Collage as a principle for performance-making

The approach to performance-making in which different sources and material are assembled to create a new whole is notable in the experimental theatre work of *The Wooster*

Group and *Goat Island*. The project uses literary reference points and presents them for comparison against other materials to allow them to be seen in an unconventional light, inviting unique critical responses from audience members.

Dissident historiographies

The project draws upon creative practices that examine the conventions of history writing such as Catherine Sullivan's *Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* (2003), which explores the dissonant combination of John Ford's 1633 play *Tis Pity She's a Whore* with instruction-based performance works by the mid 20th century avant-garde movement, Fluxus. Informed by work of this kind, *I Bought a Little City* dispenses with the rationalist approach that brings events into a reductive, sequential and causal logic. In this way it allows audiences to see histories in different way and question claims to empiricism and firm conclusions. It is here that the research works most strongly against Judd's claim that and artwork should not be 'partial and scattered' and instead embraces this as a fundamental creative principle.



South Highland Ave. and the
Presidio County Courthouse, Marfa



Goat Island *The Sea & Poison* (1998)

Giles Bailey *I Bought a Little City*



Catherine Sullivan *'Tis Pity She's a Fluxus Whore* (2003)

1: Generation, selection and synthesis

The material from which the research began was gathered in Marfa during a three-month fieldwork residency in the city. This involved live experiments such as a performance of the Barthelme text in the cupola of the Presidio county courthouse, interviews and discussions with residents and cultural workers in the city and the shooting of video. The research process began with an editorial process in the studio. By bringing together the various key elements using the collage principle described above in which different sources and material are assembled to create a new whole, Bailey was able to begin to identify a potential form for the work. Here he identified an approach to make legible the complex impact of Judd's work and legacy on the city. It would orientate around the pairing of material gathered in Marfa with the text of the Barthelme short story.

2: Analysis and Articulation

With the material gathered and series of experimental edits and performances to bring it together undertaken, Bailey saw a potential means to continue the experimental historiographic work he had developed in his projects Talker Catalogue and *Out of a Morass*. This would respond critically to canonical weight of Judd in the history of minimalism as '*partial and scattered*', attributes sited as undesirable by Judd in his text *Specific Objects* (Judd 1965). During this development phase of the project Bailey devised the form of the installation and the way the spatial arrangements of screens and objects would choreograph audiences' progress through the space to encounter elements sequentially. His aim here was that, in so doing, they would accumulate a complex picture of the the research's various enquiries and be stimulated to ask questions about where they attribute value amongst this. The graphic language for the posters which serve as footnotes was tested and finalised here also.

3: Presentation, participation and critical reflections

The research was presented firstly as a live performance of the Barthelme text with video material at Kunsthall Basel (8 Nov 2014) then exhibited at CCA Glasgow (13 November 2015 to 10 January 2016) as an installation consisting of:

- A three-channel video work which presented a video document of the performance of the Donald Barthelme text against a wallpaper depicting the vista of Marfa's cityscape from the Presidio County Courthouse. This was paired with a short film made with Chinati Foundation intern and Art History Student John White. This film was projected on the reverse of two roadside billboards. On the front of these are two obscure texts that relate to dialogues with a poet and an archivist who live in Marfa and have a close relationship with the city (the origins of these are elaborated in poster series described below).
- A minimal lightbox sculpture that bears an enlarged fragment of the Barthelme text as it was printed in the New Yorker. This serves to bring the two formal manifestations of work by Judd and Barthelme together.

- A series of posters that serve as 'footnotes' to the research providing background and supplementary information to the installations various elements.

A public event hosted by CCA Glasgow during the show gave 20 participants an opportunity to take part in a workshop facilitated by Bailey. This shared practical insights into the research methodology and conceptual background to the project.

Having realised this project it was possible to conclude that a new speculative logic for organising information and valuing it on different terms in resistance to the logic of Judd could come about through this collaging/journalistic practice. Audiences navigated the material on their own terms and had the opportunity to engage with the research questions spatially. The workshop event disseminated the research methodology and provided a forum for critical feedback to inform future inquiry.



A performance of the Donald Barthleme text *I Bought a Little City*



The project installed at CCA Glasgow
(2015)

Giles Bailey / *I Bought a Little City*



This poster series serves to supplement the experimental content and structure in the elements of the installation. By employing a similar collaged approach, they layer information but also offer a more conventionally 'readable' set of reference points to broaden access to this body of research.



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