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Carl Andre by Nancy Durrant

For a man whose work is, he claims strenuously, devoid of ideas ('There are no ideas hidden under those plates! They're steel plates and nothing else!') Carl Andre's sculptures are astonishingly evocative. His modular constructions of identical, stubbornly ordinary materials - steel pipe, sheet tin, graphite, wood and, notoriously, bricks - assembled usually at floor level, have something elemental about them, a whiff of the ancient (he decided to become a sculptor after his aunt took him to see Stonehenge). In the overwhelmingly vertical context of a gallery, you stumble upon them like the remains of a stone circle on a country walk. The existence of his materials as the building blocks, literally, of human shelter, as things on their way to being something else, elicits a strong, physical response in many viewers.

It's hard, too, not to trace a line between them and what he has called his genetic heritage: his father, a Swedish émigré to the United States, worked as a draughtsman at the Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts. Other relatives had preceded him into the state's industry and as a penniless young artist, Andre himself worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad as a brakeman. 'I've never had relatives working in a trade where there was no product,' he told *The New Yorker*. 'They added to the world, and I always thought I was adding to the stock of images in the world. I feel I've done the work I was destined to do.'

All of which makes the location of his current retrospective at Dia:Beacon, a former Nabisco box-printing factory in upstate New York, more than appropriate. Yet his involvement has been a surprise. Told by the reclusive artist that he was very much retired and would be providing no assistance, the exhibition's curator Yasmil Raymond was amazed when Andre began making sorties to the museum from his home in Manhattan to help with her installation.

Elderly now - he will be 80 this year - Andre retains a surprisingly light, even voice, although the distinctive thick black beard and shoulder-length hair are long gone. A

neat white bushel now starts under his chin and his remaining hair shines the colour of steel. He still dresses, as he has for decades, exclusively in dungaree-style overalls over a buttoned-up shirt (and occasionally a sweater, knitted for him by his fourth wife, the artist Melissa Kretschmer). As a young man, Andre was always a hit with women. 'I thought he looked like Richard Burton,' said his second wife, Rosemarie Castoro. When they met, she was leaning against a pillar in Dillon's Bar downtown. He asked her, 'Are you a caryatid?' 'You call this the Erechtheion?' she replied, which may still be the world's most learned pick-up exchange.

The artist may have aged, but the work has not dated. He still defies labels - even if people continually try to pin them to him. Sometimes he's called a Minimalist, which he neither refutes nor embraces. He came of age as an artist in the 1960s and 70s, alongside the movement's leading artists - Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt - and exhibited with them in the early days when the movement was still emergent. He is sometimes called a Conceptualist, which drives him mad. 'Works of art don't mean anything,' he said recently. 'They are realities and what does reality mean? It's there! Because our culture tends to turn everything into language, we lose sight of the actual being of things.'

Even if it has been many decades since he abandoned carving, withdrawing his hand from the object and allowing it to exist on its own terms, what he definitely is, is a sculptor. It was his old friend, the painter Frank Stella, who helped the young Andre (who was, by his own admission, 'a terrible painter... and a hopeless drawer') to realise that. 'I remember asking Frank, "Won't I ever be a good painter?" And he said, 'That's beside the point, you're a good sculptor now.' '

Every good artist has his moment of artistic outrage, and Andre's came with those bricks. When in 1976 *The Sunday Times* got wind of the Tate's purchase of *Equivalent VIII*, a low, long, neat stack of 120 firebricks, there was uproar. 'The Tate drops a costly brick,' screamed the paper's headline. But as a seminal work by an artist routinely fêted by art historians as a pioneer and one of the most important sculptors of his generation, it has stood the test of time. Laid out on the floor, it literally stops you in your tracks. You must decide where to walk - on it, or around it - making it, in the purest, subtlest sense of the word, interactive. An interruption, not just of your progress around the space but also - by dint of its material - of an economic process taking place in society. The work is still known, perhaps now affectionately, as "the pile of bricks".

Raymond, as you might expect, feels differently. Blithely ignoring Andre's protestations that nothing lies beneath it, she thinks his work 'is political by the way it's made. It's not a work that is entitled, it's not a work that is expecting a large budget, to be produced. It's a work that is reacting to conditions, and at the same time is grounded in reality. So it's pragmatic and at the same time, the pragmatism in Carl's work is utopian, because it reveals that with the conditions that we have in front of us, there's always the potential to generate beauty.'

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