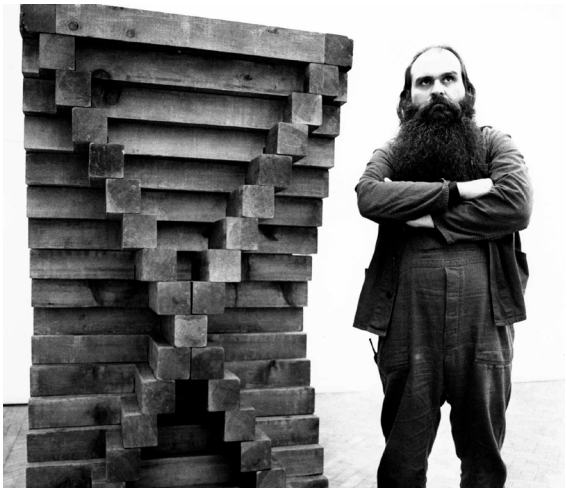

Independent newspaper
CARL ANDRE

Whitechapel Gallery, London
7 July - to 27 Aug 2000

Being in awe of someone doesn't help the interview process. As I enter the Whitechapel during the installation of Carl Andre's show, all I see is a smallish man in a faded blue boiler suit moving cubes of lead about on the floor. But the awe persists, damn it, and I sense, talking to him, that he's used to being treated that way.

I start our conversation by saying that I don't see a linear progression in his work over his career to date (he's 65), but rather a number of ways of working to which he returns periodically. Andre agrees and immediately begins to speak about 1958 - a key year, a year of realisations. Another way of putting it is that Andre had a vision: in the space of a few years, he cut through walls. He found a radical new place in sculpture, and from then on, it's been a question of making many variations from those initial, breathtaking perceptions on which his fame is built.

He makes no claim to lonely genius: he acknowledges the impact of his growing up in Massachusetts (his father was a draughtsman in a shipyard), the four years working on the railroad as a young man, the inspiration of Brancusi's work, the influence of Frank Stella, and there are links in his work with other protagonists of what became known as minimalism.

Looking at Hollis Frampton's photographs of his earliest work, I say that those small wooden pieces remind me of printing blocks: they set up an implication of positive and negative. It's useful to recall a remark he made long ago about "seizing and holding the space" of a gallery. That implied negative becomes the space around the sculpture - the sculpture acts upon it, presses into it, changes it. Andre says that his pieces are always different in every place he puts them; I comment that the 84 seemingly identical component blocks of cedar that form the huge piece *Karlsplatz* (1992) have been numbered so they can be assembled in the same order as they were in the last time the piece was on show. Andre disagrees. "It's something the owners and art handlers might want," he explains, "but it has no meaning for me."

Andre works a lot with the simple beauty of mathematics and geometry. Similarly, the poetry he's including in the show uses systems of repetition and structuring. He's spoken often of the influence Stonehenge had on him in the early 1950s: it's quintessentially a structure where number becomes form. Indeed, it becomes landscape, something that he has invoked when titling floor pieces "*Plains*". Another crucial aspect of his work is that nothing is ever fixed to anything else. Components are abutted, arranged, stacked - every element remains where it is because it's at rest. Yet it could be moved, reordered: Andre has spoken of "the infinite potential of matter and the innocence of things". By reducing what he does to the materials to the minimum and reducing form to an elemental level, he releases that sense of potential. It's the lightness of the artist's touch which is important, the source of the work's emotional power.

Another aspect of those early "vision years" was that Andre rejected the verticality of sculpture (which reaches back to monuments, the heroic depiction of the figure, the phallic) in favour of sculpture "which runs along the earth". The metal plate pieces are, he says, improved by people walking on them with normal soft-soled shoes. But he has no truck with people handling his work.

"The oils of the human hand are the most destructive agent I know of," he says. He was alarmed by the amount of handling he saw going on in Tate Modern. His acceptance of the evolution of the materials he uses (wood drying, metal dulling, even corroding) doesn't extend to what he sees as "vandalism". Though he's mostly so affable and polite, I wonder if there's a tiger in Carl Andre? And if so, do I see the tail flick?

Experience has taught him to ensure that there's nothing on the walls if he is showing floor-based sculpture. "If you have anything on the wall, you can't see anything on the floor. It's impossible." The consequence in the Whitechapel is that, downstairs, curtain walls separate the floor pieces from the displays of photographs and poetry. Upstairs, the gallery has been stripped bare: the architecture is fully revealed in an untrammelled dialogue with the sculpture. It looks utterly beautiful. On the other hand, I can remember being in a gallery once (a public collection) and realising I was standing on an Andre sculpture. After the shock, the piece began to assert its power - the sheer simplicity of it, the humility of the materials, the silence of it. It had the effect of undermining a lot of what was around it.

"Art is not a form of communication," said Andre many years ago, and he stands by it now. "A great work of art is about new experiences ... it changes your state." He feels that good art only conveys something that cannot be conveyed in any other way, just as a great poem cannot be paraphrased. In his own work, he aspires to make the visual equivalent of silence. The decibel level around us continues to rise, both literally and in terms of all our senses being assaulted. In galleries, the tide of text and educational explanation continues to lap at the sandcastle of the art itself. Education manufactures theory, it delivers meaning. The work of Carl Andre stands in opposition to this tendency: "Theory is useless," he tells me.

He speaks of order and calm in connection with his sculpture. When his work is going well, Andre feels that "thought and act become one, and that's a great state to reach." He adds (the tiger opening an eye, perhaps?): "It's a state I've never been able to reach in any other aspect of my life."