

Tony Smith

An exhibition circulated by

The Museum of Modern Art

New York



Introduction To understand Tony Smith's sculpture, one has to remember that he was for a long time a practicing architect, and therefore constantly faced with one of the basic problems of architecture: the interrelationship between a building and its environment. His ideas are very specific on the way a building—or a structure—ought to be affected by, and in turn affect, the landscape around it. He sees his structures as anchored in the environment, at the same time creating the environment by their presence. As unmoveable as a hole in the ground, permanent, stable, commanding attention, they are meant to belong to a specific location, acting as an identifying mark.

A circulating exhibition can scarcely meet this basic premise. But the present exhibition was organized, nevertheless, because the extent of Smith's influence in the development of modern American art has become increasingly clear (although his position in the many groups and movements is difficult to define), and to be able to make any critical judgment of his work, one must be confronted with the massive bulk of the structures in their intended scale. The six full-size mock-ups presented in this exhibition will allow the audience, which would otherwise have to rely on photographs, to experience their presence—and it is the intensity of their presence that accounts for the widespread public attention Smith has received since 1966 (his underground reputation, and recognition by artists, antedate it by at least a decade).

Since childhood, Smith has been interested in geometry, and has been fascinated by boxes and containers. This life-long interest, plus his becoming familiar in the 1930s with the modular systems in building, established the pattern of his work. All his pieces are built from basic geometric solids (cubes, tetrahedrons, octahedrons, etc.). While the main common characteristic among them is the unity of style, each piece is a different expression of his imagination, never a variation on the same theme. From the structures it becomes clear that Smith is not the slave of the module, but that he uses it as a practical and familiar tool to carry out his aesthetic ideas. His approach is neither conceptual nor programmatic, but belongs in the category of personal statements, with all the inherent freedom that implies. Therefore a maquette that does not satisfy his mood or aesthetic principles will be either destroyed or changed. Smith has repeatedly said that the pieces are not composed or planned beforehand, and to emphasize this he adds that "they almost come into existence by some kind of spontaneous generation." However, the selection of the components, their number, the way they are combined or "sliced," the moment to stop, etc., are the artist's decisions, and the result is always a powerful statement, a physical manifestation of Smith's ethical commitments.

In the following excerpts from an interview given in the summer of 1968, many of Smith's ideas are amplified: R.S.N.: Your structures have often been shown together with the work of minimal artists; to what extent do you share their philosophy or their approach?

T.S.: I admire much of the little that I have seen. The main difference in approach, as I understand it, is that the minimalists are aiming at certain results, while my work is the product of a variety of processes which are not governed by conscious goals.

R.S.N.: From the early 1950s you used modules in your painting; this was completely different from everything that was going on around you. What led you to make use of them at that time?

T.S.: The modular systems have been used in painting, sculpture, and architecture throughout the ages. I have always been aware of this. But while traditional art had ordinarily been governed by a dominant symmetry in the way that living organisms are, much of modern art, and in particular American art, is structured by a repetition of elements, sometimes in the form of an over-all pattern, sometimes by preformed, or prefabricated units. I had been thoroughly disciplined in cubist picturemaking by the early 1930s, but I suppose observation, habits of working with scales, grids, drafting machines, and so on, gradually overcame the more conscious methods of traditional design. R.S.N.: Some of your pieces seem to change completely when seen from different angles; by circling the structure one has the impression of witnessing some kind of metamorphosis on a grand scale.

T.S.: This effect is not sought. It is largely due to the use of modular components with which most people are unfamiliar.

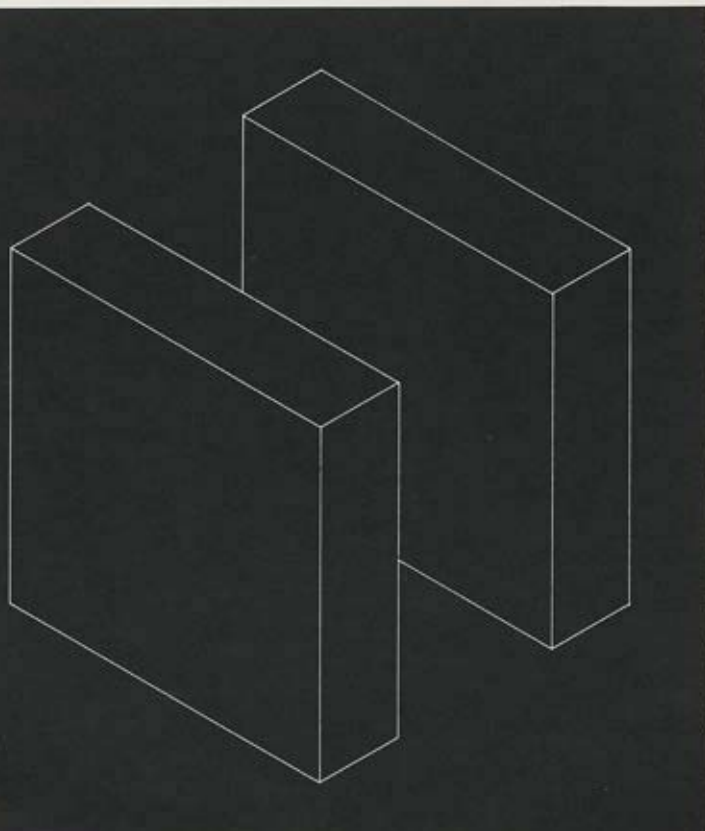
Marriage. 1965. 19' h. x 10' w. x 12' d. Basic unit (2' h. x 4' w. x 8' d.) enlarged in upper section to obtain less "pinched" aperture.



Almost everything in the man-made environment, and even in much of nature, is regulated by the axes of length, breadth, and height. The elements from which many of these pieces are made have more axes, and the forms developed from them move in unexpected ways. It is hard to visualize some of the pieces in their entirety, and it is difficult to draw them. It is for this reason that I work directly from maquettes rather than from sketches. Each modular system produces a different order of forms. Of course, it is also a matter of temperament. If a piece is too predictable I find it boring and tend to tire of it very quickly. R.S.N.: Installation is very important for every work of art, but why is it so important to you? And why do you usually prefer outdoor installation?

T.S.: I do prefer it, but this has to do with a very broad question, and in this sense I would say that many of my ideas are not related so much to my own work, but to a very large class of things that exist only in place. As a purely practical matter, only a few of my smallest pieces can be taken in and out of most buildings. But there are other

The Elevens Are Up. 1963. 8' x 8' x 8'. Two walls, each 8' h. x 8' w. x 2' d., are set four feet apart to form an eight-foot cube. Title from John McNulty's *Third Avenue Medicine*.

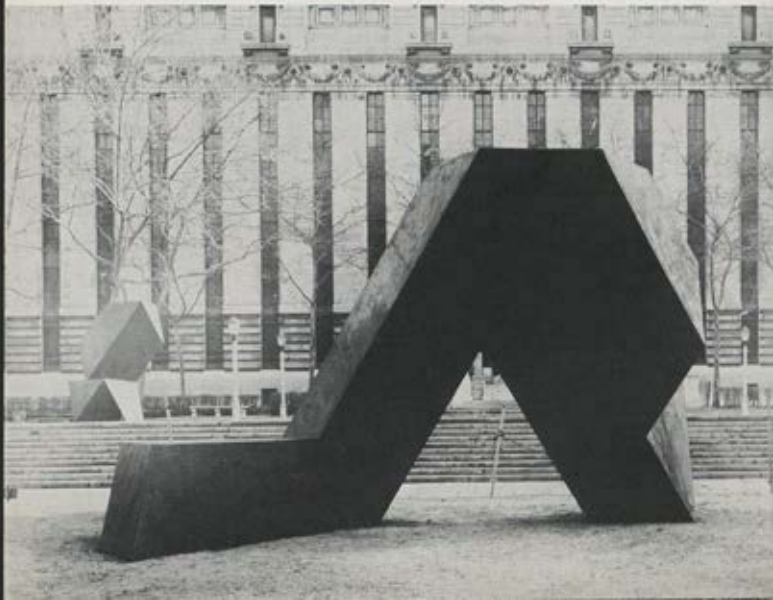


aspects of the question. Once I had a piece in each of two rooms in my house, but I had to take everything else out of both rooms. It wasn't because the pieces were so bulky; they just had to be alone. On the other hand, one of these pieces had been made for outdoors but had to be brought into the house because it looked too small outside. It needed to be more closely contained.

The factors that are pertinent here are defined space, clutter, and size. In this country, most outside space lacks definition. But almost all of my work requires a setting. If the latter is architectural, the plainer, the better. Otherwise, trees or plants, rocks, can combine with the piece in forming space around it. If the piece is entirely isolated, the spectator tends to concentrate on the surfaces and mass of the sculpture to the exclusion of the spatial continuum of which it is a part. Interiors, conversely, may be well enough defined, but they usually contain many objects, and often display architectural features which, however excellent in themselves, have not usually been designed to make the experiencing of my work any easier. R.S.N.: The pieces are so aloof, uncompromising, one feels that they must mean something, that they stand for something. Is there anything of the sort involved?

T.S.: In a way. I don't know if my pieces are meant to mean something; I suppose that I would like them to have qualities which would make them worthwhile to bring into existence and to be maintained. — Renée Sabatello Neu

The Snake Is Out. 1962. 15' h. x 24' w. x 18' d. Arrived at through chance and arbitrary conjunction of tetrahedra and octahedra. Title from John McNulty's short story *Third Avenue Medicine*.

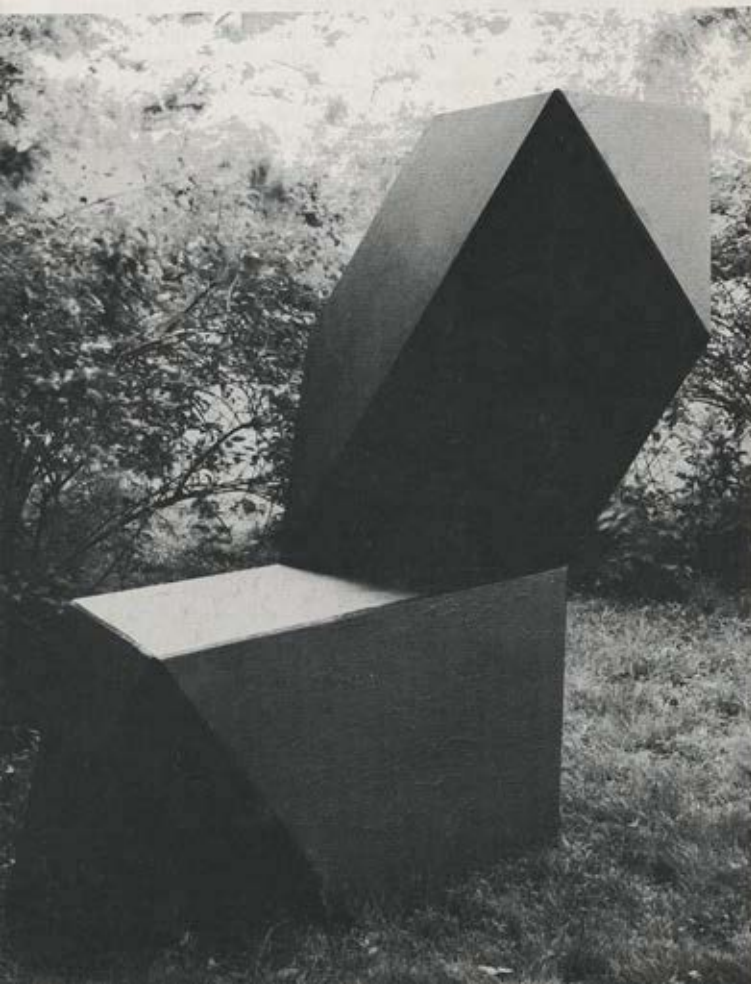


The exhibition was directed by Renée Sabatello Neu, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. It was made possible by the generous cooperation of the artist and of the Fischbach Gallery, New York. Smith's sculptures are meant to be made in steel; the plywood mock-ups exhibited, painted black to approximate a steel finish, were commissioned by the Museum for this tour, and executed by Charles Froom, New York. 1968

Biographical Notes Tony Smith was born in South Orange, New Jersey, in 1912, the son of a waterworks manufacturer. After attending Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., he served as a toolmaker and draftsman in the factory and studied painting at night at the Art Students League, New York, from 1933 until 1936. In 1937-38, he briefly attended

the New Bauhaus in Chicago, then worked as an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright for two years, assisting on several projects as a draftsman and supervisor. Although formally untrained as an architect, he designed numerous residences and projects for monuments between 1940 and 1960. During those years, as a painter, teacher, and friend of emerging artists—Pollock, Still, Rothko, Newman, and many others—he was closely associated with the avant-garde in American art. From 1946 to the present, he has been a member, successively, of the faculties of New York University, Pratt Institute, Cooper Union, and Bennington and Hunter Colleges, his students including Larry Rivers, Al Leslie, Doug Ohlson, Patricia Johanson, and Sanford Wurmfeld. In the late 1950s, Smith began to focus his interest on sculpture. In 1961, a serious automobile accident curtailed his activity, and was partly responsible for his making maquettes of sculpture to be manufactured. The first piece shown was *The Elevens Are Up*, in the exhibition "Black, White, and Gray" at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, in 1964. Since then, Smith has been represented in numerous group exhibitions. He received awards from the Longview Foundation and the National Council on the Arts, in 1966, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1968. Two of his works installed permanently are *Asteriskos*, in San Antonio, Texas, and *Cigarette*, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Smith lives in Orange and South Orange, New Jersey.

Cover and below: *Amaryllis*. 1965. 11'6" h. x 7'6" w. x 11'6" d.
Made of two identical prismatic forms. Steel version 1968.



Spitball. 1966. 11'6" h. x 14' w. x 14' d. "The alternating tetrahedra and octahedra of *Spitball* form three edges of a large tetrahedron that has been truncated at all four vertices. If we think of the thickness of each member as one layer of the space-lattice, the completed large tetrahedron would be four layers high. As it is, with the top unit lopped off, it is three layers high."—T. S.



One-Man Exhibitions

1966 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

1967 Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Bryant Park, New York

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Galerie Müller, Stuttgart, Germany (*The Wandering Rocks*)

Galerie Renée Ziegler, Zürich (*The Wandering Rocks*)

1968 Fischbach Gallery, New York (*The Wandering Rocks*)

Galerie Lambert, Paris (*The Wandering Rocks*)

Suggested Reading (arranged chronologically)

Time, October 13, 1966, pp. 80, 83-85

Tony Smith: Two Exhibitions of Sculpture. Exhibition catalog: Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, November 1966. Texts: Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., Tony Smith

Art News, December 1966. Scott Burton, "Old Master at the New Frontier," pp. 52-55, 68-70

Artforum, December 1966. Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., "Talking with Tony Smith," pp. 14-19

Art International, Summer 1967. Lucy Lippard, "Tony Smith: The Ineluctable Modality of the Visible," pp. 24-26;

Gene Baro, "Tony Smith: Toward Speculation in Pure Form," pp. 27-30

Schemata 7. Exhibition catalog: Finch College, New York, May 1967. Interview by Elayne H. Varian

Art International, September 1968. John N. Chandler, "Tony Smith and Sol LeWitt: Mutations and Permutations," pp. 17-19

New Piece. 1966. 6'11" h. x 13'10" w. x 14'18" d. "This is a hexahedron, but not a cube. Its six sides are rhombuses. It is a parallelepiped, in that its opposite sides are parallel. If four of them were symmetrically clustered about a point, they would form a rhomboidal dodecahedron."—T. S.

