

Tony Smith, Master Sculptor

The former architect's monumental works are potent examples for an emerging generation.

Below: *Smith strolls beneath Cigarette, shown last year at New York's Museum of Modern Art. 1961. Steel, 15'x26'x18'. MoMA.*





by Phyllis Tuchman

Tony Smith, once an architect, now at the height of his powers as a sculptor, has been a redoubtable force in the art world for more than thirty-five years. Examples of his rakish steel sculpture, some of them as much as thirty-six feet high, occupy sites in Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cleveland, Cambridge, and Washington, D.C., among other places, and they have helped to earn him a host of prizes, including the College Art Association's Distinguished Teaching of Art Award, the Brandeis Creative Artists Medal, and the American Institute of Architects Fine Arts Medal. Last year, at sixty-seven, Smith was inducted into the august American Institute of Arts and Letters. A fabled teacher, the burly, cherubic Irishman still commutes from his New Jersey home to New York to teach master classes at Hunter College.

Smith was a pioneering figure in the mid-sixties (he was praised as the father of primary structures) and he had a major impact on American sculpture through the seventies. Many of his ideas served as the basis for the earthworks of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter de Maria, and his influence permeated the large-scale projects and fantasy-filled architectural drawings of such avant-gardists as Alice Aycock, George Trakas, Siah Armajani, and Patricia Johanson. Yet only a decade ago Smith said of his works: "I never thought of showing them; I did them for myself as a private thing."

By the time a friend of Smith's had suggested a curator exhibit his sculptures, it was inevitable that they would be more than a private thing—his massive, angular works are done at the enormous scale carried over from his years as an architect. Born in South Orange, New Jersey, and educated by private tutors and Jesuits, Smith spent two years at Georgetown University and then took night classes at New York's Art Students League. In 1937, he enrolled in the New Bauhaus, in Chicago, where he studied architecture with European émigrés Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Archipenko.

In January, 1938, Smith came across

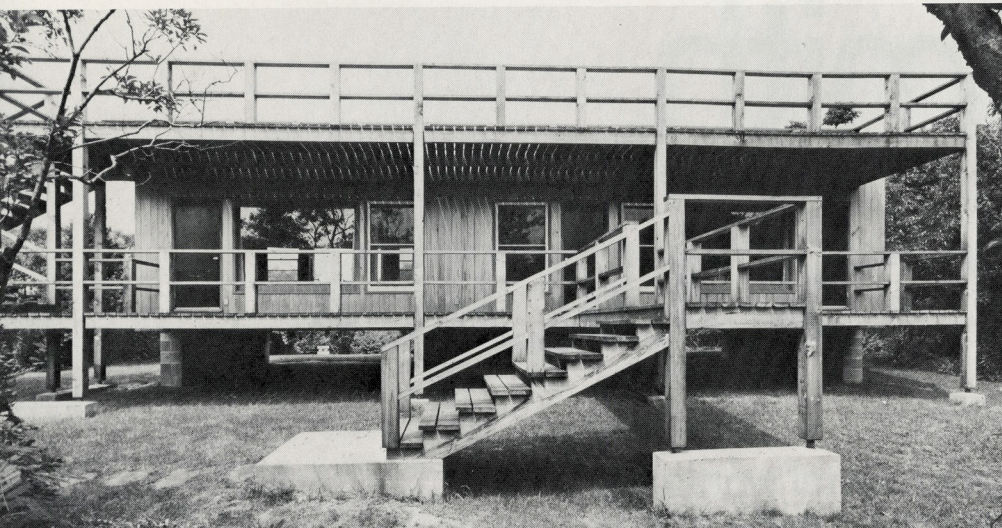
Above: *The looming, insect-like form of Gracehopper, named for a passage in James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake, is a Detroit landmark. 1962-72. Steel, 22'8"x24'x46'.*



Above: *The stepped levels of Smith's bright red For Marjorie echo the forms of a nearby building at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1961. Steel, 30'10"x18'x17'10".*

Below: *The General Services Administration commissioned Smith's She, with its sleek distortions of the cube, for the Department of Labor. 1976. Steel, 24'x30'8".*





Above: Among Smith's architecture clients were a number of art-world figures, including dealer Betty Parsons, for whom he designed this austere guest house on Long Island. 1959.

a special issue of *Architectural Forum* that had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and was devoted entirely to the architect's work. Smith was so impressed that he asked Wright for a job—and got it. At the time, Wright was developing low-cost housing for the United States government, and Smith was particularly involved with the Suntop Homes built in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. These “Usonian” houses, as Wright called them, had smooth, angled, outer walls and rested, without basements, directly on the ground. Their formal legacy is uncannily clear in many of Smith's sculptures.

By 1940, Smith had his own architectural office, and over the next twenty years, he did some renovations, a few larger projects, including a church, and more than two dozen private houses for such clients as art dealer Betty Parsons and painter Theodoros Stamos. But in 1961 Smith's practice was cut short after he developed a rare blood disease while recovering from an automobile accident. No longer able to supervise the construction of his designs, he was increasingly dismayed when workmen altered his plans, and he decided to abandon his profession. But not working in the physical world left a decided gap in Smith's life. In the thirties, he had made bas-reliefs and three-dimen-

sional structures in the manner of the Belgian de Stijl artist Vantongerloo, and when he was living in West Germany during the mid-fifties he had executed some planar Cubist constructions. Now, years later, he turned again to such things.

This time, however, Smith brought to his projects a different sensibility. A clue to his new, and independent, vision lies in the much-told story of a crucial experience he had one night while driving along an unfinished portion of the New Jersey Turnpike. His epiphany, which sounds more like a scene from a Joan Didion novel than what one associates with the austere intellectuality of Minimalism, took place, as he described it, at a place where “there were no lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. . . . The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. . . . It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.”

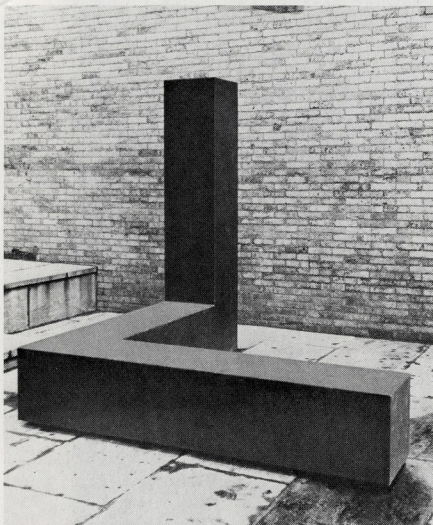
Smith made his debut as a sculptor in Hartford at the Wadsworth Athenaeum's 1964 *Black, White and Grey* exhibition. Two years later, in the

Jewish Museum's landmark *Primary Structures* show, his steel-pillared *Free Ride* was hailed as an important example of the new object-type work then gaining attention.

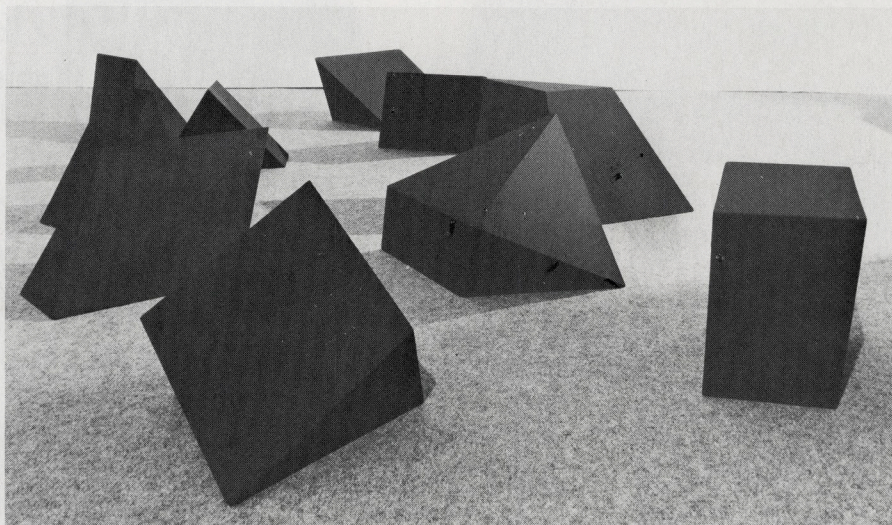
The clearly resolved imagery and bold impact of Smith's sculpture conveyed such maturity and authenticity that it provoked immediate critical regard, and his rise was swift. Eighteen of Smith's pieces were featured in a one-person show at the Athenaeum and at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art during the winter of 1966–67, and eight more were installed, with attendant publicity, soon afterward in Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library. Abstract, public sculptures had rarely received so much attention. In October, the man who by then was known as the “Master of the Monumentalists” made the cover of *Time* magazine.

Critics tried at once to categorize the works (Smith insisting all the while that they “simply exist”). His multi-angled, dark-hued geometric presences were initially discussed in the same breath with the sleek, Minimalist sculptures developed between 1964 and 1968 by Andre, Flavin, Judd, LeWitt, and Morris. Their formal idiom and their content, however, are quite different. The younger men were more involved with materials, color, less eccentric forms, and with process and procedure. Their art addressed itself less to the sensibility than to the intellect. Smith, on the other hand, was dealing with traditional sculptural properties of physical space, mass, volume, and scale, and unerringly brought his architectural sense to bear. He generally worked with the five regular geometric solids, (particularly the cube, the tetrahedron, and the octahedron), while the Minimalists were often involved with ordering systems derived from mathematical progressions, set theory, and measurement.

During the early sixties, Smith would frequently begin working on a piece with an object already in mind. One sleepless night, for example, he became obsessed with a black card-file box he had noticed on the desk of a colleague, art educator Eugene Goossen. As Smith recalls the experience, the 4½-by-6½ inch wood box was trans-



Above: *Free Ride*, 1962, has a bold simplicity. Steel, 80"x80"x80".



Above: *The related forms of Ten Elements* invite the viewer to experience the surrounding space as well as the sculptural shapes. 1975-79. Painted wood, Pace Gallery.

formed in his mind into a black prism, a geometric object which no longer functioned as a useful storage unit. The next morning, Smith phoned Goossen for its measurements and then multiplied the dimensions by five for what became *The Black Box*. Another of Smith's well-known works resulted from a conversation he had with an inventor about developing a compact way to package three gyroscopes and their rate switches. To demonstrate his solution, Smith found three Alka-Seltzer boxes of suitable size and put them on a table. "I strung them end-to-end along the three axes," says Smith. "When I was alone I took another look and decided to have it fabricated."

Something that sets Smith's art apart from that of the principal Minimalists is his literary bent. He derives some of his titles from books he has read—Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (*Gracehoper*), Beckett's *Happy Days* (*Willy*), or Haggard's *She* (*She Who Must Be Obeyed*). He never designates his work with data about materials, shapes, or installation directions, and he generally avoids the nondescript "Untitled." Occasionally, he compares his sculptures to "seeds or germs" that could spread growth or disease. "They are black," he says, "and probably malignant."

All of Smith's monolithic steel sculptures have hollow cores (fabricated as

solids they would weigh too much). But in the design stage, the sculptor thinks about them "as if they were made of granite." "I try," he explains, "to eliminate the suggestion of physical forces. I would never make cantilevered pieces." Such engineering feats, he feels, would detract from the aesthetic and psychological effects he is after.

For this artist, the open spaces in his works are as important as the solid surfaces. To move among his multiple-unit works, such as *Wandering Rocks*, *81 More or 10 Elements* is to become aware of how beholder and art work share the same space. Other pieces are to be walked into and through. About his room-encompassing cardboard cave, made for the *Art and Technology* show organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1971, Smith noted: "My intention was to make a piece of sculpture which emphasized the negative space rather than the positive form."

Smith is a staunch humanist, and he gauges his sculptures to be the measure of man. Familiar with how people react to particular dimensions from his architectural and teaching experience, he believes a work should have "an existence of its own, and at the same time not seem like an object or a monument." Smith wants people to respond physically to his work. "You

should relate to it bodily rather than just as a visual thing," he says. And the sculptures do possess an amazing physical presence that transcends the purely intellectual.

Smith's formal concerns distinguish his efforts from the sculpture made by such other architects as Mathias Goeritz and Frederick Kiesler, who produced three-dimensional art which was either graphic or merely architectural. Eugene Goossen once declared that, "with one stroke [Smith] put an end to the plague of pictorialism that has infected even the best sculpture of centuries."

The honors and commissions that have come to Tony Smith in his late career are a fitting public testament to the impact of this independent and innovative artist, especially in light of the fact that he developed his mature style at a later date than such of his Abstract Expressionist friends as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. He has addressed their metaphysical concerns and rhetorical flourishes in a spritely, elegant, sculptural mode. Smith's strong, individual art is not moving merely for its own sake. It also reminds us that man is the master of his environment. □

Phyllis Tuchman, who writes frequently on sculpture, recently completed a monograph entitled Minimalism During the Sixties.