

Art in America

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Tony Smith, 1912-1980

BY E.C. GOOSSEN

Sometime last year, before Tony Smith's death, Phyllis Tuchman, a young art historian, asked me if I still believed what I wrote in the catalogue introduction for his New Jersey Museums show in 1970. I said, "Certainly, and given what has happened since, more so." She was referring in particular to my opening paragraph, which went:

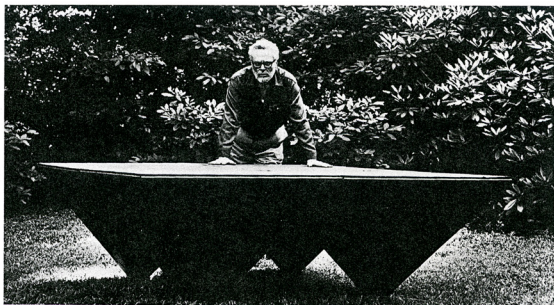
It is no longer simply a matter of opinion that Tony Smith is the most important sculptor to have appeared so far in the second half of this century. When an artist provides what other artists need and objectifies for his period both the problems and the solutions, his position is not subject to mere critical judgment. Smith's position is secured by the facts.

It is true, of course, that Smith might have "appeared" earlier in this century as a sculptor or a painter or as an architect and designer. He had been engaged in all these activities from childhood on and, based on the evidence I have seen of the extant works, the same genius is consistent throughout. But Smith did not seek to "appear," and even after he had acquired a worldwide reputation he only sold his work in order to build it.

Some people thought his high-mindedness perverse. For example, when he was offered one of the most prominent sites for a Sculpture in the City show a few years ago, including the front plaza of Lincoln Center, he sought out the most obscure spot behind that complex. Many people never saw his piece. His reasons for this, however, were entirely rational; he did not want his piece to have to compete with architecture he despised nor to obtain the kind of glamour he hated and that would obviate serious contemplation. Furthermore his placement of that piece was a didactic act.

All original artists are preceptors. They not only say "This is the way I do it," they say, "This is the way to do it." Out of such artists comes a style and subsequent artists say, "This is the way it is done." In that sense Smith was always a teacher. Once when I referred to his "sculpture," he snapped back, "I don't make sculpture, I speculate in form." But it was his didactic speculation in form that led to his debut as a "sculptor" and eventually to public recognition.

The story has been told in part by Smith himself. Late one night in February 1962 he sat with me in my Lexington Avenue studio while I was retyping a few paragraphs for the catalogue of Lyman Kipp's coming show at Betty Parsons's gallery. While we both admired David Smith we also both agreed that the situation in sculpture had been confused by the "pictorialism" in much of David's work. In the essay I was supporting



Tony Smith with *For P.N.*, 1970, plywood, 2 1/3 by 6 3/4 by 6 3/4 feet. Photo Hans Namuth.

Kipp's more classical grasp of form and using the occasion to vent some spleen at "two and one-half dimensional objects" while also noting that when "ideas take precedence over form there is a death of art." I read some of these things back to Tony as I wrote. He seemed to be enjoying the performance, but all the while he was, as usual, sketching in a small pad, and staring intensely at my desk. About midnight he drove back to South Orange. At two-thirty my telephone jerked me out of bed and Smith was asking me to give him the exact measurements of a black wooden card-file on the desk. He did not tell me why and I did not ask, but I had an idea that something was about to fall from the sky. I saw it two weeks later in the back of his station-wagon just after he had picked it up from the fabricators.

Smith had actually made much sculpture over the years but *The Black Box* was the first truly bold (and didactic) statement, simple and pure, of his idea of the essence of sculptural form. His Surrealist side was also gratified when one of his little daughters—was it Annie?—looked at it in the back yard and asked, "What's in it?" This was the beginning that led to *Die* and *Free Ride*, now 20th-century classics, which refined and reconfirmed the age-old conception of pure sculpture, rich with modern iconographic content. After these exploitations of the cube, he moved on to the more extensible and unpredictable combinations of the tetrahedra, the octahedra, etc., with their almost organic implications.

Tony Smith was also known as a great teacher in the literal sense and was once given a Distinguished Teaching award by the College Art Association (rather typically he

lost the check). In his work he taught by concrete example. In the classroom or out, he taught by the example of a mind that was relentless in its search for the essence of things. He was never carried away by fashion or sucked in by a smart idea. Smith's mode of thought was as clean and clear as a mathematician's. He had a memory that was terrifying in its accuracy, especially if someone mumbled out some recollections from a past he had shared. In other words, events for him were super-real and history was a series of sharp realities. It may have been this absolute and unromantic sense of the environment that led him not only to great work but at times to excessive drinking. Unfortunately liquor did not numb him but instead exacerbated his isolation in a world that could never live up to his standards, especially since he applied his standards to himself.

He had that uneasy shyness often associated with greatness. I remember that when he received the typescript of the New Jersey Museums show catalogue he called me and asked me if I really wanted to stick my neck out so far in that first sentence. I told him that I thought it was very carefully stated and did not rule out other major things that had been done or begun before the '60s and that he had been the only one to discover a legitimate alternative to David Smith in somewhat the way Newman had to Pollock. I think I added that the dialogue between the Rubenists and the Poussinists had always been healthy for Western art. The conversation ended in silence. □

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