

Sculpture on the Edge of Dreams

By Dore Ashton

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY



Tony Smith

1912-1980

NEW PIECE 1980

*Gift of the Artist, honoring
Albert Einstein and the
50th Anniversary of the Institute
1980*

P R E F A C E

As part of its observation of the centennial of Albert Einstein's birth in 1979, the Institute for Advanced Study not only organized an international scientific symposium on its campus, it also commissioned posters and films, encouraged radio broadcasts and cooperated in the preparation of articles for newspapers and magazines. Additionally, we sought to install at the Institute works of art commensurate with the values and achievements of the great man to whom it was our privilege to pay homage.

Thanks to the generosity of Mr. Joseph H. Hazen, in whose collection the piece originally was, the sculpture by J. Lipchitz entitled "Arrival" is now part of the Institute's collection. In a similar spirit and with equal generosity Tony Smith presented the Institute with "New Piece" to commemorate the accomplishments of Albert Einstein and to demonstrate his respect for the institution which had come to be his American and final home.

The contents of this pamphlet, the photographs by Clem Fiori (reproduced with his permission) and the lecture by Professor Dore Ashton derive from the ceremonies connected with that formal unveiling of the sculpture on 14 November 1981. Tony Smith died before the installation itself so that the dedication of the sculpture and the publication of this pamphlet enables us to express our respect for both men and to honor their memory.

In framing this pamphlet between two photographs of "New Piece" I mean not only to offer the reader a paired perspective on the work of Tony Smith, but to suggest that the light in the one and the darkness in the other are ever-present elements in the search for order which science so often embodies in a geometric expression. The light of a new theory may extend across a broader range of phenomena than an older paradigm. It may permit a deeper insight, or illuminate the intellectual effort itself by exposing an esthetic elegance or the pursuit of parsimony, but after the new construct is in place, mystery remains. So in this work, uniting art and science in symbol and substance, we find an appropriate memorial to Albert Einstein, a sculpture whose finite revealing geometry yet contains an infinite and invisible unknown.

Princeton, New Jersey 1982

HARRY WOOLF

INTRODUCTION

by Harry Woolf

It is a great pleasure for us to mark Tony Smith's gift of his sculpture to the Institute for Advanced Study and its official installation today with a lecture by Professor Dore Ashton. Professor Ashton's formal education was acquired at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, but she also served in the broader market-place of ideas as an Associate Editor of *Art Digest* from 1951-1954 and, in a similar position, for *The New York Times* from 1955-1960. She has taught at Pratt Institute, the School of Visual Arts in New York and, since 1968, at Cooper Union.

Her achievements as a critic and commentator on the arts and the humanities have brought her broad professional recognition and numerous awards. These include the Mather Award for art criticism from the College Art Association and fellowships from the Ford Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others.

Countless articles have appeared in journals published throughout the world and a selection from the list of her published books reveals the depths of her historical reach even as it displays the breadth of her contemporary concerns.

Thus:

- *Abstract Art Before Columbus*, 1951
- *The Unknown Shore, A View of Contemporary Art*, 1962
- *Modern American Sculpture*, 1968
- *A Reading of Modern Art*, 1969
- *The New York School*, 1973
- *A Joseph Cornell Album*, 1974
- *Yes, But: A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 1976
- *A Fable of Modern Art*, 1980

In Dore Ashton's view, abstract art is derived from a melding of the artist's perceptions and intuitions within a framework established in part by the epoch in which he flourishes. She has sought to identify and to study those elements of artistic expression which contribute to a developing trend or movement and thus come to speak for the spirit of the times.

In her widely acclaimed study *A Reading of Modern Art*, Professor Ashton wrote:

... The first effort of the critic should be to see the unique quality inherent in a work, the quality that immediately attracts the receiver and moves him. But the critic must also remember that other action of a work of art: its expansiveness. If it moves us, it can move us emotionally, morally, psychologically, intellectually, historically, depending on a host of subtle considerations....

Praised by her reviewers as “a writer of subtle sensibility, concise exposition and consistent standards of judgment,” I am honored to present Professor Ashton on the intriguing topic: *Sculpture on the Edge of Dreams*.

Sculpture on the Edge of Dreams

By Dore Ashton

TONY SMITH

When Einstein was asked why he used ordinary soap for shaving instead of shaving cream he answered: "Two soaps? That is too complicated!" In all his inquiries, Einstein sought the sparest, least encumbered of principles. His quest took him into vertiginous realms of infinite complexity, but always he returned to the simple with an almost religious faith that only the clear and the pure could illuminate the world. The philosophic dimension in Einstein's thought was pronounced. As he said in his 1918 paper in honor of Max Planck:

Man seeks to form for himself, in whatever manner is suitable for him, a simplified and lucid image of the world (*Bild der Welt*) and so to overcome the world of experience by striving to replace it to some extent by this image. This is what the painter does, and the poet, the speculative philosopher, the natural scientist, each in his own way. Into this image and its formation he places the center of gravity of his emotional life, in order to attain the peace and serenity that he cannot find within the narrow confines of swirling, personal experience.

Tony Smith's swirling, personal experiences were unusually varied, and, he too, struggled untiringly to construe a simplified and lucid image of the world. As he said—simply—"I have always admired very simple, very authoritative, very enduring things." This has a slightly Platonic ring, and I think there *was* something Platonic in Smith's complicated personality. Like Plato, he loved the permanence of geometries and he had the thinker's passion for order. And like Plato, he had a poet's will that, in spite of itself, had to recognize the power of emotion, and the randomness of so much of life. The "very simple, very enduring things" were the lure that drew Smith into so many activities of the mind and so many highly-charged experiences, through which he tested the principle of metaphysical simplicity. All those strange turnings in his sculpture, all those unstable details, all those unexpected diagonals were, in effect, speculations beyond the physical facts of basic geometries.

Smith's early training was unusual. He spent three years at the Art Students' League, painting, encountering the sharp wit of George Grosz,

among others. From there, he betook himself to an experience of a totally different order: he went to the newly established Institute of Design in Chicago known as the New Bauhaus. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy had just started his school which was to strive for the closest connection between art, science and technology. No doubt Moholy's insistence that "we are not immediately interested in the personal quality of expression which is usually called 'art' but in its primordial, basic elements, the ABC of expression itself" intrigued Smith. The Bauhaus emphasis on an exploration of basic forms led instructors into many precincts formerly rarely visited by artists. Smith would have been exposed to a view of sculpture that was developed from science rather than art, a view that isolated geometrical elements and claimed that seven biotechnical constructional elements—the crystal, sphere, cone, plate, strip, rod and spiral—were the basic elements of the whole world. He would have been subject to the various exercises, sometimes in materials as ephemeral as paper, designed to instruct students about the mathematical and physical bases of form. He probably heard Moholy expound on the forty-four different kinds of spaces, and heard him counsel students to begin with a scientist's definition—that space is the relation between the position of bodies. All of this would have nourished Smith's immense curiosity about the universe and stirred his rebel soul, too—he who never forgot Stonehenge and Egypt. When he moved on to his encounter with Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Whitmanesque romanticism could not have failed to stir Smith, he again sought clarification. It is an odd detail that Frank Lloyd Wright had been trained as a child in the Froebel method in which basic geometric shapes in three dimensions were used to establish a pattern of visual thinking. It is even odder that Einstein attended a school in the tradition of Pestalozzi, Froebel's teacher, and was there exposed to Pestalozzi's fundamental idea that the foundation of instruction is the visual understanding (the *Anschaung*). As Pestalozzi wrote:

I must point out that the ABC of visual understanding is the essential and the only true means of teaching how to judge the shape of all things correctly.

The physicist Gerald Holton has pointed out that Einstein characterized thinking in largely visual terms, speaking of pictures rather than signs, and that, as Einstein wrote to Jacques Hadamard, he always had a feeling

of "going straight toward something concrete." Holton speculated that the Pestalozzi school's emphasis on visual understanding may well have released Einstein's genius. The two kinds of visual thinking—that of an architect accustomed to working his thoughts in matter and space, and that of the theoretical physicist—were certainly of consuming interest to Tony Smith. His paintings—for he continued to paint even after he became what he called a builder—explored the slippery world of imagined forms in imagined space, while his architecture displayed the quirky experimentalism of a visual thinker trained to consider volumes and voids. He understood from the beginning that there is a natural instinct in *homo faber*—one sees it at work in a kindergarten, for what children do, before all else, is build. Smith's play with the elementary solids of geometry was the serious play of the species, directed toward the satisfaction of a longing for form wrested from chaos. He knew, as Guillaume Apollinaire said, that "geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of a writer." He believed, as he said, that "we are all born with a sense of rightness of form."

But form, as Smith knew only too well from his readings in the history of science, is not initially a simple matter, although ultimately it might be. The problems in aesthetics were as significant to him as they were to his kinsman James Joyce—both trained, as they were, in the rigorous Jesuit tradition. I can imagine Tony Smith in his Jesuit high school, where they learn to write Greek and Latin verses, having just the kind of intense discussion that Stephen Dedalus had in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen, you will remember, begins his aesthetic disquisition by addressing himself to a polite but not especially quick-witted priest, and finishes peripatetically in the streets of Dublin, outlining his theory to his closest friends. Aquinas, he said, maintained that the three things needed for beauty are wholeness or integrity, harmony or *consonantia*, and radiance. Wholeness in the sense that one apprehends an object by its boundedness, its contrast to "the immeasurable background of space or time that is not it!" Harmony you feel by the "rhythm of its structure". And *claritas*, or radiance, he equates to the scholastic notion of *quidditas*. This perhaps is the most important contribution Joyce might have made in Smith's youthful formation. Temperamentally, Smith was perfectly designed to understand *quidditas* which Joyce called the *whatness* of a thing. Smith, throughout his creative activities, whether as builder, painter, speaker or sculptor, ex-

hibits a peculiar ability to get at *whatness*. And Joyce's program in *Portrait*, where he describes three progressive forms—the lyric, the epical and the dramatic—and which he enacted himself in his writing career—seems very close to Smith's intuitively shaped life's program. Smith in his last works reached toward what Joyce defined as the dramatic form which

is reached when vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life . . . The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination . . . The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails . . .

One feels that Smith in his major works strived to remain invisible behind his handiworks, paring his fingernails, *with a smile*. His straining for *quidditas* was a serious business, about which he kept his sense of humor—one is tempted to say his Irish sense of humor. He discovered when he first undertook to make objects in space that the most elementary geometric solids lead to the most complicated visions. Form is not an easy goal, for while one can distinguish in the first apprehension something bounded and different from all it is not, in a sculpture one has only to move a few inches to the right or left and the boundaries seem to change. Smith was well aware that, as the physicist S. P. F. Humphreys-Owen states: "In the deepest reaches of the analysis, form is the first to vanish."

And yet, it was form he was after from the beginning to the end. Knowing the treacheries of perception, he called his works "presences," and most of us responding to them feel them as presences. He did not calculate in the sculptor's manner the degrees of light and the play of shadows that would enhance his forms. The *quidditas* has to be within, self-contained. "I am not aware," he said, "of how light and shadows fall on my pieces. I'm just aware of basic forms." Perhaps it was this philosophical insistence on the *reductio* that entered, who knows how, the making of his works, and led such commentators as Harold Rosenberg to notice "a sense of intangibility" in his works. They are certainly there, and have a *whatness*, but the paradoxes needed to arrive at a basic form are also there, bespeaking a Platonic abstraction that moves us in its ancientness. For

when Smith spoke of basic form, and his sense of rightness of form, he had behind him a great history of pondering these mysterious geometric entities. And he had in his mind's eye the great monuments to formal simplicity from ancient China to Alexandria. No doubt those earlier builders and makers of presences noticed the vast possibilities in the shifting and grouping of cubes, tetrahedrons and octahedrons, and all the hedra the geometer can conjure.

Smith's first significant sculpture, made in 1960, was perhaps his most audacious. It was quite simply a black box, standing with unabashed aplomb against a world of chaos. The interior structure of the cube, as complicated as it might be mathematically, is dominated in this work by the artist's conviction that its black *whatness* will speak of mystery. And it does, for reasons that would be impossible to adduce. In this resounding gesture we can compare Smith with his spiritual predecessor, Malevich, whose first black square on a white canvas was fraught with meanings that could only become legible as Malevich went on to his white on white. Like Malevich, Smith, having established his right to speak of the final simplicities, moved on to complications, such as his "Free Ride" of 1962 which deals again with the basic axes of the cube. But, in omitting one side of the cube, the sculptor makes his sculpture complex to our mode of perception.

As Smith moved on, juggling his modular hedra, he managed to touch many problems that belong to the realm of sculptural discourse. The fact that a sculpture must be perceived in three dimensions, and that human perception brings to bear a great deal of complicated abstracting in order to form a three-dimensional image, a gestalt, governs the way a sculptor works. Smith invariably counted with the human scale and the biological experience of gravity, now working in harmony with natural law, now testing its further limits. Despite his adherence to the given module, Smith contrived to give his forms their presence, their *affect*.

And this is the other side of Smith that corresponds again to the other side of Joyce, the wild wordster whose own careful Thomistic aesthetics are gleefully challenged by himself at every step. There is no question that Smith shared Joyce's impatience with the given. When Joyce was asked "Aren't there enough words in English for you," he said, "Yes, there are enough, but they aren't the right ones." For Smith, there were enough forms but not the right ones. *They*, only *he* could invent. And even then,

they were not quite right, and he went on. The side in Joyce that relished a good pun and a good run on words, appealed enormously to Smith who could recite long passages from *Finnegan's Wake*. He often gave his titles a humorous turn, and sometimes created several works that might have inhabited *Finnegan's Wake*, such as those called "Smoke," "Smog," and "Smug." Smith's play with his language of modules, and its neologisms, in formal terms, can be compared to Joyce in spirit and fact. If one remembers "Smoke," a great joke, but also a serious challenge to sculptural orthodoxy, one knows this Joycean side. Smith created this huge edifice, or non-edifice, in the central atrium of the Corcoran Gallery, which it entirely filled. And yet, although spectators could wander amongst its columns as they could wander in Paestum, they could not conjure either a sculpture or a piece of architecture. Each segment led to the next logically, but because of its open structure, and its complicated internal logic, the piece seemed finally quite crazy and exciting. Lucy Lippard wrote that "Smoke" is a kind of contemporary octastyle. "Neither an object or an enclosure, its open lattice form allows space to flow, to suggest a sculptural infinity, a freedom of means not hitherto permitted by geometric sculpture...the crystalline structure of 'Smoke' is multilaterally symmetrical, a two-story self-generating vault system of columns and arches." Smith could have run on and on, like the Liffey, with "Smoke."

The implicit challenge to orthodoxy in Smith's mysterious distillations is everywhere apparent, and certainly deliberate. His most appreciated friends were such members of the abstract expressionist generation as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. One can well imagine him, like Stephen Dedalus, regaling his friends as they wandered in Manhatan's streets, with theories and recitations. What they had in common, this generation of nay-sayers, was a belief in the significance of intentions. They considered the entire world of discourse a potential source of inspiration, and the entire world of sensation their territory. They believed that their intention to make art a significant act by means of their ethical choices was important. Newman's interest in myth and ancient cultures; Pollock's belief in a collective unconscious; Rothko's intense search for *consonantia* or harmony—all these attitudes and interests were shared by Smith. The search was the thing, and orthodoxy an impediment. Smith said that he derived his vision of art from the modern world of Bergson and Einstein. Bergson's vision of

time, his metaphorical allusion to flow and change, and his insistence that only intuition can know the real in its totality seems endemic to Smith's endeavor, for although Smith used the logic of mathematics and analytical methods, he finally sought what he called the inscrutability and mysteriousness of art objects. Smith knew the *esprit géométrique*, as Pascal called it, with its dialectical logic, but he was finally a practitioner of Pascal's *esprit de finesse*, or intuitive thought.

To continue the story of Smith and his friends among the abstract expressionists, I would have to mention the darker side of their meditations, to which Smith was certainly not immune. Like them, he was an admirer of Kafka, whom he mentioned often, and most especially when he spoke of his sculptured maze. Mazes, he said, are "formal and symbolic analogies of a breakdown of intellect and will." In this paradox we find the key to Smith's own sustained interest in quarries, caves, fortifications, and all somewhat disquieting enclosed sites. In many of Smith's modular pieces, especially those in very large scale and with multiple elements, one senses a spirit of unease akin to the unease Kafka's K. experiences when he must navigate the great labyrinth to the interrogation chamber. But also, the philosophical aspiration of Kafka's hero who takes on the quest of the great door, so implacably guarded against human comprehension. In one of Smith's sculptures here in Princeton, the "Moses," I sense all this. And Moses, don't forget, was a stammerer. Smith's defiance of convention in "Moses" is notable. How can a piece seemingly in the language of the 1960's with its barren geometries raise its arms metaphorically and tragically?

There are still more puzzling questions when we come to the piece we are here to dedicate today. Smith's reverence for Einstein gave him pause when he had to decide what he could offer as an homage to Einstein's memory. He decided on "New Piece," because it was sufficiently mysterious. When he used to be asked about his sculpture as sculpture, Smith would often turn the questioner aside with either technical description or ironic disavowal of sculptural intention. But when it came down to it, he would answer, "I'm interested in the inscrutability and the mysteriousness of the thing." For "New Piece" also, he offered a technical comment as follows:

This piece is not based upon rectangular prisms, nor on tetrahedral lattices, but upon modular units made up of components of

the rhomboidal dodecahedron. There is a connection with the tetrahedral structures, however, in that the rhomboidal surfaces of this figure are the same as the sections of the others.

But, of course, this dry analytic description of the sculpture's properties and inner structure is far from giving us its *quidditas*, its presence. And I suspect that Smith himself was each time smitten anew with the mysteriousness of this seemingly simple six-sided form. Despite Smith's disclaimer of interest in sculptural effects such as light and shadow, this piece must be seen as a sculpture with the eternal sculptural character, having mass, weight, light-enhanced surfaces, and a challenging composition. If I speak of composition, I mean that this form, listing as it does so strongly to one side, challenges the laws of gravity and proclaims itself man-made. It sits on no plinth yet it is statuesque in its inexorable presence. It can be seen frontally, yet its frontal place immediately suggests the invisible structure within and without on the other side. It has a familiar topological association with a given form, the cube, but it is stretched into a new form that induces a perspectival reading. If you stand close, it is an impenetrable wall leaning to the heavens, if you move to one side, it is a domino like the paving stones in renaissance paintings. If you circumambulate the entire piece the lines grow sharp, or else merge almost invisibly. There is no point at which this piece does not appear at once stable and full of whatness, and unstable and full of the intimations of Bergson's and Einstein's other dimension. In its very being this piece encompasses both the order implicit in the laws of nature, and the randomness also implicit in nature, or life. And there is one other strange, and as Smith would say, inscrutable aspect: if you stand before "New Piece" at the junction of two planes, they spread like wings, wide, almost flat, and suggest a spread, as of arms. The anthropomorphic echo, faint as it is, is not altogether unthinkable, for we know that when Smith did his straight-forward cube, he was thinking of Leonardo's man with his outstretched arms within the square. Smith's Hellenistic side is certainly here in the fact that this piece *is*, despite its hovering just above us, the measure of man.

A piece like this is finally mysterious because of its elusiveness. It is solid and yet not. Massive and yet not. It reminds me of one of Goethe's most mysterious lines, in which he sums up his morphological and philosophical speculations on nature:

There is naught within and naught without
Whatever is within is also without

There is, in Smith's endeavor, the primary urge to find the singular form, the *Urform*, as there was in the great 20th-century Irish poets the urge to find the *Ursprache*, the primary language. Didn't Joyce love Vico, that audacious Renaissance thinker who told us men sang before they spoke? And didn't Smith dream of ancientness, also, and think of the great vanished monuments, and tell a reporter that he really wanted to place his presences on great avenues, like a great avenue of sphinxes? And wasn't he, in his way, a robust thinker and maker, sharing values of the ages. He surely would have admired Archimedes who lived both by laws and by dreams, declaring: "Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth."

We must also admit that Smith partook of his epoch—its darker side. In the deep shadow of "New Piece" lies the all but desperate will to overcome the great confusions of his age. This is what he shared with Newman, Rothko, Pollock and the others. And I think it is no accident that he loved the chant of Samuel Beckett, even naming one of his pieces after a Beckett character. Beckett did understand. He wrote of a 20th-century painter:

The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. My case, since I am in dock, is that Bram van Velde is the first to admit that to be an artist, is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion, arts and crafts, good house-keeping, living...

It is well to remember that Smith said:

All my sculpture is on the edge of dreams.

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