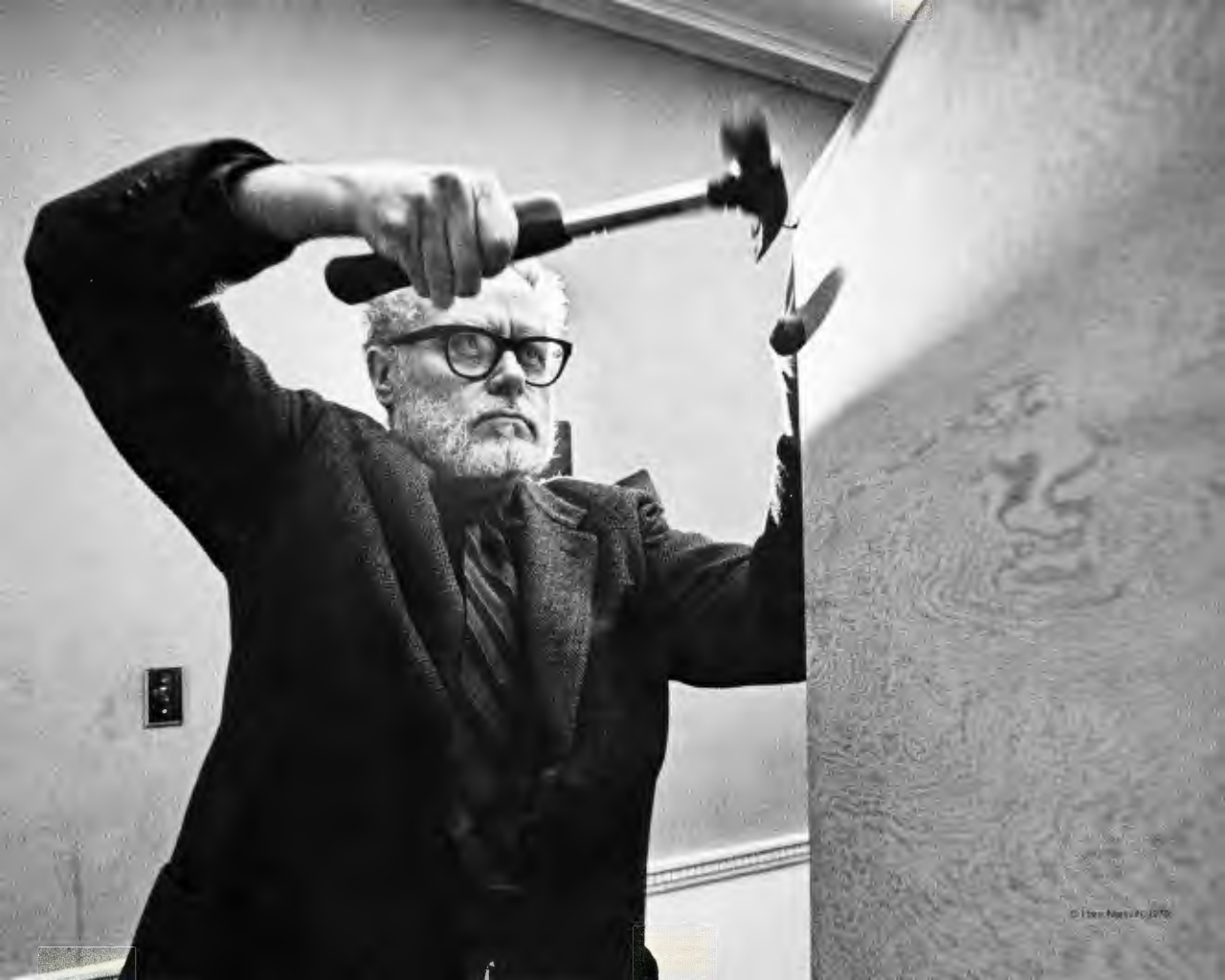
TONY SMITH



TONY SMITH

PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE
SEPTEMBER 23-22 OCTOBER 1983

THE PACE GALLERY 32 EAST 57 NEW YORK 10022

ISBN 0-938608-40-1

Photo credits: David Allison, Scott Bowron, Geoffrey Clements, Bruce C. Jones, Al Mozell

The Fourth Sign, 1975–76,
wood model painted black, 22½″ x 55½″ x 38″
(figure represents scale at full size)

A MEDITATION ON TONY SMITH'S SCULPTURE

by Robert Hobbs

It's time to stop copping out in our assessment of works of art. It's time to stop settling for mere biographic information, formal analyses, and so-called contextualist studies, which usually become summaries of the matrices in which works of art were made rather than intense examinations of the works of art themselves. And it's time now to look at significant art from the point of view of the values it assumes. In criticism we need to start examining reasons why we respond to particular pieces and find them satisfying, moving, or more simply, right for the time in which they were created. We might wish to note in a study of the drip paintings, for example, that Jackson Pollock suffered bouts of alcoholism, but ultimately the significance that these paintings will have for us will depend on the works themselves, on ways the open fields and drips create a vertiginous feeling in viewers who are pulled into a realm that seems chaotic and yet satisfying, larger than life and yet intimate and embracing. These paintings give observers an image of the tremendous energies of modern life, they exhilarate in terms of information overload, and most important they elicit in viewers a profoundly sympathetic

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response to a felt quality of modern existence—its freneticism and chaotic flow—and enable us to experience this feeling in an abstract and consequently less threatening manner than we would in everyday life, and thus they help us to cope with the modern world. Art, in this fashion, enables us to preview new felt qualities, reassess values we hold dear, and make steps toward accepting new and sometimes fundamentally radical ideas as taste—that is, the largely unselfconscious emotional/intellectual level of sensation—so that we can playfully sense this new identity that awaits us in our daily lives.

What all this amounts to is the fact that art changes us as we attempt to see it. Art contains a self-focusing quality that causes us to readjust our intellectual/emotional lens; in the process we become the character that the artist has scripted for us, the audience, he or she assumes to be looking at the art. Taking this dynamic position that art assumes in casting viewers in new roles as a working proposition, I would like to consider the sculpture of Tony Smith and to compare it to the work of his friends, the Abstract Expressionists and his stylistic contemporaries the Minimalists, to discern ways his art determines a new and important attitude toward the world. In many respects his work resembles that of other artists, but it differs primarily in the new role it creates for viewers and the new way in which it conceives space. But before examining Smith's sculpture, it is necessary to consider briefly the importance of painting and the function it has performed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When he proposes the theory of a dominant art for a particular age and assumes painting to be the preeminent art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Formalist critic Clement Greenberg is correct. In an age of bourgeois capitalism, upward mobility, and massive migration from the country to the city, painting certainly was the most popular art form because it was transportable and monumental. Encased in massive gold leaf frames, painting in the nineteenth century looked resolute and timeless. It gave a room instant cachet, and even more important, a look of distinction and respectability and a self-conscious air of being a place for meditation. Paintings in the nineteenth century were often stable views, windows that looked out to an unchanging world: they memorialized an event by fixing it in a static state. It seems to me no coincidence that the bourgeoisie hated the Impressionists because they dared to turn this carefully orchestrated and ossified world into a fleeting instant, a simulated blur. Paintings could be light in weight but they must be stolid in their content. They could be easily bought and sold; and they could move with a bourgeois family as it changed to more lavish or less auspicious spaces. Painting turned the bourgeoisie into instant gentry; it supplanted the old estate, the massive homeplace, the lavish gardens, and the collection of weighty sculpture which rested in niches or dominated the landscape. Paintings, the most portable of the arts excepting works on paper which are intimate and not imposing, evoke feelings of permanency, and for that reason they dominated the art world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Paintings were created in practically every conceivable mode. There were paintings about the Greeks and the Romans, the land, one's feelings, the structure of reality, the reality of paint, the psyche of the artist, the reality of the canvas, the unreality of art, and finally with Ad Reinhardt's Black Paintings there were works about the death of art, about its ultimate academic/vanguard synthesis into a being consequent with nonbeing. By the 1960s, painting was a bankrupt convention desperately in need of revitalization. Though it has not continued to be the primary mode for artistic thought, it has been resuscitated in the ironic creations of Pop Artists, New Realists, Pattern Painters, and Neo-Expressionists who have all taken their cues from criticism and have made the codes of mass media, photography, wallpaper, and the artistic clichés of feeling the mainstays of their art.

In order to develop the case for sculpture, it is probably not necessary to show the bankruptcy of painting even though there may well be a cause and effect relationship between the two, since painting did leave a gap which has been filled by sculpture. At any rate, in the early sixties, sculpture assumed a new and truly exciting role. No longer were young artists content to formulate literary sculptures, three-dimensional collages, or equivalents to Abstract Expressionist paintings. One artist after another in the early sixties started to work with the bare elements of form. They may have been reacting to Clement Greenberg's criticism as Irving Sandler has so astutely suggested: they may well have been searching for the essence of three-dimensional form in a manner similar to painters who were seeking a new, nonliterary, and nonreferential meeting of paint and canvas, but I frankly doubt if Greenberg's criticism was the only concern. I think these sculptors were seeking a new unobstructed foundation for thinking about sculpture and its similarity to and difference from ordinary objects. Robert Morris' objects, his developments on Brancusi and Duchamp, are excuses for a series of phenomenological investigations regarding the meaning of sculpture, the importance of its immediate surroundings, and the expectations of viewers who are used to seeing anthropomorphic forms. And Donald Judd refers to his pieces as "Specific Objects," suggesting that they are pure artistic el-

ements that have no reference to anything except themselves. These reductive objects exist on the threshold of the aesthetic, they are barely perceivable as art and appear to represent a new way of thinking about sculpture, which became in the sixties a fabricated and technically engendered form that emphasized the importance of process and function over the beauties of shape and color.

Strictly speaking, Tony Smith is not a Minimalist. When one examines his sculptures, the act of appreciation is vastly different from the act of viewing a Judd or a Carl Andre. When one looks at a Judd, one is very definitely examining a thing: galvanized metal, Harley-Davidson purple, polished brass, and plexiglass all play a role, as do the scale of these pieces which are table height, wall length, and generally accommodating to human scale. Carl Andre's floor pieces likewise are concerned with the specific properties of lead, magnesium, zinc, and copper. Though they now look stingy in their resiliency to any concept outside themselves, they were conceived, I suspect, as an attempt to avoid ideas which might prove slippery and somehow beyond the artist's jurisdiction. These objects are about control, rigidity, specificity, and materiality. They occupy a space by resolutely holding on to their parameters; they are stoic, not particularly intelligent—consequently they are known as dumb objects, "dumb" being a positive acknowledgment of their plodding quality of just being there. I realize as I write about these works that I am personifying them and am trying to turn them into anthropomorphic equivalences. Perhaps I should qualify this approach by pointing out that their personification is one step removed. They are not vying to be human equivalences, rather they are competing with human accoutrements such as tables, rugs, and technical equipment. These minimalist sculptures, in spite of being reductive solutions to traditional formal problems, are definite manifestations of a materialist age.

Now Tony Smith in his sculpture seems to participate in a similar glorification of the object and a similar delight in the substances composing them. But only at first glance. Because when one begins to study his sculpture a subtle, and I would stress its being a crucially subtle, difference separates them from minimalist objects and makes them radiate a new idea of nonpresence and nonbeing. I would like to venture the idea that Tony Smith is creating the sculptural equivalent of Barnett Newman's zips, Mark Rothko's veils, and Ad Reinhardt's black cruciforms. He is dealing with sublime ideas and is couching these concepts in a manner that is more Eastern than Western, more attuned to Zen concepts of nonbeing and nonthinking than the Romantic attitude of heightened being through intensification of the aesthetic that at first occurred to the Abstract Expressionists in the forties and later changed in the fifties with the infusion of Eastern thinking. I am suggesting that Tony Smith had the opportunity to assess Abstract Expressionism in the fifties through the mind set of Zen. Barnett Newman's zips were at first informed by a latter-day, heroically attuned, nervous profile of Impressionism that also constitutes the sculptures of Giacometti, but Tony Smith's work is informed by both Newman and Giacometti and also by his own researches into the nonspaces of the present day. It is no accident that Smith coated his plywood mock-ups with tar, giving them an asphaltic quality, and certainly no coincidence that his most famous statement deals with a night ride along the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike:

> When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, 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. This drive was a revealing experience. 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. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.
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> The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe—abandoned works, surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a drill ground in Nuremberg large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three sixteen-inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.*

Smith was looking for a powerful and relevant way of approaching the world, a means of understanding its new spatial/nonspatial con-

*Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), p. 130-131.

cepts. The fifties were an era of superhighways, America's great land works, its only real monuments/nonmonuments that in terms of sheer size, expense, planning, and public support are comparable to the Old Dynasty pyramids of Egypt, the High Gothic cathedrals of France, the Great Wall of China, the terracing of the Andes, and the Dolomic constructions of the British Isles and coastal regions of France. Superhighways were a Cold War tactic that revolutionized American culture. Probably they are also the natural response to the automobile, but it's worth noting that they were constructed approximately a half century after the first mass production of the automobile. Clearly, superhighways, then, depended on a mobile society and also on threats of nuclear attack, on a need to mobilize troops and great numbers of people in case of a national calamity.

Tony Smith's description of the New Jersey Turnpike at night is a logical manifestation of the fifties. It belongs to the same type of thinking that informed the science fiction and apocalyptic films of that decade: *War of the Worlds, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, On the Beach,* to name only a few. The last scene of *On the Beach,* showing an empty West Coast American city with newspaper rolling like tumbleweeds and a sublime oppressive emptiness, captures the flavor of this era. The Abstract Expressionists were concerned with the Sublime too, but the Sublime in the 1940s and 1950s was not dependent, as in the eighteenth century, on a natural force such as a thunderstorm or waterfall that pulled one into it and became an overwhelming but comforting and embracing environment; similar to the oppressiveness of *On the Beach,* it was a void that could overwhelm one with nonspace and nonbeing. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* another classic of the fifties, the main character becomes aware of the fact that people are no longer themselves. They might act like themselves and talk like themselves, but there was a distinct difference—a new frightening quality of becoming an automaton who acted out someone else's directives and seemed to enclose nothing. The film played on two great contemporary fears: the dread of becoming numb to all experience and the increasing apprehension regarding cancer. In this film the plant pods are an insidious growth which replaces human beings with vegetating voids.

This presence which is almost anthropomorphic and yet still objectlike, this sense of being/nonbeing, which is positively advocated in Suzuki's books on Zen and frighteningly symbolized in science fiction films, was important in Tony Smith's mechanical and empty sculptures. Black and malignant, these forms were not really things but more subtraction of things, crystalline-shaped black holes that displaced space without occupying it. These sculptures reflect Smith's background as an architect: when they are most successful, the large pieces appear to be almost rooms one can walk into; after approaching these sculptures, one is confounded because the spaces surrounding them seem more solid than the sculptures themselves, more concrete and real than these gangling, eerily science-fictional subtractions from the everyday world. The sculptures remind me of Ad Reinhardt's Black Paintings in their ambiguity: in photographs they appear to be mechanical dinosaurs, but in reality they are much less frank and assertive, much more mysterious and threatening.

For Tony Smith the edge and the crystalline shape were essential. The edge, finely worked and subtly organic, endows the mechanical forms with a presence equivalent to living forms. They appear alive, and yet we know that they cannot be because living forms do not assume perfect mathematical shapes: they are round, organic, imperfect, and flexible. Solid geometric shapes indicate an ideal realm, an abstract order on a par with Plato's concept of universals. And yet, in Smith's sculpture, the ideal seems to live, to be edging out of an abstract order, to be at the threshold of our own less exalted, day-to-day realm. For centuries artists have been attempting to create believable ideal types. We need only think of the overly studied line drawings of Flaxman or the excessively detailed nymphs of Bougereau to recognize the problem of the ideal in a mundane world. In the nineteenth century, only Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* was able to reinvigorate an ideal type which has its origins in Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* Ignudi and to make an allegorical figure of Liberty beautifully inspiring and yet fleshy and solid enough to have risen from French soil. And in the early twentieth century Brancusi convincingly idealized matter. Coming soon after the Superrealist Rodin, Brancusi made the ideal a progressive ascension from roughly hewn, massive wooden bases to unpolished stone transitional elements to finely polished soaring or floating abstracted shapes that recalled heads, fish, eggs, and birds. In contrast to Brancusi, Tony Smith achieved a believable ideal by merging organic edges with crystalline, mathematical forms, by making them black which seems at first less grandiose than our concept of the Greek ideal, which usually assumes the form of carved white pieces of marble. Smith's ideal is dark and menacing, absent rather than present, alive but not living —a stirring nonbeing.

It has generally been recorded in texts on Tony Smith that his interest in D'Arcy Thompson's classic book *On Growth and Form* is crucial to the development of sculpture. But I should point out that Smith

came in contact with this book in the 1940s and not in the early 1960s when he began to create sculpture. In 1975 when I was working on Jackson Pollock and early Abstract Expressionism, I had the opportunity to talk to Smith about this book. At the time, I tried to find out by questioning Smith if Pollock had a copy of D'Arcy Thompson's book and had regarded its discussion of the functional origin of life's forms an important source. Smith did not think so. In a telephone conversation with me, he stressed the importance of the book to him and mentioned that he had given Pollock a copy after the first drip paintings had already been created. The book may have confirmed Pollock in his direction, but Smith seriously doubted his reading it. I responded that Smith may have related enough information about Thompson's research into the shapes of unicellular life to provide Pollock with clues to a possible biomorphic interpretation for the drips, and Smith responded that it was possible but unlikely.

Obviously, from this conversation and other references, Thompson's *On Growth and Form* was of great importance to Tony Smith and his studies of a mathematical basis for life. But these studies, which occur a full fifteen years before the sculpture, seem to me to relate more to Smith's architecture and, in fact, appear to be an outgrowth of his interest in the organic principles of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, that is, more to do with enhancing life than with questioning it, much more to do with building a monumental architecture that used nature's underlying laws as a means to culminate it than a means of subverting it as Smith does in his sculptural voids, his enclosed nonbeings.

After studying D'Arcy Thompson and becoming acquainted with the guidelines of Jay Hambidge's *Elements of Dynamic Symmetry,* both positive outlooks on life and on the possibility of understanding the world in a logical, verifiable manner, Smith, in my opinion, veered away from an optimistic approach and came to dwell on those aspects of life which confound reasoning and betray an underlying anxiety about modern existence. His sculptures have more to do with Existentialist doubt and Zen nonbeing than they do with rationally explaining modern life. They are ambiguous concretions of forces or malevolent vacuums; at times they look like César compressions that have been reduced to the point of nonbeing and thus have become incredibly powerful voids of antimatter resembling black holes.

It's interesting to reflect on the relationship between Tony Smith and Barnett Newman and to consider the fact that Newman's zips—quivering voids dashed across a canvas such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* like so many exclamation points—consider the void as positive, as rays of divine energy caught on earth when God broke off his connection. The void, in this sense, is a metaphysical substance, an affirmation of the fact that human beings are the children of God and contain within themselves powerful spiritual forces which God once directed toward earth. Contrasting with Newman's optimism is Smith's acceptance of the disturbing forces making up modern life. His ideal realm is not divine even though it is universal. His ideal realm consists of abstract concepts that attract and consume fleeting thoughts and intuitions, causing elisions of self and ultimately a dehumanized and pessimistic view of the world.

When thinking of Tony Smith's contribution, I like to invoke the doctrine of syncrhonicity rather than influence, which negates originality and commitment and makes an artist simply a transmitter of an idea. I like to think that about the same time Smith began to make sculpture, George Kubler was writing *The Shape of Time,* a mathematic schema for artistic development depending on prime objects, classes, and successions. Smith may well have been influenced by Kubler's references to crystals and his description of reality as those moments when a lighthouse is not beaconing light, but I think he was already committed to a mathematical basis for his art and found in Kubler at best a catalyst for his own inclinations.

In many respects Tony Smith's sculptures parallel David Smith's *Cubi* series. Both deal in their own way with voids—Tony Smith's are black and almost static; while David Smith's are shimmering containers for an impressionistic light that fills the cavities of his surrealist-inspired figures and his imposing portals. Because David Smith is more playful and traditional, less philosophic and relentless in his desire to encapsulate the meaning of existence, his work attempts to bring together scintillating voids into a positive statement about life. I think his portals are efforts to symbolize the threshold of consciousness; they are essentially surrealist cum Abstract Expressionist works that attempt to dredge up areas of the artist's unconscious through free association. David Smith's sculptures depend on juggling with formal elements, playing with them so to speak, to make them participate in a delightful game, to lighten his metaphysical cubes and make them new totemic elements: doorways beginning to topple over, lower limbs of walking figures, and shiny, almost transparent silhouettes. It's as if David Smith intuited a spiritual malaise and did not wish to deliberate on it: his *Cubis* resemble those lighthearted jokes delivered by politicians who know that they must make some unpleasant pronouncements but who wish to keep the tone light. David Smith's *Cubi* sculptures attempt to be as open and evanescent

as the air around them; they wrap themselves around space and tempt gravity. In contrast, Tony Smith's sculptures, with their black disseminating surfaces and attention to edge and profile, seem to be gravely reduced forms that make the air around them palpable and dense. Rather than activate space, they solidify it; reversing roles, they become voids enclosed by space.

Of what use to us are Tony Smith's solid geometric sculptures which appear to be blanks in the atmosphere? One response might be that these sculptures make space, which before seemed nothing but air, real and significant. If we remember that, in the sixties, the word "space" was omnipresent, as in "space race," "spacey," "to be in one's own space," we can begin to understand the need at the time to make sculpture which did not dominate space but interacted with it, forms which did not attempt, in the manner of Boccioni, to turn space into an incredible velocity but were content to allow it to be itself, to be simply an ocean of gases holding in suspension innumerable particles. Only when we think of the nonspace making up black holes do we consider our own space to be real and full. And Tony Smith's great contribution is to make sculpture acknowledge the preponderant importance of this space and to create a new race of nonanthropomorphic nonbeings that cause us to view the world in a new manner. When we look at a Tony Smith sculpture, we come to be aware of ourselves and our surroundings. These works cause viewers to question themselves, particularly their tendencies to regard themselves as monolithic. Becoming empty receptacles, voids outlining space, they point outside themselves: as in *Die* they frame viewers who become aware of their own scale in relation to the sculpture. Usually, the sculptures seem monumental because they accommodate themselves in some way to the average viewer's height and then manage to go beyond that height. Even a larger than normal person, say a six-foot tall viewer, can barely see over *Die* and cannot easily look around it; the sculpture deliberately blocks and confounds observers and appears an uncomfortable, mysterious void.

Sam Hunter likes to tell the story about how young Tony Smith, the child victim of tuberculosis, lived in a small house in his parents' backyard and spent his days reading, daydreaming, making models, or contemplating the large black stove that stood in the middle of the room. I can imagine how important that stove was for Tony Smith. A black and assertive form, a metal construction that gave off warmth and yet seemed as distant and removed as its fire which was blocked off from view, the stove, I'll bet, was later a working assumption for such sculptures as *Moondog* (pp. 36-37) and *Tau* (pp. 20-21),

Die, 1962, steel painted black, 6′ x 6′ x 6′

sculptures which appear to be the temple guards of some science fictional realm.

These works are the sculptural kin of Pollock's figures in *Out of the Web,* Newman's *Stations of the Cross,* Rothko's series for the Houston Chapel, and Reinhardt's Black Paintings. Being sculpture, they are blocky and volumetric even though they do not appear to be solid monoliths. The sculptures like Abstract Expressionist works are environmental. Resembling these paintings which become walls and not mere precious objects, the sculptures come close to becoming architecture when they surround space and create an envelope of air that encloses both them and us in a discernable, habitable, and inviting realm. Just as Abstract Expressionist paintings are large in order to be intimate, to disclose their secrets by enveloping viewers in their atmosphere, so Tony Smith's sculptures are monumental and massive, not in order to dwarf or overwhelm viewers, but, more significant, they are large in order to make viewers aware of their protective surfaces, hidden secrets, and separate, metaphysical state. The unseen, interior space of a Tony Smith retreats from us; it, like the cast iron stove of his childhood and the Black Paintings of his contemporary Ad Reinhardt, appears to be both empty and full, a nonbeing being.

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