TONY SMITH:
THE SHAPE OF SPACE

Bakalar Sculpture Gallery
List Visual Arts Center
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
January 17-April 5, 1987

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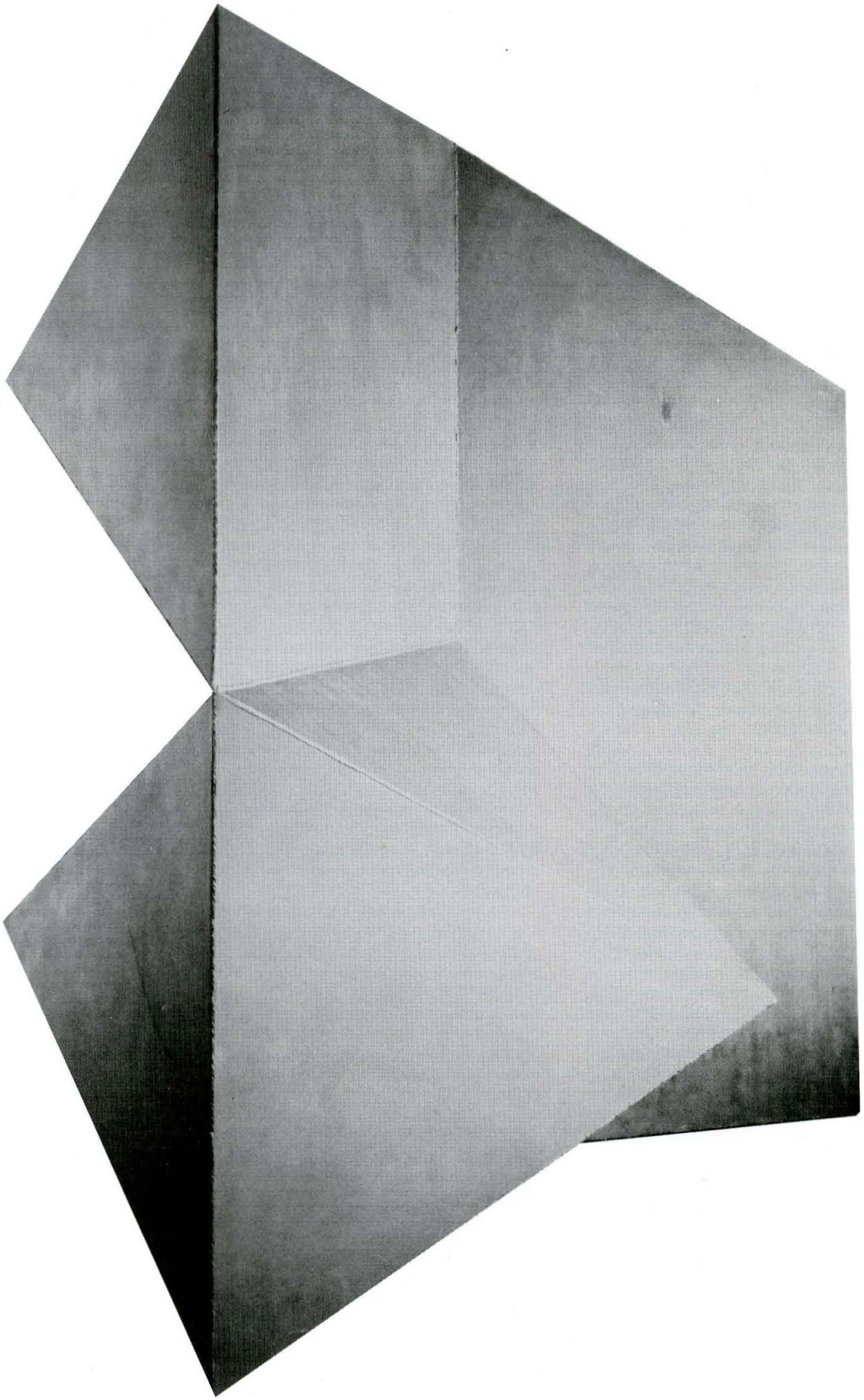


THE SHAPE OF SPACE

Dana Friis-Hansen
Assistant Curator

This exhibition is the fifth in a List Visual Arts Center series investigating the formal vocabularies of modern sculpture, featuring artists whose work is represented by a work in MIT's publicly-sited Permanent Collection. The intent of these historical exhibitions is to offer visitors and members of our community an opportunity better to understand and appreciate the major works of public sculpture on the MIT campus, as well as to bring prime examples of an artist's work together for the pleasure they provide. Previous exhibitions have explored the early cubism and later expressionism of Jacques Lipchitz, the naturalized figuration of Henry Moore, the mechanics of Alexander Calder's mobiles and the inventiveness of Louise Nevelson's wood assemblage. Two major bronze works now fill the Bakalar Sculpture Gallery to evoke the spirit and voice of Tony Smith, whose 18-foot high painted steel sculpture *For Marjorie* graces the front lawn of Tang Residence Hall at the West end of the MIT campus, just off of Memorial Drive. (*Illustration 1*)

How do we begin to understand and appreciate these stark, planar monuments? The primary components of Smith's formal vocabulary—shape, scale, and the unfolding of form within three dimensions—are perceived as much by the body as by the eyes. But equally important is the artist's intelligent and sometimes playful attitude towards the configuration of form, which draws upon twenty years of architectural experience as well as deep interests in mathematics, crystallography, topology and even literature, especially the writings of James Joyce. In his short career as a sculptor Smith produced a body of work with refreshing and intelligent originality, and from the start assumed not only a patriarchal role amongst sculptors of the 1960s and '70s, but also a solid place for himself in the history of modern American sculpture.

Born in 1912, Tony Smith was part of an important generation of American artists who would challenge and overturn the traditions and dominance of European art. In the thirties, Smith studied at night at the Art Students League in New York. He later became close friends with many painters including Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, and the dealer Betty Parsons, all pivotal figures in the advancement of abstract painting in America.

Yet Smith turned away from this early artistic study to pursue architecture. He studied first at the "New Bauhaus," in Chicago, formed by émigré artists from the important progressive German "Bauhaus" art school, pivotal in the development of the glass-and-steel "International Style" architecture. Impressed by an article about Frank Lloyd Wright in the magazine *Architectural Forum,* Smith left Chicago after a year to become part of Wright's team. At that time Wright was investigating new approaches to modular housing, what Wright called his "Usonian" style, units with smooth, angled outer walls which met ground at the slab on which they rested. In the two years with Wright, Smith worked his way up to the position of "clerk of the works," supervising construction of these innovative structures.

From 1940 through 1960, Smith worked on his own as an architectural designer, producing thoroughly inventive and modern buildings. Inspired by the structure of bridges, he designed a house on trusses for the painter Theodoros Stamos. Support elements were painted white, distinguished from exterior panels painted yellow, red, white, and blue. (*Illustration 2*) The design for a studio-house for Betty Parsons boasted large, airy boxes of space in a squarish configuration, with generous windows and an exterior patio. (*Illustration 3*) In a project submitted to the Roosevelt Memorial competition in 1960, a majestic plaza would have been created by three

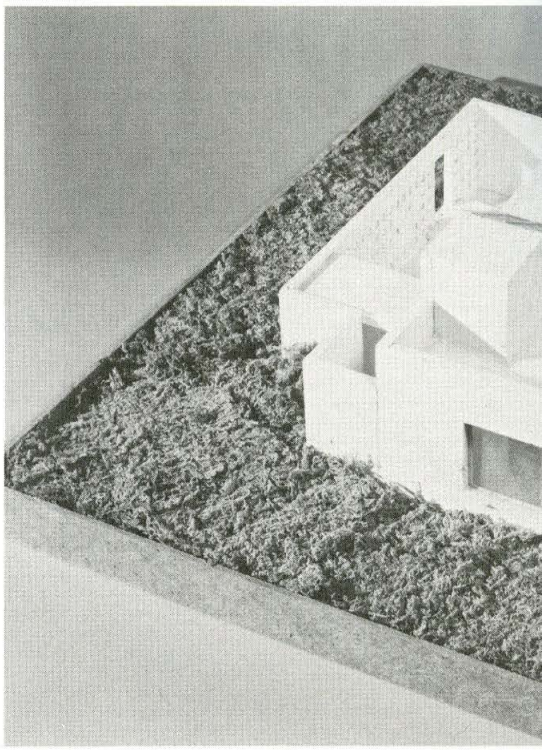
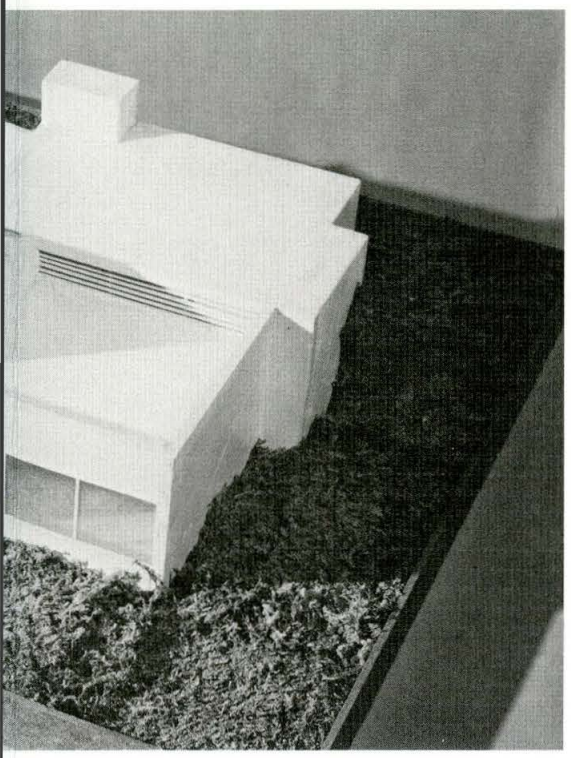
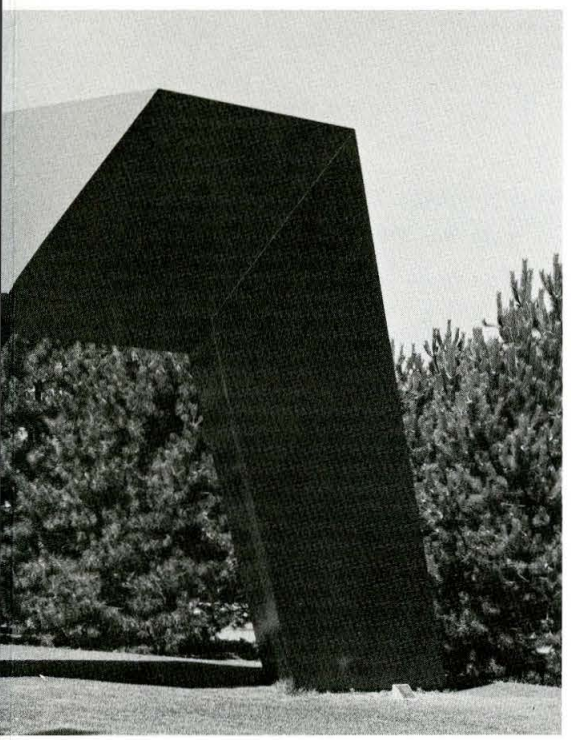


Illustration 3
Model for Betty Parsons House, 1956 or 57
Southhold, Long Island

Illustration 1
For Marjorie, 1961
Painted steel
18 feet high
Permanent Collection, Massachusetts Institute of Technology





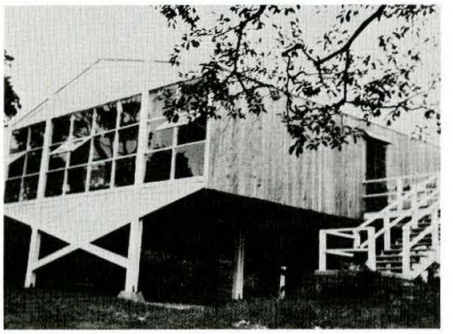


Illustration 2
Theodoros Stamos House, 1951
East Marion, Long Island

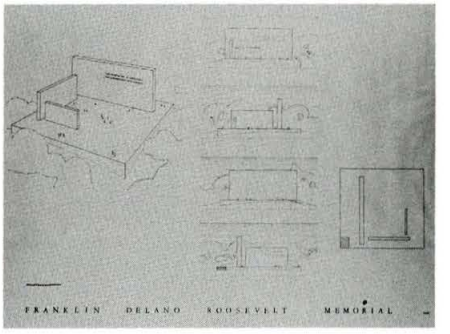


Illustration 4
Proposal for FDR Memorial, 1960

marble walls of progressively larger proportions, bounding a white marble platform which rested in a marshy park area. (*Illustration 4*) But in 1961, Smith left the field of architecture because of a growing frustration with clients and contractors who would change his designs, a frustration exacerbated by an automobile accident which left him unable to drive to sites. He turned his focus to sculpture.

When his sculpture was first exhibited in 1964, Smith emerged into the art world as a mature artist, not a beginner. Twenty years as an architect had empowered him with a structural and spacial sense from which he drew effortlessly. He had been teaching art and design since 1946. As a close associate of the major painters of the New York School, he was more than familiar with the aesthetic issues of the times. His sculpture has affinities with the crisp, spiritual paintings of Barnett Newman, but was far removed from the abstract expressionistic work by sculptors such as Herbert Ferber, Ibram Lassaw or Theodore Roszak, who were the major figures during the 1940s and 50s. Instead, his massive modular works shared the clean, reductive, industrial geometry of "Minimalist" artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, twenty years younger than Smith, who were also beginning to be recognized. But Smith's refined and inventive approach to structure and space put his complex and sometimes whimsical work in a different camp from Judd's steel-and-plexiglas boxes or Morris' grey plywood columns which were concerned more with theory than with the simple facts of three dimensions.

The cardboard model for *For Marjorie,* featured in this exhibition, reveals Smith's unique compositional process. Instead of a pencil and sketchbook, Smith worked out his forms with ready-made geometric solids. These cardboard modules, either tetrahedrons (a geometric solid with four triangular faces, forming a pyramid) or an octahedron (a form with eight triangular faces, creating a diamond) were the primary units from which Smith invented most of his sculpture. Through inventive playing with his building blocks, Smith actively pieced together the schemes that became his sculpture.

This dynamic design process allowed for solid drawing in space. The elegant forward thrust of *For V.T.,* (*Illustration 5*) if lengthened, elaborated, and gently shifted, would echo the serpentine twist that forms *For Marjorie.* Many of Smith's sculptures were extensions of a single line, seeming to grow almost organically. Smith utilized a dynamic symmetry which evolved and revolved around a shifting plan. By rotating the modules along their multiple axis, Smith's works perform gymnastics, playfully folding in and around on themselves until they reach their final "inevitable form," the point at which, according to the artist, "nothing can be added or taken away."

Once composed, Smith's accumulations of similar units must be transformed into the bold, expressive solids which exert their presence in museums, plazas, and sculpture gardens around the world. From the cardboard models a full-scale plywood mock-up was usually made, followed by fabrication in its permanent metal form. Smith imagined his structures to be part of a continuous three-dimensional space lattice, a concept drawn from principles of crystallography. In this vast gridded area, Smith theorized, voids were equal to masses, and thus he saw his sculptures as complex interruptions in the otherwise unbroken flow of space. When placed within a gallery, the presence of the sculpture resonates against the walls. In *Smoke,* 1967, created for the exhibition "Scale as Content" at Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art, Smith's towering framework branched upward to fill the galleria, even intertwining itself amongst the columns. (*Illustration 6*)

Smith's effectiveness as a sculptor was dependent on his spacial intuition, an uncanny sense of scale and proportion.

Sculpture is experienced physically as well as visually, distance and volume, as gauged by the body. Before working as an artist, Smith designed structures for human habitation and activities; his sculpture addresses the human body with an interest in a pure experience of interaction. When one encounters Smith's *Die,* 1962, (a six-foot weathered steel cube) in a gallery, the impenetrable object enforces its mass immediately; it is dense, wide, and just taller than eye level, and creates a mysterious hollow core within the room. (*Illustration 7*) The work reads very differently outdoors, against a horizon, where open space and larger environmental elements (trees, buildings) set a different scale of proportions.

Part of the eerie magic of *Die* is drawn from its dumb simplicity, and this quality also fills its cousin, *For V.T.,* a cube seemingly squashed, lunging forward almost to the point of overturn. Though not even waist-high, this sly, elegant object dictates its presence in the environment from its spot on the floor. It is this facet within the body of Smith's works, the solitary or standardized geometric forms, that prompted an early link with the younger minimalists.

But most of Smith's works are less straightforward. Exceptions are not only the larger multi-faceted works, but also small tabletop cast bronze pieces and his plans for earthworks to be built into the crest of a mountain landscape. The majority of Smith's sculptures coyly prompt the viewer to circumnavigate the work to unravel a logic in its form, such as *For J.C.* (*Illustration 8*)

Three photographs prove this point about *For J.C.,* but cannot replace the experience of studying the structure from all angles to relate adjacent sections to each other, to the opposite, and to the whole. Smith's configurations of simple and complex symmetries build a tension between logic and a frustrating irrationality, between predictability and a captivating confusion. While some of Smith's standard solid modules are visible, others have been absorbed within the mass.

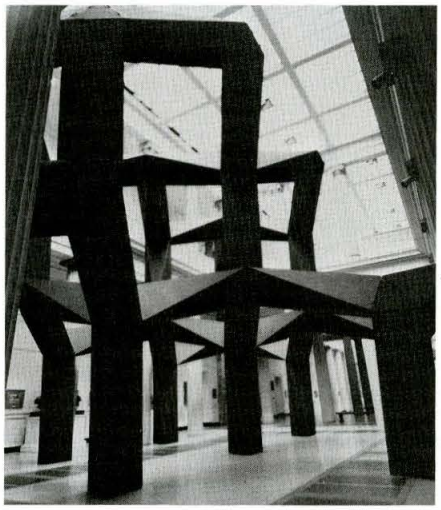
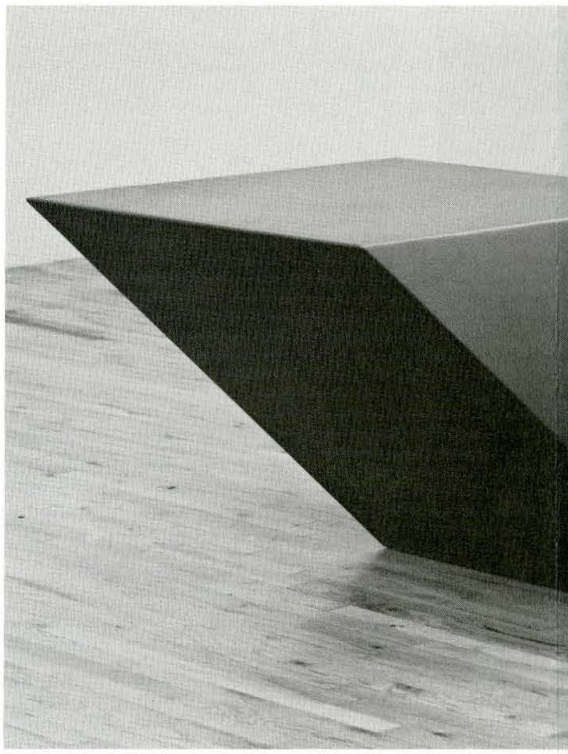


Illustration 6
Smoke, 1967
plywood
24 × 34 × 48 feet
(Not in exhibition)



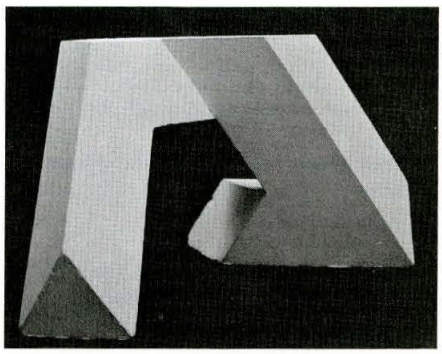


Illustration 9
Model for *For Marjorie*
Plaster
9⅞ × 18 × 9½ inches
Collection of Marjorie Iseman
(not in exhibition)

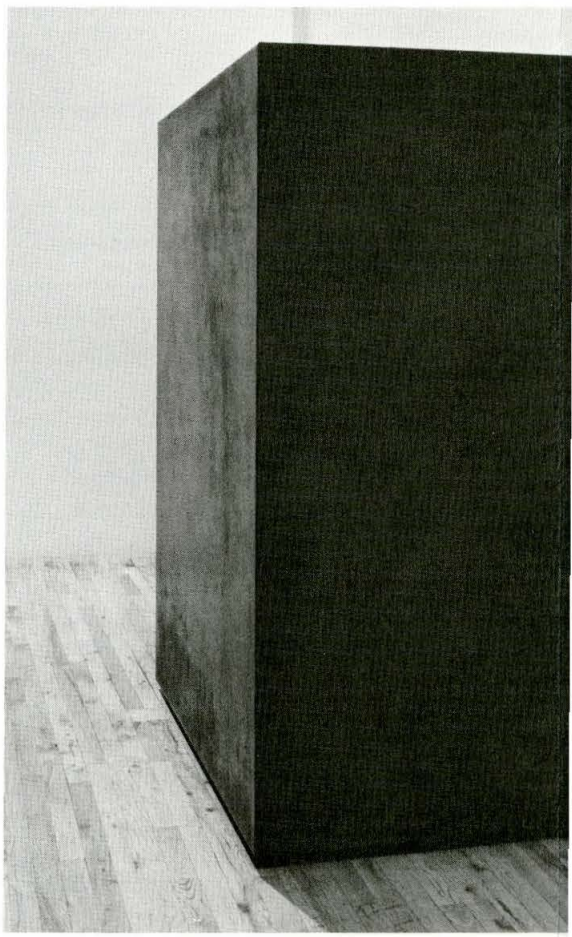


Illustration 7
Die, 1962
Steel
6 × 6 × 6 feet
(Not in exhibition)

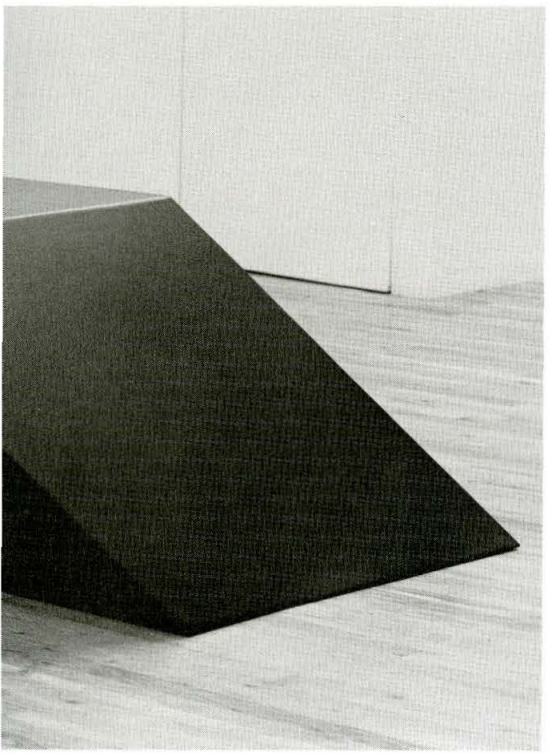
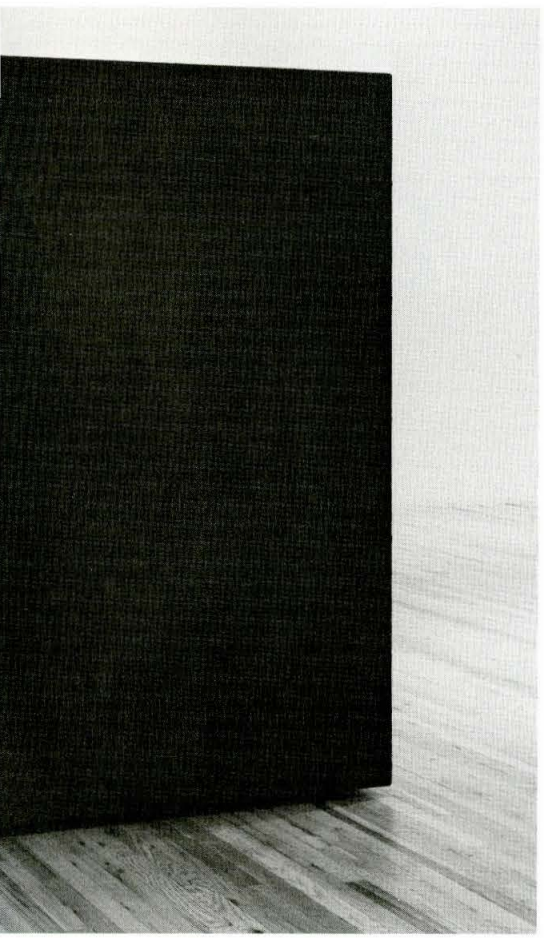
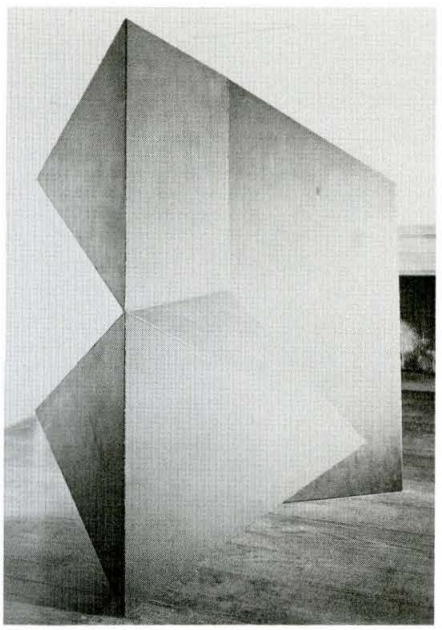
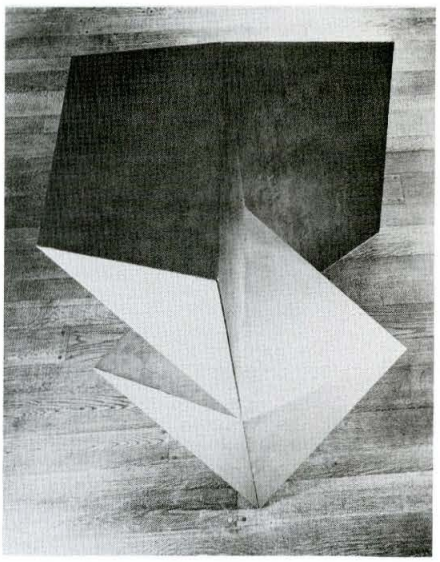


Illustration 5
For V.T. 1969
welded bronze
56 × 84 × 28 inches







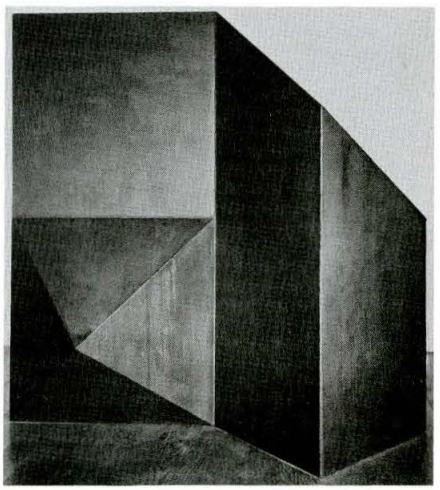


Illustration 8
For J.C. 1969
welded bronze
80 × 57 × 80 inches

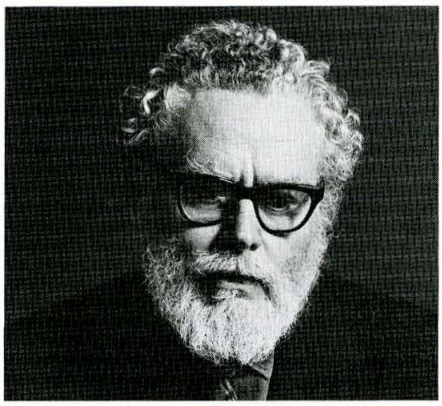
Smith's *For Marjorie* was originally composed from paper modules in 1961, and made into a plaster model (*Illustration 9*) which was given by the artist to his friend Marjorie Iseman in 1962. Nearly fifteen years later, Smith selected this work especially for the area between Tang Residence Hall and 500 Memorial Drive, proposing that the work be fabricated in steel. The modular units were expanded to six feet—roughly the height of a tall man—to form a majestic eighteen-foot gateway for residents. When asked about the final size anticipated for a particular maquette, Smith remarked that it should be "large enough to ride a horse through," at once indicating the height and grandeur of his monumental works.

Although most of Smith's works were dark or black, Smith specified that *For Marjorie* be painted fire-hydrant red, perhaps to echo the red brick of Alvar Aalto's Baker House Dorm, to the east, or the Hyatt Regency Hotel, within view to the west, two buildings with striking diagonals in their architectural vocabulary. From a man who derived his titles from James Joyce, it would not have been surprising if this color choice was also a sly self-reference to the family business, manufacturing fire hydrants.

The monumental scale of *For Marjorie* powerfully reveals the way Smith manipulated not only solid forms, but also used the surfaces of these forms to create an exciting intersection of planes and a series of striking silhouettes. As the sun progressively highlights each of the faces of the sculpture, bold new shapes are created, underscored by their accompanying passages in shadow. The work's configuration seems to evolve, following the viewer's point of view; walking in and around the structure, unanticipated shifts in form await viewers as they walk around and under the piece.

The success of Tony Smith's sculpture results from the unification of the visual and visceral experience of the solid object with an intelligent configuring of form. With the maquette for *For Marjorie, For V.T., For J.C.,* in the gallery, and the major public work *For Marjorie,* we can explore the shape of space.

SELECTED CHRONOLOGY AND EXHIBITIONS



1912
Born in South Orange, New Jersey into a prominent and close-knit family with one sister and five brothers.

As a child he is striken with tuberculosis and quarantined in a small quarters in the backyard, where he constructs "models of pueblo villages" from small medicine boxes.

Private tutors educate him until recovery. Attends St. Xavier High School, a rigorous Jesuit school in Manhattan.

1931–32
Studies at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. and Fordham University, New York City.

1933–36
Works as a toolmaker, draftsman and purchasing agent at the family ironworks business.
Attends the Art Students' League after hours, studying with Vytlacil and George Grosz.

1934
Attends Fordham College, New York City.

1937–38
Attends Chicago's recently-established "New Bauhaus," student of European émigrés László Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Archipenko and Gyorgy Kepes.

1938–39
Impressed by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright represented in an issue of *Architectural Forum,* he joins Wright's team to work developing low-cost housing for the United States Government, and on the Suntop Homes in Ardmore, Pennsylvania.

1940–1960
Independent architecture practice. Projects included renovation design as well as over two dozen private residences, including homes for the art dealer Betty Parsons and the painter Theodoros Stamos.

1943
Marries opera singer Jane Lanier Brotherton.

1946–50
Teaches at New York University. Students included Larry Rivers and Robert Goodnough.

1950–53
Teaches at Cooper Union and Pratt Institute.

1953–55
Living in Germany; executes a few small sculptural studies.

1957–58
Teaches design at Pratt Institute.

1958–61
Teaches at Bennington College.

1961
Terminates his practice of architecture.

1962–1974
Teaches at Hunter College. Students include Robert Morris and Alice Aycock.

1962
Fabricates his first metal sculpture, *The Black Box.*

1964
The Elevens included in "Black, White and Gray," Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; this is the first time his sculpture is exhibited publicly.

1966
Exhibits *Free Ride* in "Primary Structures," Jewish Museum, New York. One-person exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Receives the Longview Art Award and a National Arts Council Grant. Also participates in "Annual Exhibition 1966: Sculpture and Prints," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1967
One-person exhibitions at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; at the Galerie Muller, Stuttgart, Germany; and in Bryant Park, New York. Participates in "American Sculpture of the Sixties," Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art; "International Exhibition," Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; and "Scale as Content," Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.

1968
One-person exhibitions at the Fischbach Gallery, New York; Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris and the Donald Morris Gallery, Detroit. Traveling show of plywood mock-ups organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Participates in XXXIV Biennale, Venice, Italy. Receives a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

1969
"New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940–70," Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Exhibition of models at the University of Hawaii.

1970
"Seven Sculptures by Tony Smith," organized by the Newark Museum, the Montclair Museum, the Art Museum of Princeton, and the New Jersey State Museum at Trenton. One-person exhibition at the M. Knoedler & Co., New York.

1971
"Tony Smith/81 More," Museum of Modern Art, New York. One-person exhibition at the Newark Museum, New Jersey. Receives the Fine Arts Medal from the American Institute of Architects. Participates in Art and Technology Project, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and "Whitney Museum of American Art Sculpture Annual," New York.

1972
"Annual Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.