

Tony Smith

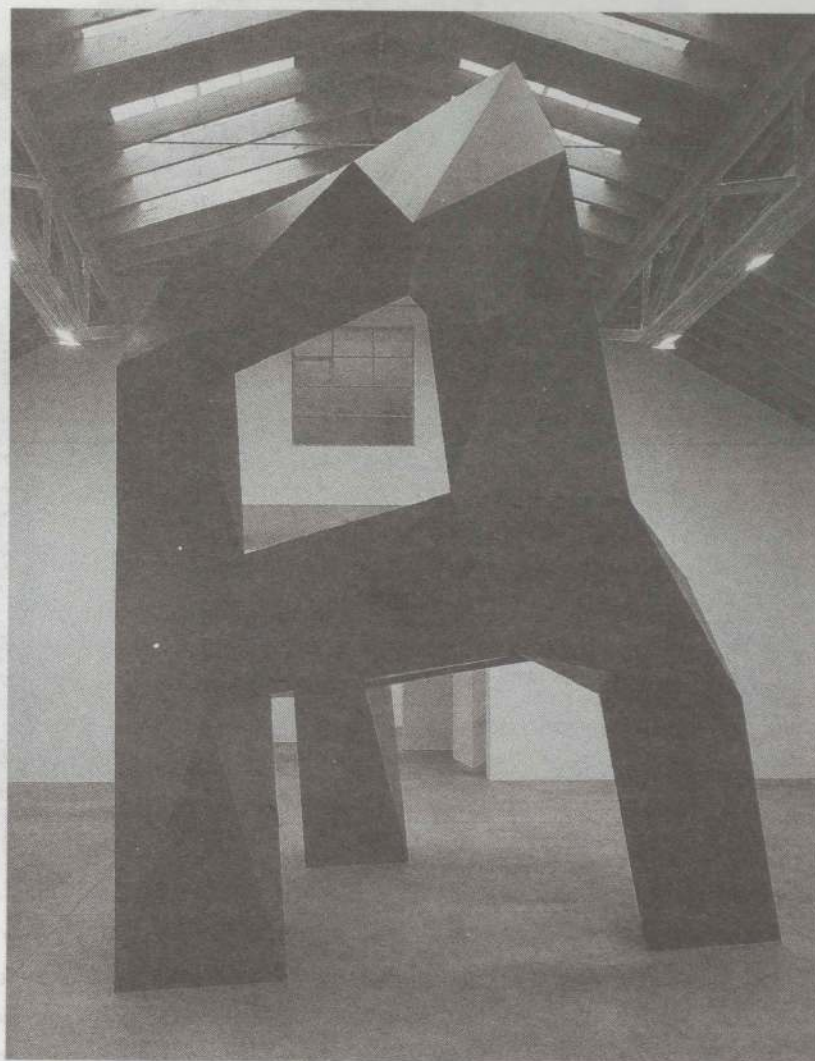
ARCHITECT • PAINTER • SCULPTOR

"The idea of space is given [to the artist] to change if he can. The subject matter in the abstract is *space*." So said the American painter Willem de Kooning. No artist of de Kooning's generation understood the full import of this assertion better than Tony Smith. Certainly no artist tested it against more space-defining disciplines than he. A modernist jack-of-all-trades, Smith held to a heroic ideal of the individual creator as "Renaissance man" while nurturing a sometimes desperate desire to bring his multiple talents to bear on the essential formal problems shared by his several vocations. At different times in the course of his life—he was born in 1912 and died in 1980—Smith painted, drew, built buildings, and made sculpture, and for a brief period in the early 1960s did all at once. The result is a body of work as various in its manifestations as it is coherent in its fundamentals.

All of Smith's thinking and making centers upon the basic assumption that space is not just the context in which art takes place—the void that is filled by objects and images—but is, instead, among art's basic raw materials—something to be taken hold of, studied, and shaped. Thus the architect frames emptiness to consolidate volumes, while the draftsman or painter divides space within the confines of the white page or blank canvas, and the sculptor anchors the environment around him with physical mass or embraces the atmosphere with armatures. A hunch-driven generalist in an age of specialists, Smith's broad conceptual grasp of spatial dynamics permitted him to work simultaneously from the outside-in and from the inside-out, from all-encompassing structure down to the irreducible building blocks that compose it, and from such simple geometric constructs back to city-scale complexity.

A visionary improviser among designers, Smith was a visual engineer among painters and sculptors. In every dimension of his activity he was a poet. In fact, Smith's first contact with modernist ideas was through literature, in particular the work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and, above all, his spiritual compatriot James Joyce, whose words Smith could recite from memory and whose sonorously abstract novel *Finnegan's Wake* provided the titles for a couple of his sculptures. These and other avant-garde writers fostered his interest in myth and archetype and encouraged him in the belief that the mysteries of Catholicism in which he was brought up and those of other cultures to which he was attracted by the monuments they left behind were all somehow connected, and, in turn, that the past he read about so avidly was vitally linked to the present he was living and a future he was just beginning to glimpse over the shoulders of his modernist predecessors.

Otherwise, Smith's schooling was spotty. A tubercular child who had spent the better part of his youth in quarantine in a small square house built behind his family's East Orange, New Jersey residence, he was, for the most part, tutored at home. Subsequently, classes at the Arts Students League in New York drew him into the world of art. A one-year stint at the New Bauhaus in Chicago confirmed his commitment to the arts but ended his official education. The cause of his departure was the discovery that, contrary to the



Moondog. 1964. Painted aluminum, 17' 1¼" x 13' 7¼" x 15' 8½" (521.3 x 414.7 x 478.8 cm). Collection Benesse Corporation, Tokyo, Japan. Photograph by Thomas Powel, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

principles of the original German Bauhaus which were predicated on the idea that all the types of artistic expression should be integrated, the curriculum of its American off-shoot emphasized the "applied arts" at the expense of the "fine arts." Even as a student, it was a distinction Smith refused to accept.

Frank Lloyd Wright's notions of organic design offered the young man a clear alternative, and good fortune brought him to the attention of this master architect for whom he worked as an assistant on several projects. Wright's romantic faith in the unique potential of America to create a holistic society and a democratic culture struck a deeply resonant chord in Smith. Despite a relatively brief association with his mentor, the apprentice systems-builder worked out of Wright's formal model—symbolized by his frequent use of the hexagon—and responded to his intellectual and aesthetic example for much of his life. The inventor Alexander Graham Bell provided Smith with addi-

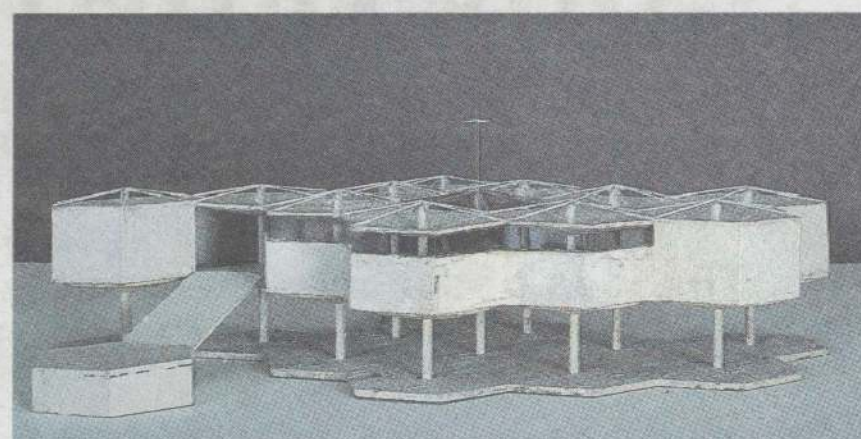
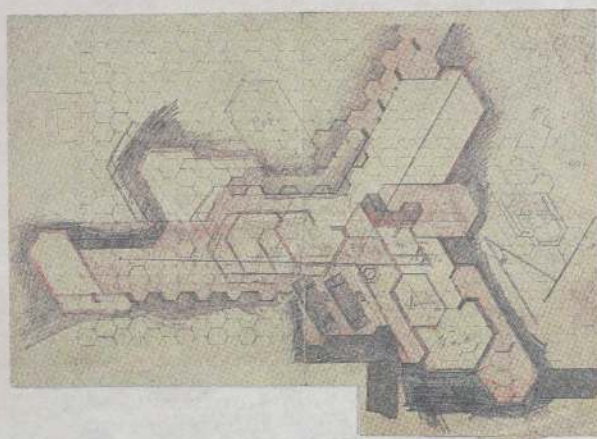
I have always admired very simple, very authoritative, very enduring things. —Tony Smith

July 2 to September 22, 1998

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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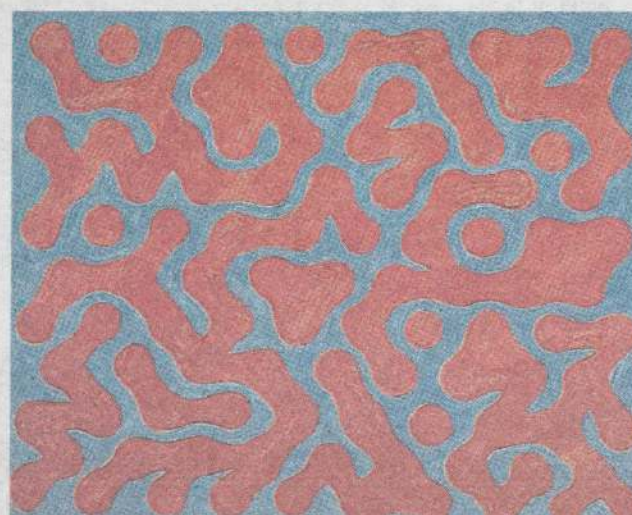
Brotherton House (plan). c. 1944. Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (30.3 x 48.4 cm). Tony Smith Estate, New York. Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy Tony Smith Estate

Church. 1951. Model. Wood and cardboard with paint and plaster, 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 29" (17.2 x 47 x 73.7 cm). Tony Smith Estate, New York. Photograph by John Wronn

BOTTOM ROW: LEFT AND RIGHT

Untitled. 1953–54. Oil on canvas, 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 39" (79.4 x 99.1 cm). Private collection, New York. Photograph by Thomas Powel

Untitled. 1953–54. Oil on board, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (49.5 x 59.4 cm). Private collection, New York. Photograph by Thomas Powel



tional insights along the same lines. Bell's pioneering use of the tetrahedron as the structural basis for kites and towers inspired Smith's conjugation of the same triangulated forms in his later sculpture. Finally, the Frenchman Le Corbusier spurred him to rethink the rules of proportion commonly employed by architects and to come up with a mathematically flexible and implicitly humanist standard of his own. Otherwise, time spent working as a skilled laborer, mechanical draftsman, and technician at his family tool and die works rounded out his practical training.

Never officially licensed as an architect, Smith explored his spatial and structural intuitions as a designer and a builder for some twenty years, during which time he completed over twenty projects. Notable among them were the L.L. Brotherton House, built for his father-in-law in 1944 and plainly if ingeniously derived from Wright's style, the elaborate complex of houses planned for Fred Olsen and his son from 1951, the cantilevered studio he conceived for the painter Theodoros Stamos in that same year, and the spare New York gallery and Long Island country houses commissioned by the dealer Betty Parsons between 1959 and 1963. The unconventional nature of Smith's ideas and professional status precluded a conventional career, but even when he was without clients he stuck to his guns, planning metropolises, working out the permutations of abstract configurations, or theorizing on the social and symbolic meaning of architecture ancient and modern.

One of Smith's most striking projects was a church intended to contain a suite of canvases and "stained glass" abstractions by Jackson Pollock. This unrealized collaboration of the early 1950s highlighted his novel approach to traditional architectural formats, his religious cast of mind, and his involvement with painters, among whom, in addition to Pollock, he counted Mark

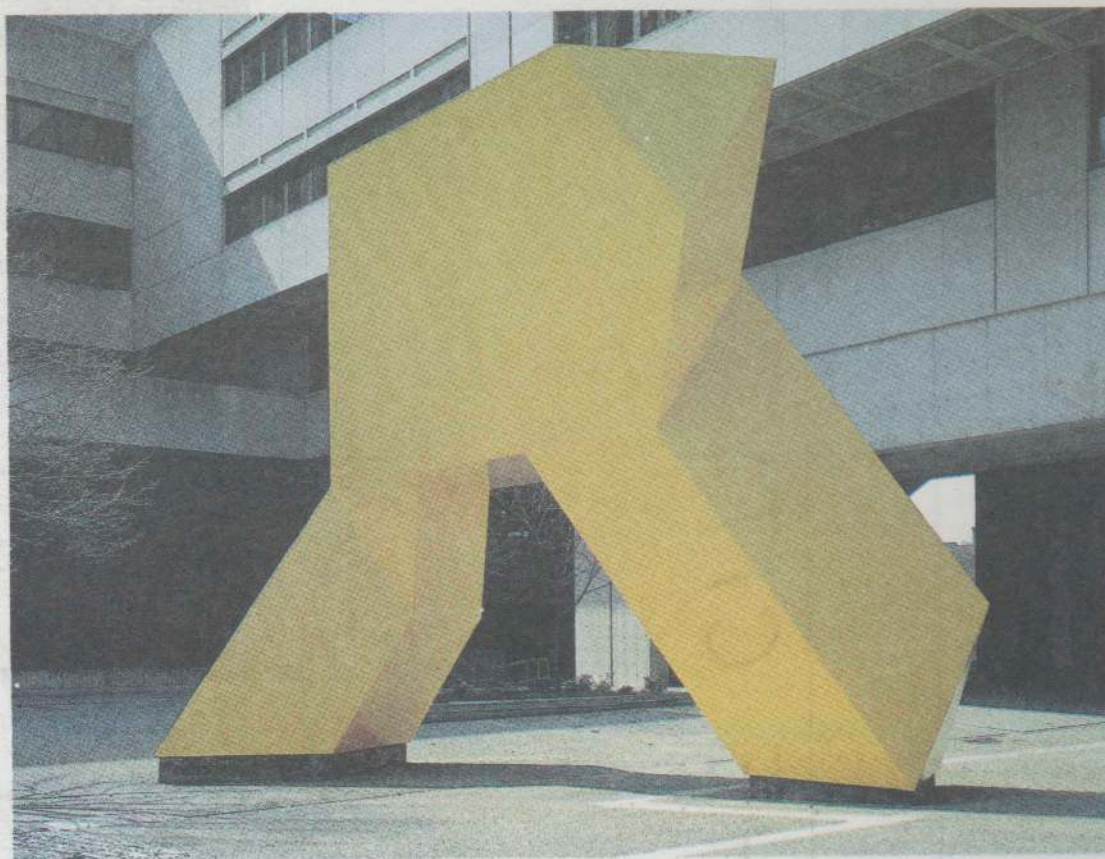
Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman as close friends.

The earliest of Smith's own paintings date to the mid-1930s and show the influence of a number of seemingly contradictory sources, including the cubist syntax of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, the biomorphic silhouettes of Jean Arp and Henri Matisse, and the graphic emblems of Kasimir Malevich and the Bauhaus. The initial tension between sharp geometries and swelling organic forms—and, by implication, between ideas and sensation, mind and body—was directly addressed by Smith through his interest in the classical paradigm of the Golden Section and contemporary theories of "dynamic symmetry" deriving from it as well as its application to the science of plant and animal growth. In the work itself this tension was gradually resolved—starting with the "Louisenberg" paintings of the mid-1950s—by the reduction of his vocabulary to a simple grid filled by circles or amalgams of circles that spread across the surface of his pictures like cloning or subdividing cells. To the Abstract Expressionists' sweeping "all-over" paintings, Smith responded with a cut-and-dried but equally expansive "field" painting of his own.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, these wafer-thin discs had acquired the painterly heft of Pollock's and Still's work, only to be followed by a second turn toward austerity in a series of flat, hard-edged canvases in which analogues to architectural form—blocks of color in post-and-lintel arrangement or unitary portal shapes—supplant the chain-linked rings. It was, in these latter paintings, as if Smith had decided to paint the grand buildings he was never able to build. Consistent throughout his paintings and drawings, however, is the pictorial assertion that structure *is* image and that all structure is transformational. Rather than being opposites, therefore, rectilinear and curvilinear

Tony Smith

IN THE CITY



Light Up. 1971. Steel, painted yellow, 20'9" x 16'6" x 28'7" (632.4 x 502.9 x 871.2 cm). University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

In a first time collaboration, the Public Art Fund and The Museum of Modern Art have extended the *Tony Smith* retrospective into the parks and plazas of Midtown Manhattan. *Tony Smith in the City* presents the artist's large-scale work as a "presence" within our urban environment, the context in which Smith first became known to a wider audience. It is now more than thirty years since Smith's groundbreaking exhibition at Bryant Park in 1967. His eight painted plywood sculptures provided a surprisingly raw encounter with experimental art for a general public more accustomed to Alexander Calder and Henry Moore. *Cigarette*, *Amaryllis*, *Spitball*, and *The Snake is Out* were among the now familiar works that at the time represented one of the most ambitious public exhibitions of minimal sculpture.

Far from the bucolic respite that Bryant Park offers today, in 1967 the patchy lawn set back from a gritty 42 Street provided Smith with the kind of marginal urban space that had earlier informed Smith's intellectual development from architect to artist, spaces that had "a reality . . . which had not had any expression in art." Smith would count abandoned airstrips, derelict marching grounds and half completed highways as his sources of inspiration. The latter, specifically the experience of driving with his students at night along the dark unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s, germinated a disquiet in Smith that the art of his time was constrained: "I view art as something vast. . . . Art today is an art of postage stamps. . . . There is nothing to look at between the Bennington Monument and the George Washington Bridge." Modern society for Smith had

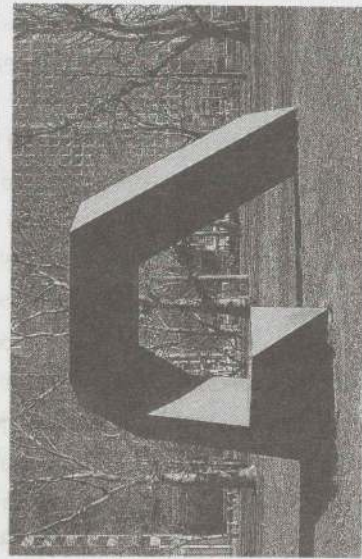
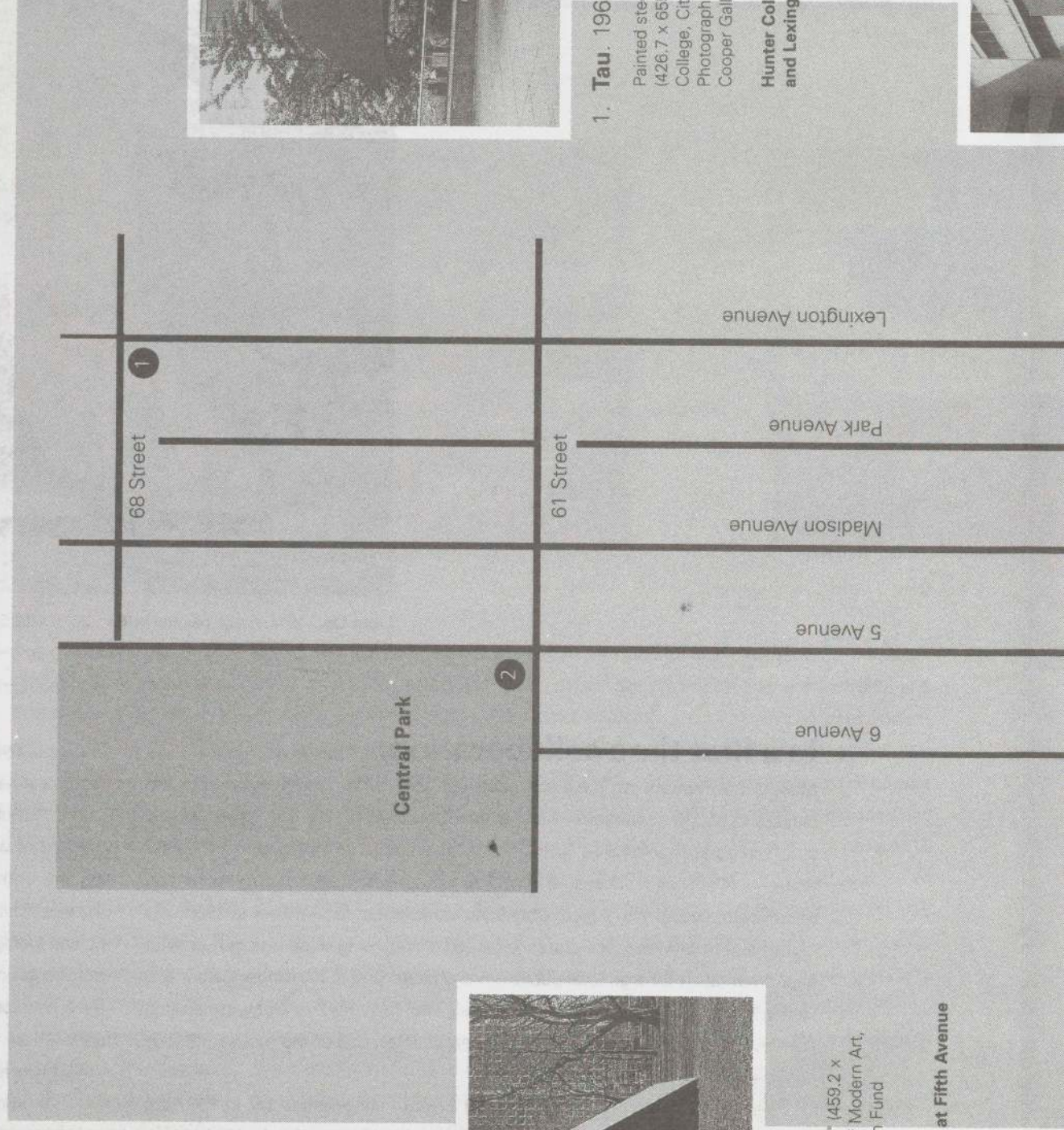
undoubtedly succeeded in creating its own monuments, but they were architectural in nature and purpose.

By the early 1960s, Smith had begun to experiment with a particular method of working in sculpture which was to become his signature—combining the complex shapes of tetrahedrons and octahedrons into large-scale masses. The resulting sculptures present a formidable manipulation of geometric and biological form that is both complex and seemingly intuitive. For all their precise geometry, the sculptures of Tony Smith never fail to escape calculation for a passionate, perhaps, unconscious turn. "If my work has possibly more appeal than it deserves," Smith said with characteristic modesty, "I imagine it probably affects people at an animal level."

Encountering Smith's work in a public setting creates a disconcerting contrast with the verticality of Manhattan's glass-plated buildings laid out on the city's orthogonal grid. Describing the optical ambiguities that Smith uses to contradict our expectations, Sam Hunter wrote, "what is seen as a sharply receding plane may flatten out as we approach it, or turn on us menacingly from another angle of vision—an unsteady, leaning monolith crowding our space. [Smith's sculpture] deliberately poses a challenge to the human presence, and outdoors, to any competing architectural forms." If Smith eschewed any notion that his work was intended as "an Experience," these large-scale sculptures certainly "unfold" when viewed from different angles. That experience of "unfolding" is only heightened by the physical siting of these looming figures in

Tony Smith

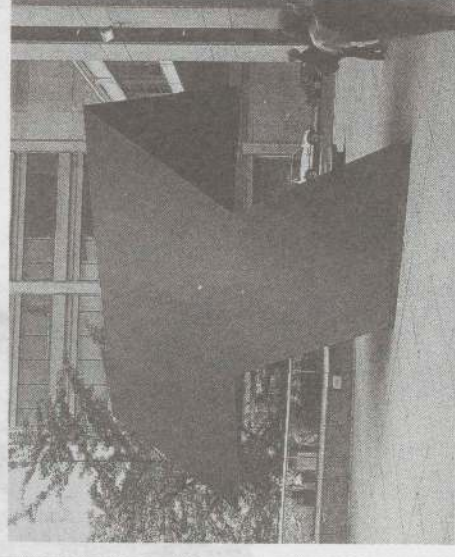
IN THE CITY



2. Cigarette. 1961

Painted steel, 15' 1" x 25' 6" x 18' 7" (459.2 x 777.2 x 566.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund
Photograph by Thomas Powell

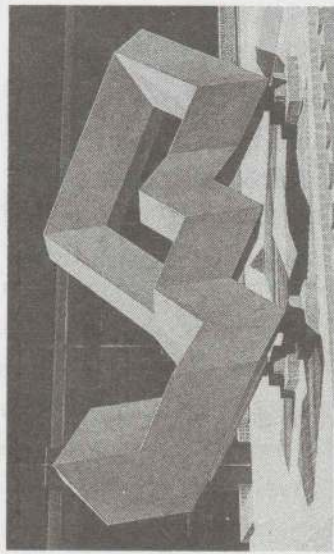
Southeast corner of Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 60 Street.



1. Tau. 1965

Painted steel, 14' x 21' 6" x 12' 4 1/2" (426.7 x 655.3 x 376.6 cm). Collection of Hunter College, City University of New York
Photograph by Thomas Powell, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

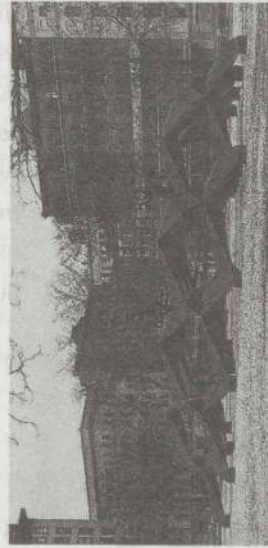
Hunter College, southwest corner of 68 Street and Lexington Avenue.



4. **Throwback.** 1976-77

Painted aluminum, 6' 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 16' 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 8' 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (202.2 x 493.3 x 267.9 cm). Collection 1166 Avenue of the Americas

Courtyard of 1166 Sixth Avenue. Enter from 45 or 46 Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

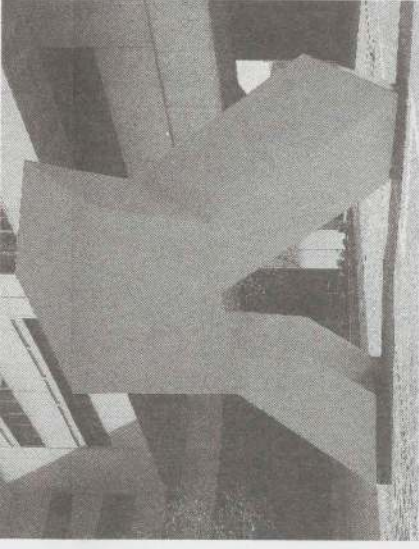


5. **Smug.** 1973

Cast bronze, black patina, 3' x 16' x 11' 8" (91.4 x 192 x 355.6 cm). Collection Tony Smith Estate, New York

Bryant Park, entrance staircase off 6th Avenue between 41 and 42 Streets.

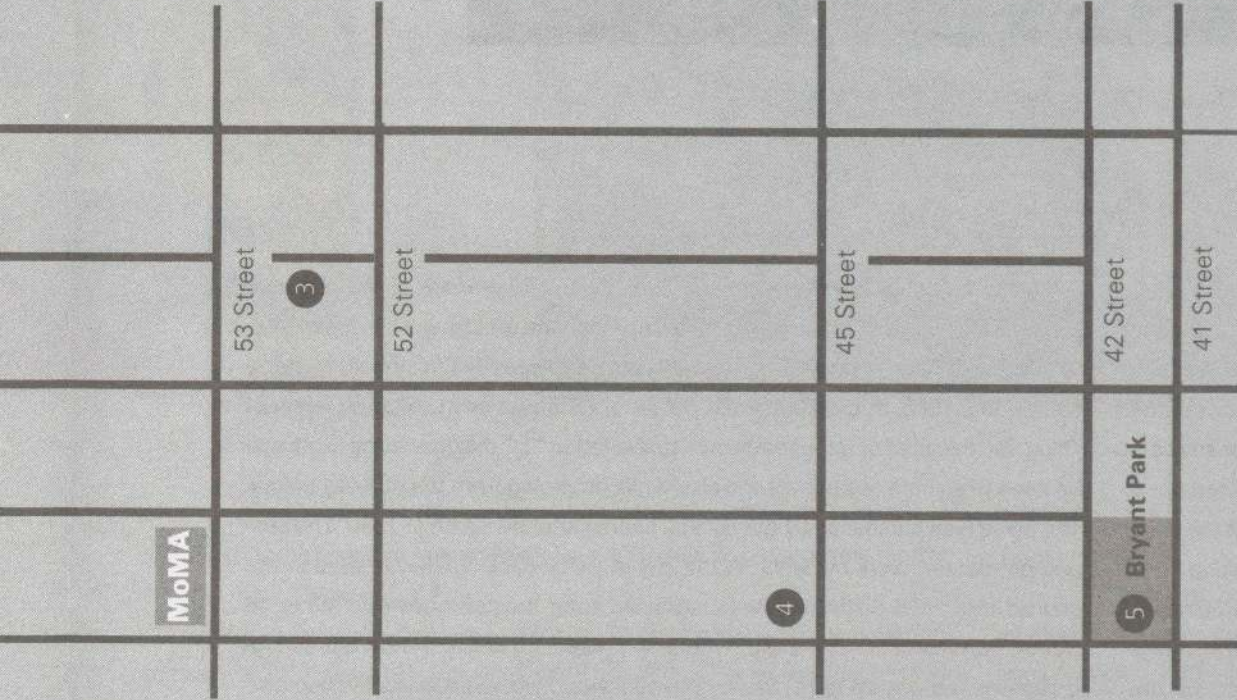
The photograph above shows a painted plywood mock-up of Smug, 11' x 78 x 64" (335.3 x 2377 x 1950.7 cm). Installed on St. John's Rotary, New York, 1968-93 (subsequently destroyed). Photograph: D. James Dee, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery and Tony Smith Estate.



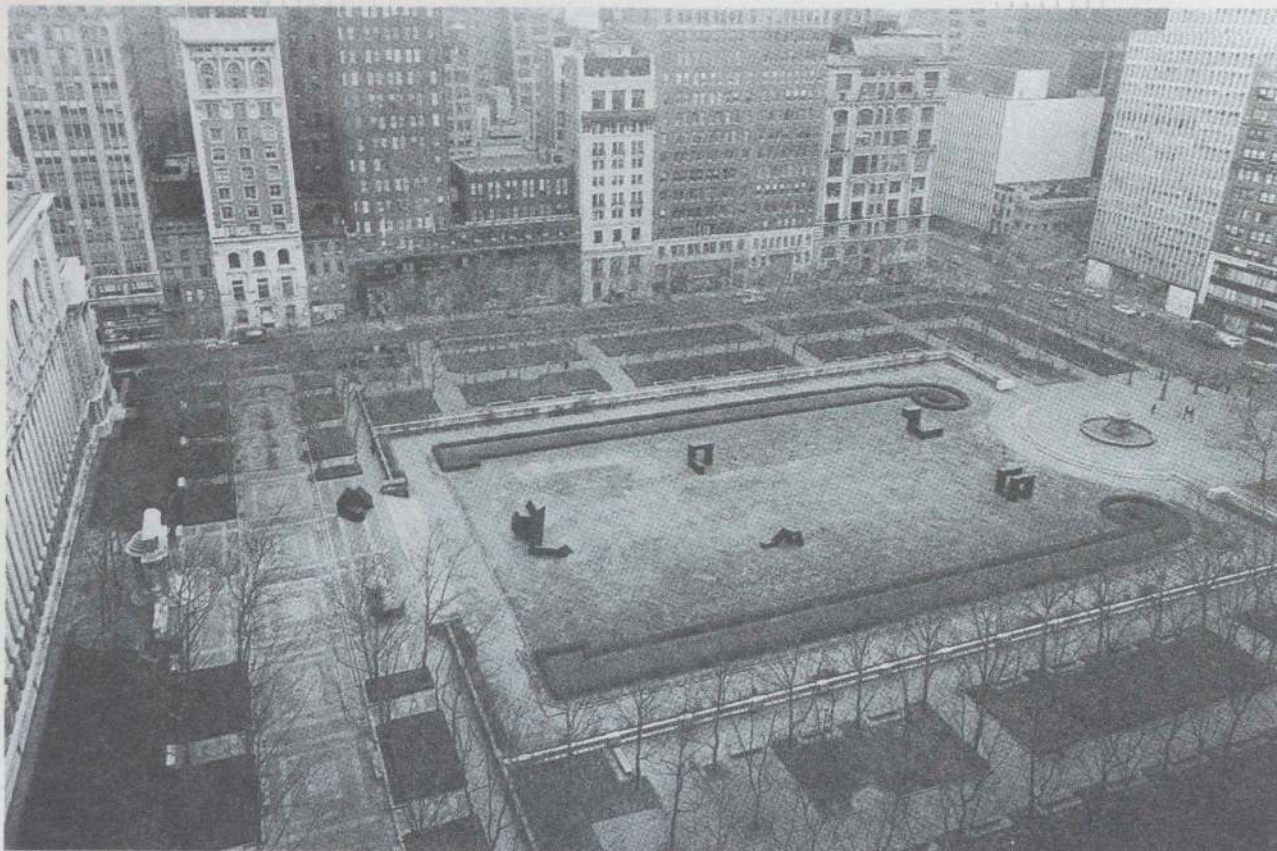
3. **Light Up.** 1971

Steel, painted yellow, 20' 9" x 16' 6" x 28' 7" (632.4 x 502.9 x 871.2 cm). University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Photograph © Ed Massery

Seagram Plaza, 375 Park Avenue, between 52 and 53 Streets



MAP OF MIDTOWN MANHATTAN



Installation at Bryant Park, New York, 1967. Photograph by David Gahr, courtesy Tony Smith Estate

the grand plazas and parks that punctuate the canyons of Midtown.

Tony Smith claimed to be unaware of how light affected the reading of his work and concentrated his attention on the basic form. The public context, outside the museum walls, does however provide an opportunity to witness the radical changes natural light makes upon these composite forms. Under any conditions the experience of the sculptures' shifting planes and unexpected turns can be awe inspiring. Writing in the December 1966 edition of *Artnews* the artist Scott Burton exalted, "The authority [of Smith's sculpture] is breathtaking. . . . I know of no other American sculptor who can combine volume, monumentality, and geometry like Tony Smith." Smith was more modest, considering "my things as being stable, down-to-earth, ordinary in a sense." He would describe the works as "presences" rather than sculptures.

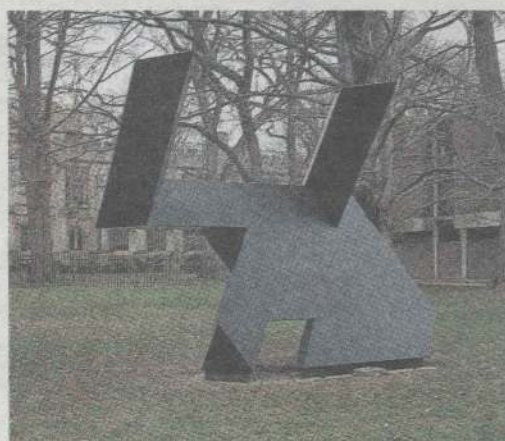
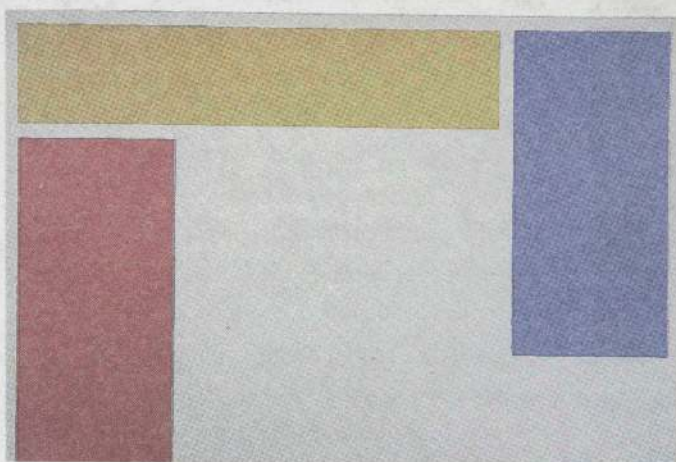
Tony Smith in the City includes five works, three temporary and two permanent installations at sites within walking distance of the Museum. At Doris C. Freedman Plaza (the southeast corner of Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 60 Street), Smith's colossal *Cigarette*, 1961, creates a formidable gateway. With *Cigarette* Smith "had set out to make a serious piece of sculpture" but found the first model "redundant, with the look of a war memorial." Having stripped the model down to its spine, Smith was left "with a cigarette from which one puff has been taken before it was ground out in the ashtray." On Seagram Plaza (the east side of Park Avenue at 52 Street), a location that attracted Smith as a potential site for his sculpture, the yellow *Light-Up*, 1971. One of Smith's few color works, it is "at once massive, imposing and at the same moment surprisingly playful." Originally commissioned for the Westinghouse building in Pittsburgh, *Light-Up* has been loaned from the University of Pittsburgh where the sculpture is permanently installed opposite the Carnegie Museum. No public exhibition of Smith's work in New York would be complete without a return to Bryant Park. *Smug*, 1973, the most "animal" of his sculptures, rises above the entrance staircase at 41 Street. The large plywood mock-up of this menacing lattice was last seen in New York in 1988 at St. John's Rotary at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel where it appeared like a gigantic alien craft.

In addition to the temporary exhibitions, *Tony Smith in the City* also draws attention to the permanent installations of the artist's work in New York. At Hunter College, where Smith taught and developed his sculptural system, stands *Tau*, 1965, at the southwest corner of 68 Street and Lexington Avenue. Titled *Tau* because of its resemblance to the letter "T," this menacing work can be seen from both streetlevel and also while emerging from the subway below. The piece was purchased by the college shortly after his death in 1980. The second permanent work by Smith in the city is *Throwback*, 1976-77, sited in the courtyard of 1166 Sixth Avenue (visitors can enter the courtyard from 45 or 46 Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues). Presenting radically different configurations when viewed from diverse perspectives, *Throwback* (so-called because "it recalls an earlier period") rests on three points, and its window-like openings lend a light, almost flirtatious quality to the work.

The unprecedented exhibition of Smith's sculptures at Bryant Park in 1967 (organized by then Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving and New York's first Director of Cultural Affairs Barbaralee Diamonstein) opened new possibilities for contemporary sculpture to be seen in the urban environment. Art critic Hilton Kramer writing in *The New York Times* heralded the Bryant Park exhibition as "enlightened civic policy joining hands with advanced art—a development guaranteed to astonish the professional art world in New York almost as much as it will the public at large. . . . May one hope that this is just the beginning of what could be an extremely interesting civic-esthetic dialogue?" One of Smith's most important legacies may be that he suggested an avenue for subjectivity to exist on an architectural scale, demonstrating the power of art to transform our public spaces into venues for human creativity.

Tom Eccles, Director, Public Art Fund

Susan K. Freedman, President, Public Art Fund



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Untitled. 1962. Oil on canvas, 5' 4" x 7' 10½" (162.6 x 240 cm). Tony Smith Estate, New York. Photograph by Thomas Powell

Moses. 1968. Painted steel, 11' 6" x 15' x 7' 4" (350.5 x 457.2 x 223.5 cm). The John B. Putnam, Jr., Memorial Collection, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Photograph by Thomas Powell

BOTTOM, AT LEFT

Throne. 1956-57. Painted wood model, 27 x 39 x 32" (68.6 x 99.1 x 81.3 cm). Tony Smith Estate, New York. Photograph by Thomas Powell

systems of spatial organization coexist within the same formal spectrum, as indicated by the fact that the rectangle of the Golden Section can be rotated into the most elegant of spirals.

If molecular biology and cellular generation provide the paradigm for so many of Smith's paintings and drawings, then physics and the angular blossoming of crystals and clustering and compression of bubbles supply the model for the his sculptural inventions. Like Matisse, who began painting while recovering from an illness, Smith became a sculptor in convalescence. The process occurred in two stages temporally far removed from each other. As a boy confined to his quarters in the yard of the family house, he had made miniature "pueblo" villages out of the medicine boxes that accumulated around him. In 1961, as a man in his mid-forties suffering the effects of a severe automobile accident and the chronic blood ailment it precipitated, Smith tried his hand again at deploying small handmade components to sketch monumental forms in three-dimensions.

These folded-paper constructions followed a classroom demonstration Smith had made five years previously for his students at Hunter College in order to prove the superior properties of tetrahedral as opposed to ordinary rectangular joints. The result of this exercise was his first mature sculpture, *Throne* (1956). The consequence of his subsequent bed-bound experiments was a decisive switch to the medium and a creative burst that in the decade and a half between 1961 and 1975 produced a series of stunningly original works and earned him a reputation as one of the most radical of contemporary form-makers. A classic artist's artist and "one of the best known unknowns in American art," according to Samuel J. Wagstaff, who mounted his breakthrough exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1966, Smith found

himself on the cover of *Time* magazine a year later billed as "Master of the Monumentalists."

Of course, Smith was not the first of his epoch to appreciate the aura of elemental geometries, but no one before him had better understood how scale conditions the experience of basic forms, such that a small work like *Black Box* (1962) holds our attention because of its intractable compactness while the larger *Die* (1962) arrests us by virtue of its strangely anthropomorphic height and reach. (The latter piece was in fact based on Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of a man positioned spread eagle inside a circle set inside a square.) Neither had any modern sculptor until then ventured so deeply into Euclid's universe, nor seen so far beyond it into the realm of topology and its uncanny plasticity. Thus, even as the middle-aged Smith made his sculptural debut in the company of much younger so-called Minimalists like Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, he was in the process of fundamentally reordering the mathematical givens of the formal language they collectively spoke.

For Smith the grid was just one device among many for articulating shapes and their setting, and, for that matter, grids came in a variety of squared-off, isometric, and other formats. Moreover, Smith was convinced, rational aesthetic systems were of value only insofar as they opened the way toward suprarational truths—that is to say only to the extent that they arose out of natural phenomenon and directed us to emotional and spiritual realities. A modern day American mystic in tweeds, tie, and topcoat, Smith was an anomaly in the 1970s, an artist willing to gamble on the proposition that great things were still possible—by which he meant a contemporary art and architecture to rival that of antiquity as well as the exemplary achievements of

European modernism—and whose ace-in-the-hole was a gift for numbers and penchant for playing with blocks.

Although Smith had every reason to agree with de Kooning's remark about space being the subject of abstraction and something the artist must change if he or she can, it was with Pollock that Smith had the greater affinity. The clear lesson of Pollock's looping and snarling gestural pictures was that even though the canvas had limits, space itself and the marks that delineated it could go on forever in all directions. Having already plotted out sections of this two-dimensional "infinity" with the circular integers and rounded composites of his "Louisenberg" paintings, and having previously sketched its three-dimensional scope in architectural plans based on hexagons and tessellated or aggregate forms, Smith applied Pollock's discovery and his own modular method to the domain of freestanding sculpture.

Working in table-top scale, Smith thus fused simple planar configurations—cubes, pyramids, diamond and honeycomb shapes—to make obdurate but curiously animistic objects, strange gesturing "presences," imposing monoliths, alternately rigid and contorted gateways, squat arches, and cathedral-like vaults. These fragile paper and cardboard miniatures were then cast in bronze, temporarily fabricated in wood, or permanently executed in welded sheet-metal, with each successive enlargement bearing out Smith's unprecedented grasp of the continuity of form within the broader continuity of space. Accordingly, one may look at Smith's sculptures as a series of solids filling a particular number and pattern of units in a consistent spatial mesh, like sealed compartments in a translucent wax beehive. Or, conversely, one may experience them as opaque, light consuming blanks in an intangible template, like imploding stars or black holes in the celestial grid. In either case they are inseparable from the whole, whose boundless but invisible fretwork they pinpoint and affirm.



Tony Smith. Photographer unknown, courtesy Tony Smith Estate

Just as Pollock's abstractions spilled beyond the containing edge of traditional easel painting, Smith's diminutive models prefigured sculptures that swelled into sometimes huge and frequently complex entities which, on occasion, threatened to take over like uncontrollable cell growth or the invasive march of a plant spreading at root and branch. In so doing, however, he not only created the volumetric equivalent of Pollock's sublime flatness, he metaphorically diagrammed the matrices connecting micro- to macrocosmos. While much of modern art has seemed to attack the idea of a coherent universe, and thereby undermine confidence in scientific or philosophical principles that emanate from that

assumption, Smith pitted his faith and his idiosyncratic but far-reaching gifts against such doubts.

Whether doodling on graph paper, calculating the angle at which roof or floor beams meet, penciling-in and coloring the shapes in his painting, or assembling and disassembling groups of taped-together polygons, Smith was always pursuing the same task, namely the trial-and-error divination of the links he was sure existed between this world and all its wonders and a transcendent realm that nature reflected, art struggled to represent, and the soul longed for. By force of will Smith kept these romantic aspirations alive even as his Abstract Expressionist cohorts passed from the scene and newer, more skeptical or strictly formalist generations replaced them. His singular achievement was to have found a way—and then another, and another after that—of grounding his high-flown ideals and improvisational practice in a ceaselessly innovative and just plain beautiful concreteness.

Robert Storr

Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture

Public Programs

The following programs will be held in conjunction with the exhibition

Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor

Tony Smith: Artists' Responses

Tuesday, September 8

A panel discussion including artists Mel Bochner, Joel Shapiro, Robert Swain, and Richard Tuttle. Moderated by Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

Tony Smith: Critical Views

Monday, September 14

A panel discussion with Anna Chave, Professor of Art History at Queens College and The Graduate School and University Center of City University of New York; Lucy Lippard, writer; and others to be announced. Moderated by Robert Storr.

All talks begin at 6:30 p.m.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

Tickets: \$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5

Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk.

For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

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Tony Smith in the City, the off-site installations of Tony Smith's sculpture, is organized in collaboration with Public Art Fund, Inc.