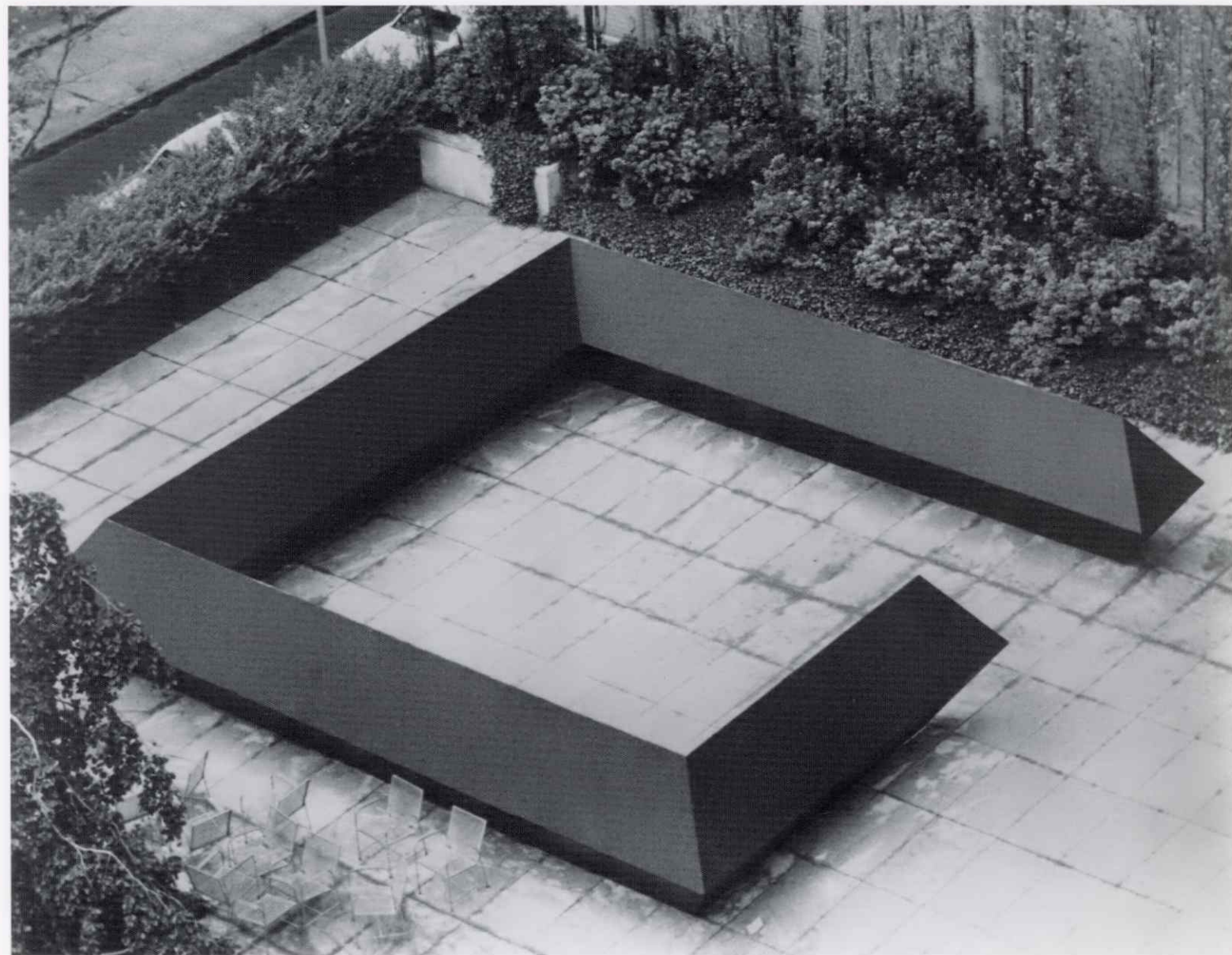


TONY SMITH
STINGER



cover and above: *Stinger*, 1968, plywood mock-up, *Art of the Real USA 1948-1968*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

TONY SMITH: STINGER

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Stinger is a large work — 6' 6" high, taking up a thirty-two-foot square area; the inner space spans twenty-six feet. Part of one side of the overall square is removed, serving as both entrance and exit. Its size and scale contribute to its status as architectural sculpture. A viewer is surrounded immediately upon entering the space defined by *Stinger's* linear yet massive form, yet cannot apprehend the whole work from a single vantage point inside, necessitating a walk around the outside perimeter and back in again; the rounded-corner square plan is visible only from above.

Conceived in late 1967, *Stinger* was first installed to great acclaim in The Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden in 1968 as part of Eugene C. Goossen's landmark exhibition *Art of the Real*. When the show traveled in Europe, *Stinger* was installed in various locations, perhaps most memorably outside the Grand Palais on the Champs Élysées. Its impact, in this location, was so intense that John Russell recalled it vividly, eighteen years later, when he reviewed another exhibition of Smith's work.

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Tony Smith (1912-1980) began his artistic career in the mid-1930s, studying at the Art Students League. By 1938 he turned his attention to architecture, working for Frank Lloyd Wright before opening his own practice; he continued to design proj-

ects through the early 1960s. Smith's work as an architectural designer and builder indelibly affected the sculptures that he began to make around 1961.

Despite his fame, Smith's reputation continues to rest on a relatively small body of sculpture. His environmental projects are less well known either because they were erected as temporary installations (like *Stinger* and *Smoke*, 1967), or because they were never built at all. Yet these projects, which confound the boundaries between architecture and sculpture, between monuments and objects, comprise a vital aspect of his achievement. *Stinger* derives its height from standard architectural measurement, yet its impact stems from its distance from the norm. Smith's open structure suggests the language of building, yet is not a shelter.

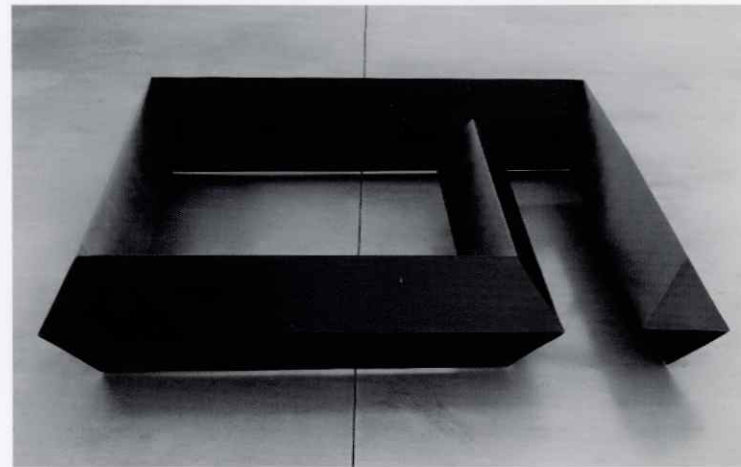
Smith made many works whose composition depended on regular orthogonal systems, but his genius lay in using a regular system to create irregular, unsettling effects. In this instance, Smith turned a square on its end, transforming a planar shape into a continuous diamond-shaped line, constructed by linking together cross sections of six-sided tetrahedra and eight-sided octahedra. Set directly on the floor, *Stinger* rests on a single point of the diamond. A viewer who might expect to see a wall plane set at ninety degrees to the floor, is instead met by

an aggressively protruding edge, while the planar surfaces seem to recede. This contrast between edge and plane gives the work a sense of organic animation, a mixture of threatening protrusion and buoyancy unexpected in a work of such bulk.

Stinger was created as part of an organic continuum of works whose basic elements Smith would construct, deconstruct, and reassemble into new compositions. The bulk of Smith's sculptures seem to have naturally morphed into one another, like generations of a family. Smith stated that *Stinger* was a descendant of *Willy* (1962), *Gracehoper* (1962), and *Source* (1967), and the antecedent of various works, including *Arch* (1967), *Moses* (1968), *Trap* (1968), and *Hubris* (1969).

One of Smith's primary goals as an architectural designer was to integrate a building with its environment, creating a natural flow linking the natural world with the manmade one. Conceived in late 1967, *Stinger* was intended to give the feeling that entering into the sculpture's negative space was both a physical transition and a spiritual passage. (This theme of passage through a gate or portal was one that Smith had investigated for many years.) Smith's annotations on a preliminary drawing of the work included these words: "Even those who enter by the wrong gate, who take the wrong path, will find their way. It shall be the right way, the correct way." Smith considered naming the piece "One Bad Gate" in keeping with this idea.

Entryways are, of course, part of every manmade and natural shelter and the entrance to the interior plaza underscored the relationship between the sculptural form and architectural precedents like the gate, arch or portal. Many other artists in the 1960s and 1970s, including Alice Aycock, Robert Morris, Bruce

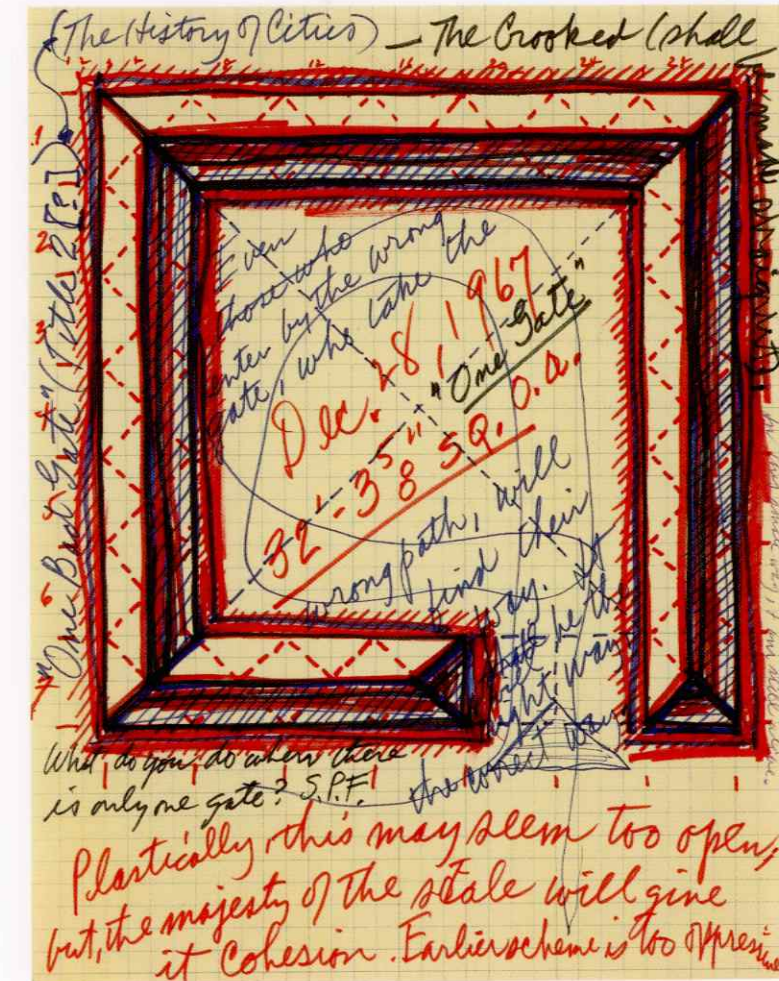


Trap, 1968, bronze, 10 x 55 x 55 inches

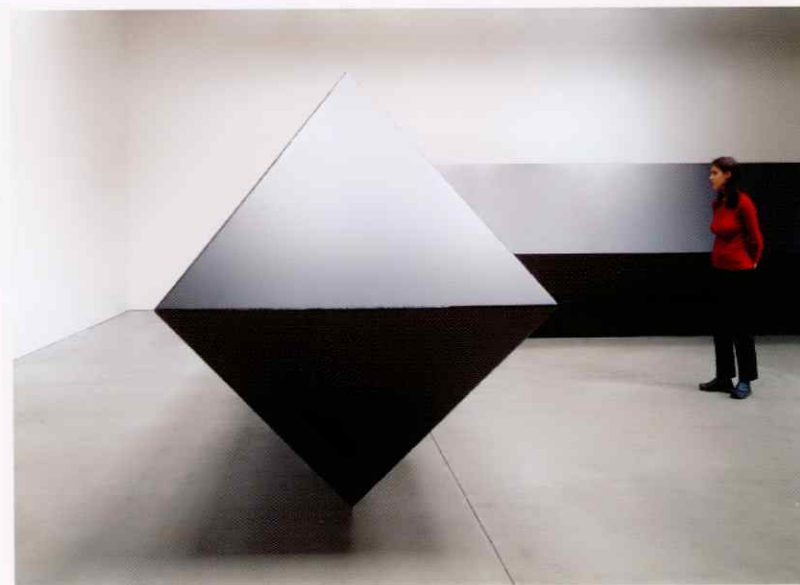
Nauman and Richard Serra, created works dealing with the theme of passage through space and time, and the image of the door as metaphor was also analyzed in Gaston Bachelard's influential *Poetics of Space*, published in 1964.

Smith decided on the title *Stinger* after its construction was completed by his assistants Robert Swain and Frazier Dougherty, during the spring of 1968. It was first erected in the backyard of Smith's home in suburban South Orange, New Jersey. The name *Stinger* was suggested by the shape itself, which reminded Smith of the sneaky effect of a Stinger, an popular alcoholic drink whose sweetness masks its alcoholic content, surprising the drinker with its potency – as he said on many occasions: it comes around and nips you in the back of the neck.

Joan Pachner



One Gate (drawing for *Stinger*), 1967, ink on paper, 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches



Stinger, 1968-99, steel, painted black, 6½ x 32 x 32 feet



Stinger, 1968-99, steel, painted black, 6½ x 32 x 32 feet



Stinger, 1968, plywood mock-up, *Art of the Real USA 1948-1968*, the Grand Palais, Paris

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