

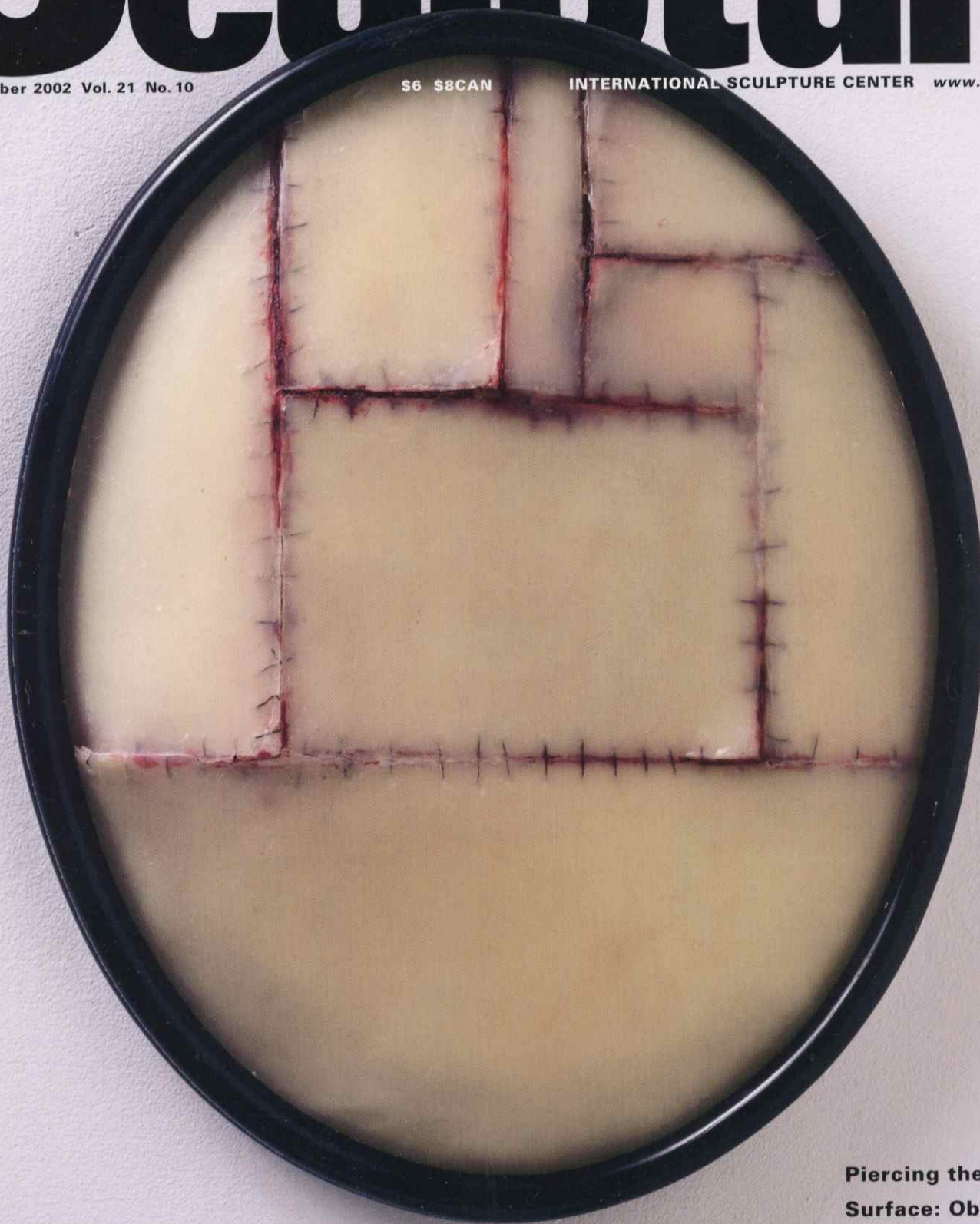
Sculpture

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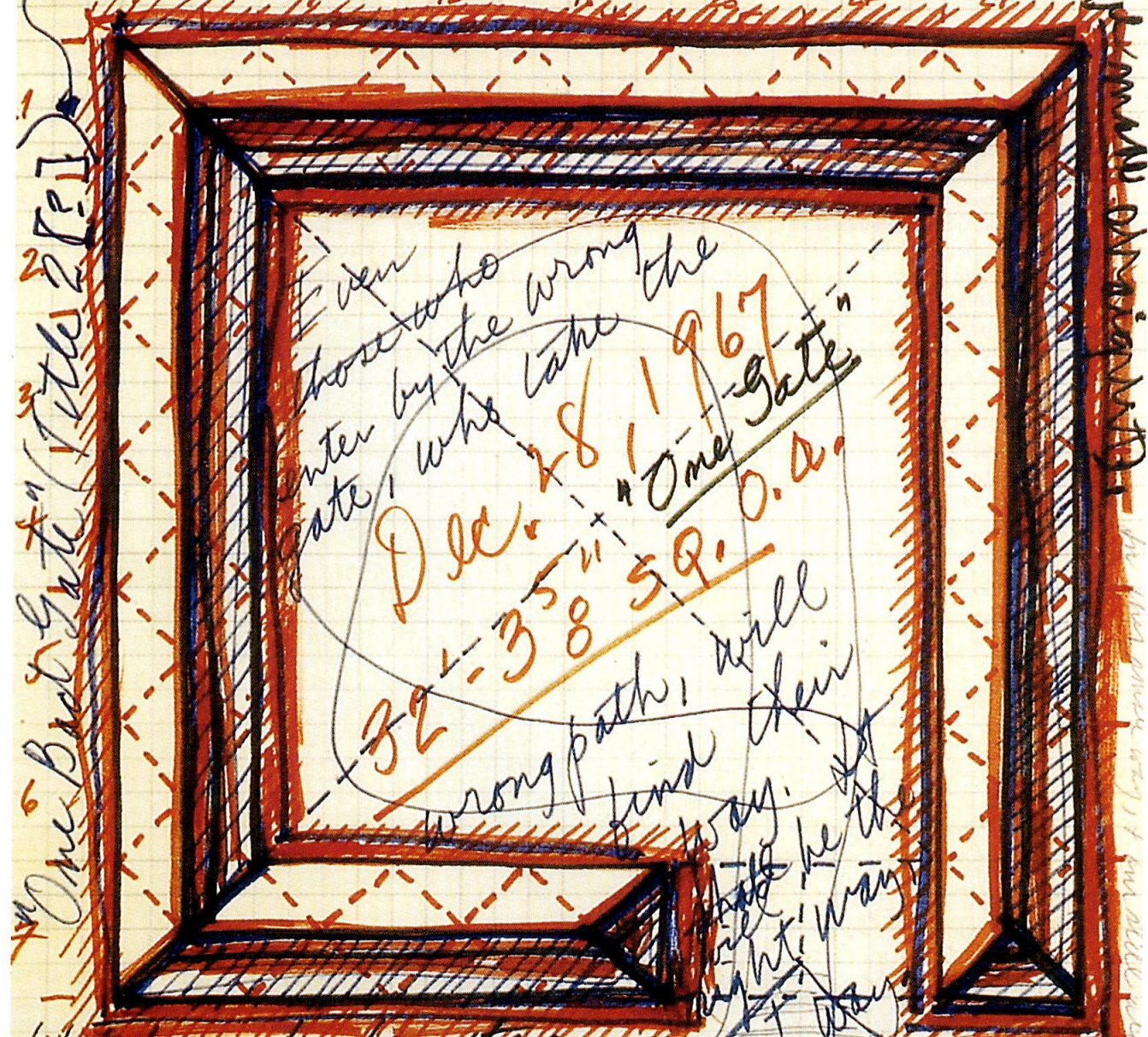
INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER www.sculpture.org



**Piercing the
Surface: Object,
Body, Earth**



(The History of Cities) — The Crooked (shall



What do you do when there is only one gate? S.P.F. ~~the correct~~

Plastically, this may seem too open, but the majesty of the scale will give it cohesion. Earlier scheme is too oppressive

In the Ether of

TONY SMITH

by Robert C. Morgan

Before attending the retrospective of Tony Smith's sculpture at the Institute of Modern Art in Valencia (IVAM) last spring, I had many recollections of the artist's work. My first memorable experience was in Santa Barbara, California, in 1968. Smith had agreed to do a selection of his large-scale sculptures as compressed cardboard mock-ups (actual size) that would travel to various public spaces in cities throughout the United States. Having read about Smith's fantastic new works such as *Smoke* (1967), which appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in October of that year, I was eager and enthusiastic to see them in the flesh—that is, in steel. The fact that the sculptures were fabricated in cardboard and painted black as opposed to actual steel was not entirely disappointing. What struck

me was how the various sculptures were sited around town—in shopping malls, parks, lobbies, and, most fascinating of all, the turf in front of the historic Santa Barbara Mission where a large work entitled *The Snake is Out* (1962) had been perfectly placed. Being a novice in contemporary art at the time I was mesmerized by the magic of this piece.

The Snake is Out breathed air. Later, I read somewhere that Smith had made a similar statement. I understood and believed exactly what he intended. I remember waking up in the morning in that sprawling beach town and driving my battered Sunbeam Rapier to the site of the mission before breakfast. There I would sit alone and contemplate the sculpture. I would walk around it, stopping at various corners to examine it from various angles. This monumental piece had both gravity and lightness. It seemed to reconcile geometry with organic fluidity. In

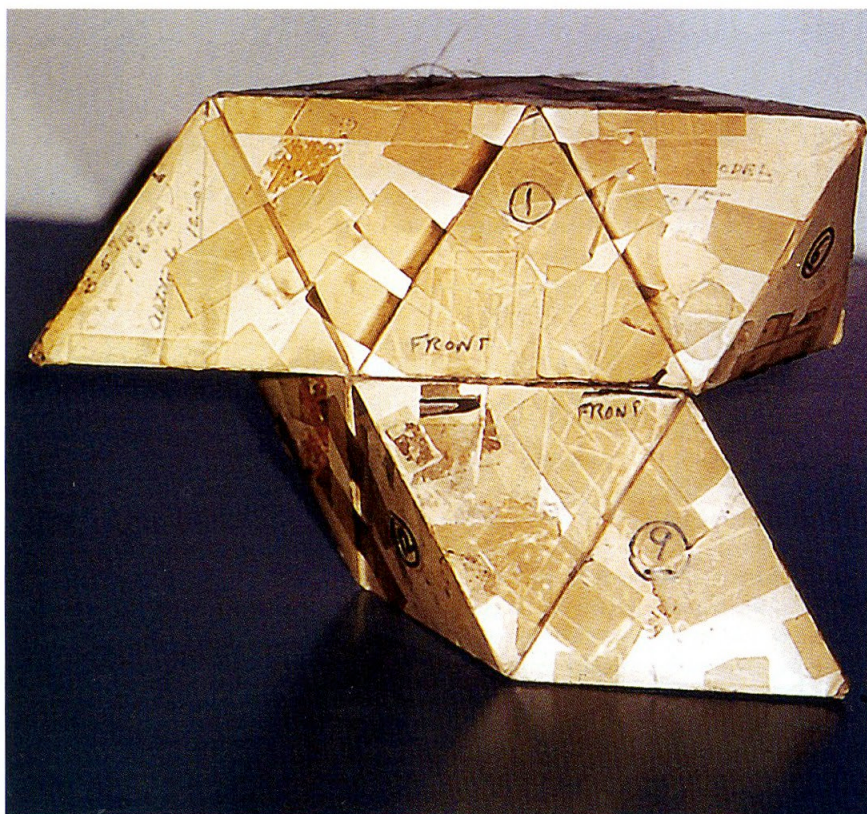
Valencia, I learned that the title, *The Snake is Out*, comes from an Irish drinking term that refers to the visible vein that appears on the temple of a drunk. Apparently, this is something Smith gleaned from reading *Finnigans Wake* by James Joyce, a writer whom he admired, given his own related heritage.

There is little doubt that Tony Smith had a complicated career. His artistic aspirations did not begin and end in the same place. As an architect and painter, he equivocated between the function and fiction of hard-edge form. He was perpetually exploring the variations of how to calculate form in space or how to invent space through form. His breakthrough as an artist was not at all instantaneous. It came relatively late, when he was nearly 50. For Smith, the issue was to give his concepts an originality that went beyond the predictable notion of calculation. It can

One Gate (Drawing for Stinger), 1967.
25.6 x 20.4 cm.



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take years for some artists, who are predisposed to this kind of thinking, to discover this. Smith was one of them.

Like other significant discoveries in the history of art and science, Smith's discovery came nearly by accident. Although he was exploring sculptural forms as early as 1956, it was not until he had evolved a clear understanding of the modular unit that he made his radical break with the past. Smith's application of modularity became the fundamental ingredient in his system of forms as he worked primarily with octahedra and tetrahedra. Given his architectural training, he was adept at understanding the complex relationship of these modular units in relation to solid geometry. But it was not until 1961 that Smith grew confident enough to move these relational solids into a non-functional three-dimensional space. His assiduity and commitment to this method of construction would eventually change the direction of modern sculpture.

Often Smith is regarded as the forerunner of what came to be known in the '60s as Minimal art. This is both correct and incorrect. One can speak of Smith as building a kind of transitional bridge between the attitude and scale of Abstract Expressionism and the invention of a modularity (based on the tetrahedron) in sculpture. There is a mathematical complexity in Smith, however, that is generally not associated with the early Minimalists such as Morris, Judd, LeWitt, Andre, and Flavin. These artists tended to work more directly with the grid and with the reduction, repetition, and placement of forms, based on a straightforward application of modularity, seriation, and standardization.

One could argue that Tony Smith's insight opened the threshold, albeit reluctantly, to what the Minimalists eventually became. This is not to say that all artists associated with Minimal art are directly indebted to Smith. The importance of his transitional role was a paradigmatic shift between Abstract Expressionism and Minimal art. This cannot be underestimated. In one way,

Top: *Untitled*, c.1960. Gouache on paper, 12.8 x 15.3 cm. Bottom: *Tau*, 1965.

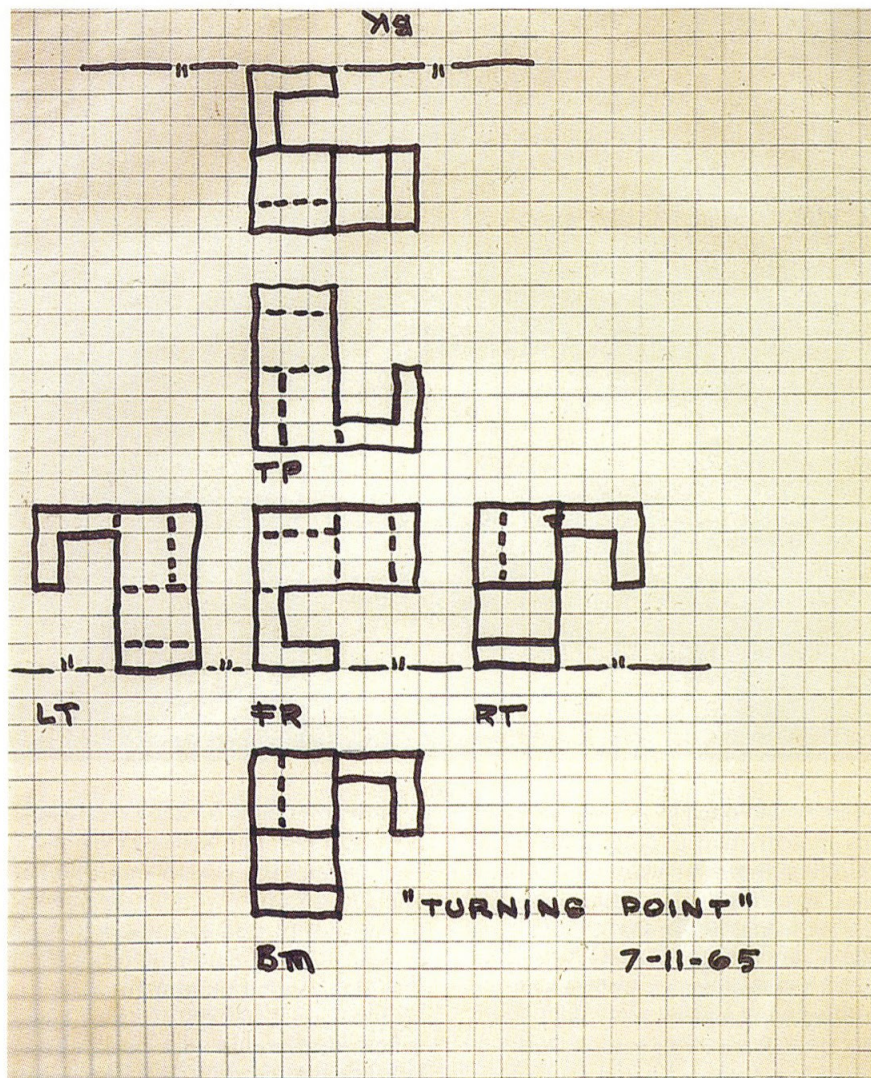
Cardboard model, 16.5 x 25.4 x 15.2 cm.

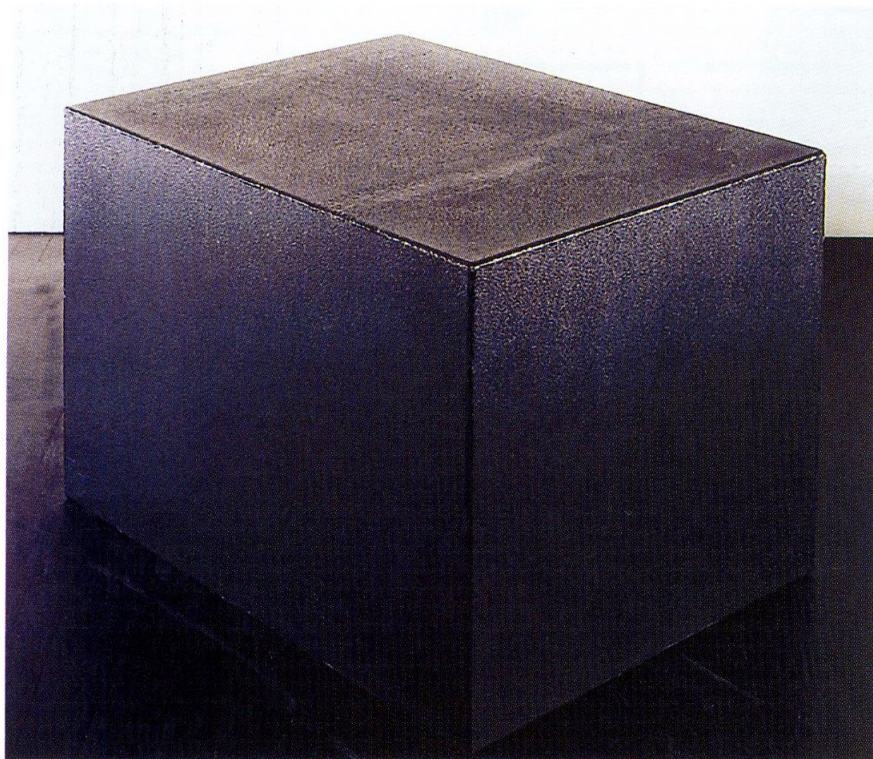
Top: *Turning Point*, 1965. Ink on paper, 27.9 x 21.5 cm. Bottom: *For D.C.*, 1969. Welded bronze, black patina, 33 x 140 x 6 in.

Smith was to Minimalism what Arshile Gorky was to Abstract Expressionism a generation earlier. Whereas Gorky was the bridge between European Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, Smith's paradigm pointed the trajectory in another direction, thus advancing the historical evolution of sculpture one step further.

There are those who will inevitably disagree. Some will argue that the change between Gorky and Pollock is more visually coherent than the change from Pollock to Smith. Gorky and Pollock were painters—and Smith, while he may have been a painter—evolved away from the exclusivity of the medium into what many would infer as a more calculated non-relational, three-dimensional form. Even so, if one takes into account the role of Newman's reductive subject matter in relation to scale and Reinhardt's reductive and nearly invisible surface grids, Smith's paradigm begins to take on another validity. His later aesthetic evolution becomes all the more crucial and more subtle in terms of how the structure of art exceeds the superficial boundaries of style. Smith's trajectory leads from the painterly and moves toward the conceptual aspect of form. It begins to emphasize the structure of art as the conceptual basis of form rather than as purely formal.

The great French-Spanish-American writer Anaïs Nin in Volume Four of her *Diaries* refers to Tony Smith as the "mystical architect." Upon reading this statement (written by Nin in 1945) four years after my experience with *The Snake is Out*, I began to have a different take on Smith. Although I knew of his architectural career, I began to consider how it might have affected his thinking as a sculptor. Clearly his role as a teacher played an important role. Students from various classes at Pratt, Cooper Union, Bennington, and Hunter College have testified to the extraordinary influence he had on their thinking. Often, when a teacher carries this kind of influence, it works both ways. During the years of his involvement in architecture, painting, and sculpture,





Smith would often give assignments to his students that paralleled his own thinking about his work. Two examples, in terms of three-dimensional design, would be *Throne* (1956/57) and *Black Box* (1962). Whereas the earlier work revealed Smith's problem-solving affinity for complex angles and joints, the latter, more direct in its reductive simplicity, instigated a new vocabulary for thinking about sculpture in relation to Minimal art.

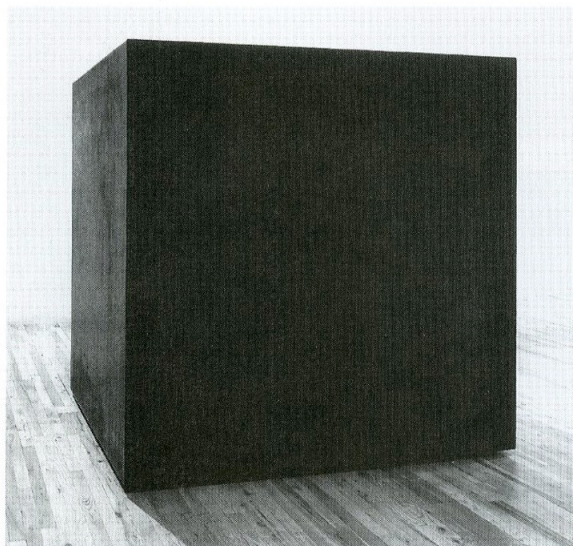
In the catalogue for the IVAM exhibition, art historian Kosme de Baranano suggests an even greater importance implicit in Smith's work at the outset of the '60s. Instead of one direction in American art, Baranano proposes that Smith paved the way for three: Minimal art, Land art, and the "new urban furniture"—specifically the hybrid sculpture of Scott Burton and Siah Armajani. It is not insignificant to see Smith as having an overriding influence in all of these developments. In a more general sense, the American art historian Joan Pachner believes that Smith confounded the boundaries between architecture and sculpture and between monuments and objects.

Whichever the case, it is difficult not to see the work of Smith from the early '60s as having

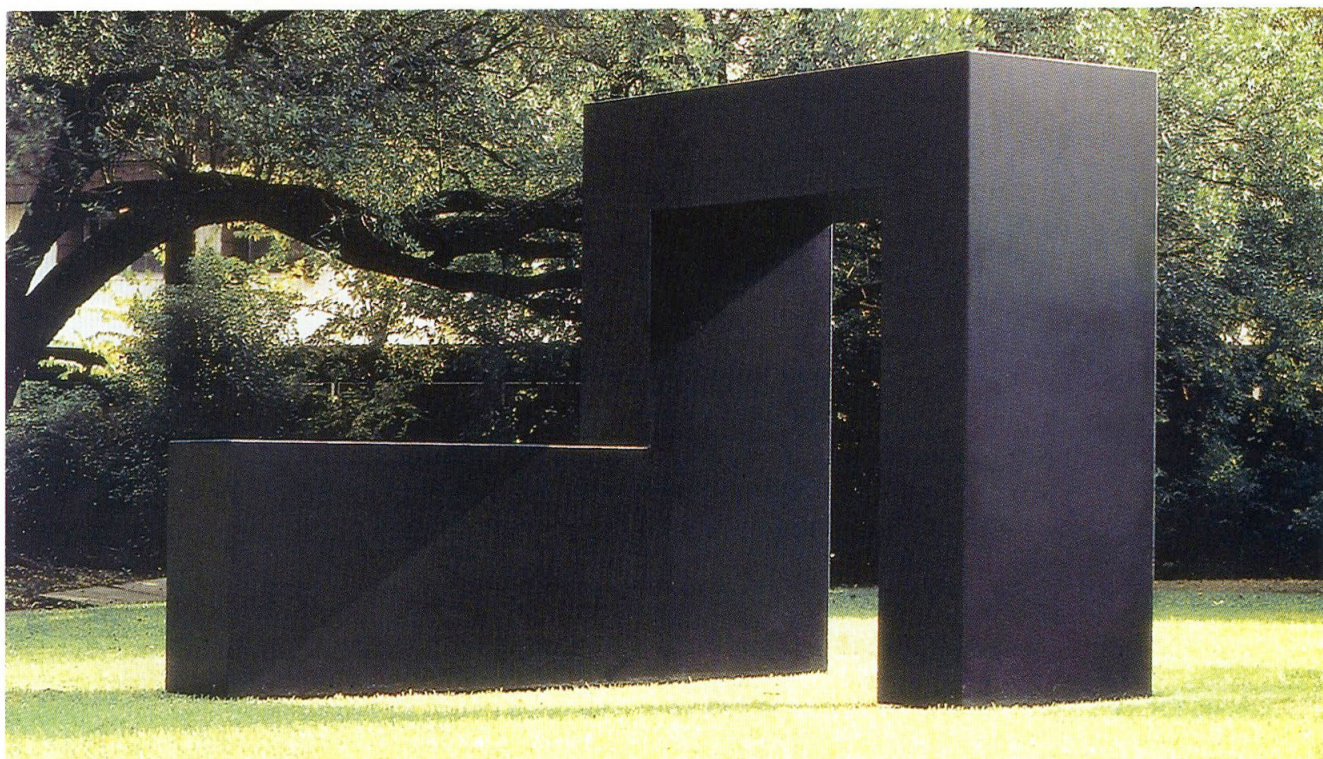
a profound impact. The year 1962 was not only the year of *Black Box* but also the year of *Die*—a six-by-six-by-six-foot steel cube fabricated in a machine shop and based on specifications the artist made by telephone. Prior to the national publicity given to *Smoke* (1967), a work constructed of elongated octahedrons for the atrium of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, *Die* had been the most noteworthy of Smith's works. *Die* became the logical three-dimensional successor to the utopian Modernist penchant for cool, reductive geometry as evidenced from Malevich to Reinhardt.

In many ways, the IVAM retrospective was more thoughtfully considered than the one shown at MoMA three years earlier. First of all, sufficient floor space to adequately present Smith's work in his triumvirate role as architect, painter, and sculpture was not available at MoMA. Hence, the ill-considered profusion of small partitioned rooms, particularly at the outset, that were crowded with too much trivial and unnecessary work, making it difficult to understand the real significance of Smith's contribution as a sculptor. Rather than devoting indoor space to the great large-scale sculptures of the '60s, such as *Marriage* (1961) and *The Keys To Given* (1965)—as IVAM made certain to do—MoMA scattered these important works either in the outdoor sculpture garden or at selected locations around the city. As a result, one could not focus on the magnificent modularity and the inventive permutations intrinsic to these visually complex forms when they are seen in relation to one another.

Second, IVAM rightly chose not to present Smith's early career as an architect, which compared to his breakthrough as a sculptor in the '60s was truly insignificant. Instead, what implicitly came to the foreground was how Smith's background as an architect augmented his abilities as a sculptor, once he had found his way. Again, in contrast to MoMA, the curators in Valencia presented a small and carefully chosen selection of quality hard-edge paintings that complemented the large sculptures in an extraordinary and aesthetically coherent manner. This



Top: *Black Box*, 1962.
Painted steel, 57.2 x 83.8 x 63.5 cm. **Bottom: *Die*, 1962,** Steel, oil finished, 6 x 6 x 6 ft.



included the large-scale version of *Louisenberg* (dated 1953–54/1968), a painting whose primary importance could be understood in its relationship to Smith's evolution as a sculptor. Curatorial wisdom again reigned supreme in Valencia as *Louisenberg* was shown not as a separate phenomenon but as integral to the small-scale sculptures, drawings, and models produced during this time period.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the Smith retrospective in Valencia was a separate room given to the series of nine sculptures *For...*, all completed in 1969. Equal in satisfaction to my experience with *The Snake is Out* 34 years ago (the year before the nine permutations of *For...* were made), I found the latter work filled with conceptual intrigue and perceptual puzzlement. As I moved from one sculptural unit to the next—each dedicated to a specific person in one of Smith's workshops—the excitement of discovery began to augment. I was discovering how these shapes and angles related to one another. It was like being a Neo-Platonist in an ether of solids. Here, through a series of gentle confrontations, I found the opportunity

to explore the gestalt of space and time. This physical reality of forms not only constituted a heightened sensory cognition, but a maze of signs that pulled me back and forth between the various individual units.

Seeing these nine elements was like being within a power field, an exemplary situation in which the perception of individual minds and characters was structured in accordance with Smith's uncanny intuition. At IVAM I began to realize the importance of seeing an artist at home in a far-away place, which permits a re-evaluation of the cultural context of thinking and feeling in a way that otherwise would not happen. At last, I began to understand from a structuralist perspective the limitations of postmodernity—that

sometimes to understand one's identity from the position of the Other is more valuable than being constantly fed with the mirror of oneself. Smith's show in Valencia ultimately showed me a new political context for understanding not only sculpture but for understanding myself as the observer of forms.

Robert C. Morgan's books include Between Modernism and Conceptual Art.

Above: *Marriage*, 1961. Painted steel, 304.8 x 304.8 x 365.8 cm. Right: *The Keys to Given*, 1965. Bronze, black patina, 640.6 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm.

