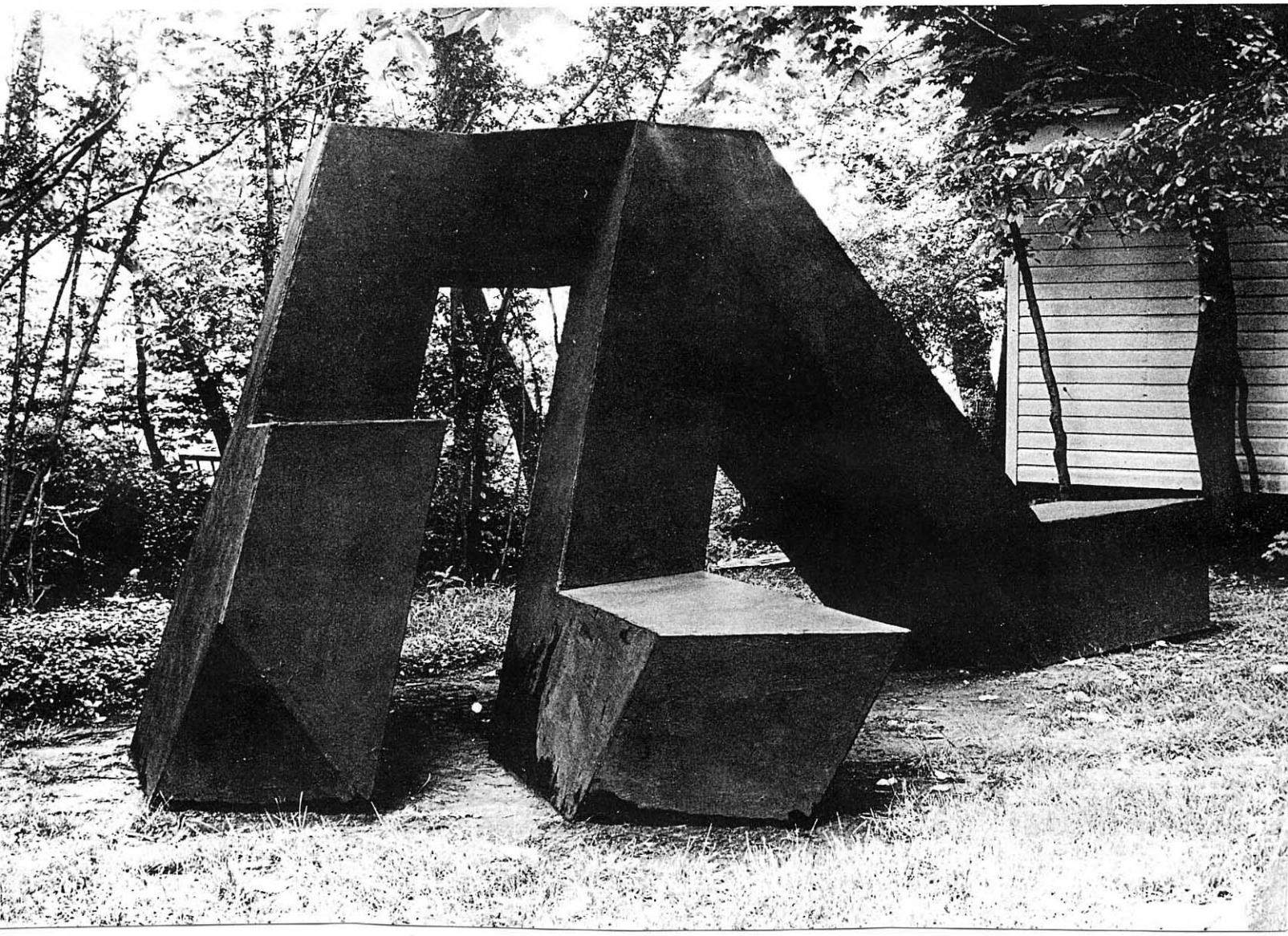
TALKING WITH TONY SMITH "I view art as something vast."

Willy, plywood, weather-proofed with black car undercoating, 7'8" x 18' x 12' (to be shown in Philadelphia), built Fall 1962. "The model for this piece was made from parts of other models (paper tetrahedra and octahedra). In this way one piece often evolves from another. I tried to put the components together as arbitrarily as possible. I decided to see what would happen by adding elements without a scheme, purposely allowing it to be as uncontrolled and undesigned as I could so that composition couldn't come into it. After a time things like that become determined by structural necessity. In this case the assemblages of components were left just as they fit together & made a labyrinthine thing, rather surrealist. It's as close to a chance piece as I could get. I live to a great extent by chance. The configuration often just appears as a totality when I'm lying between sleep and consciousness. Paul Feeley named the piece after a character in Beckett's play, *The Happy Day* — somebody who couldn't get off the ground and crawled on all fours."



ARTFORUM
DECEMBER 1966 $1.50

SAMUEL WAGSTAFF, JR.

The sculptor-painter-architect, Tony Smith, born in South Orange, New Jersey in 1912, is one of the best-known unknowns in American art. Most people involved in the art world around New York have met him or know of him. Of the generation of, and a friend of Pollock, Still, Rothko and Newman, he has "always" painted and "always" made sculpture, which he has thought of as a private and purely experimental pursuit. ("I didn't think of them as sculptures but as presences of a sort.") Therefore he has not exhibited either. But he has put much of his energy into teaching art and design at, among other places, NYU, where his students included Robert Goodnough, Larry Rivers, and Al Leslie, Cooper Union, Pratt, Bennington, and Hunter, where he is teaching now.

From 1940 to 1960, after working as clerk of the works on several Frank Lloyd Wright houses, and after having spent about five months with Wright at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, he developed a successful architectural practice of his own, but became disillusioned by the domestic restrictions set by clients interested in comfort before form. He began to despair at the impermanence of the houses he had built, and the changes they underwent. In about 1960 he shifted his attention, therefore, to sculpture, and his civic sense of being a builder gave way to an intense private consideration of form in sculpture, a medium which might provide a more permanent stake in the ground, something for him to refer to as constant.

When I was putting together the show, Black, White & Grey, *for the Wadsworth Atheneum late in 1963, Ray Parker told me about Tony Smith but was sure he would not be interested in exhibiting. I went out to South Orange, and he lent me a plywood piece,* The Elevens Are Up, *for the show which, as it turned out, was the first place he had ever exhibited. Only about a half dozen people had seen the sculpture in his home before that; it was that private. Just recently,* Free Ride, *the second piece to be shown, was in* Primary Structures *at the Jewish Museum.*

The joint exhibition at Hartford and Philadelphia is the first one-man show Smith has had. There will be eighteen pieces in all — eight in Philadelphia and thirteen in Hartford, with three seen in both places. All are of plywood painted with black automotive undercoating, except Cigarette *which in Philadelphia will be white (black in Hartford),* Fixture *which will be grey, and the three of steel plate.*

The notes which accompany the photographs here are culled from a summer and fall of talking with the artist. They were sometimes written down, sometimes dictated.

In their "International Style in Architecture," (1932) H. R. Hitchcock and Philip Johnson said that the style was characterized, among other things, by ordering the plan through structural regularity, rather than through unilateral symmetry. I had been familiar with the root rectangles of Jay Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry* since before I started high school. I had no experience in architecture and the notion of planning according to regular Bays, although all over the place, hadn't occurred to me. In painting, however, as I tried more and more schemes, I reduced the size of the format. I painted dozens of 8" x 10" panels, and began to use a 2-inch square module instead of the application of areas based upon the root rectangles.

When I saw the January 1938 *Architectural Forum*, devoted to the recent work of Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the things which struck me most was his use of the modular system of planning. I spent the summer of 1938 in the Rockies and had an opportunity to design and build some small buildings based on plans from the Department of Agriculture, and on modular organization. By the time I began to work on the Ardmore Experiment (designed by Wright) in the spring of 1939, I began to see the limitations of systems based upon material sizes as units. At some point, the book, *Das Japanische Wohnhaus* made it clear that the *tatami* (or mat) modules of the Japanese had the same shortcomings. I hadn't heard of Beamis until the publication of the A62 guide. After this, most building materials became available in sizes based upon a continuous space grid of four inches.

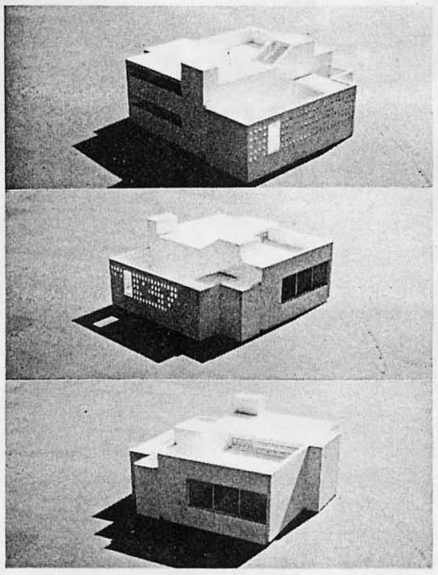
Meanwhile, I had been interested in the exposition of close-packing in D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form*. A large structure based on the tetrakaidecahedron was built by students at Bennington College in the spring of 1961. Another, based on the rhomboidal dodecahedron is shown as a mock-up in Philadelphia. Thompson was writing about the effects of mathematical and physical laws upon living form. He did not, therefore, go into space frames based on the tetrahedron which is the basic unit of many of these figures.

The Honeycomb House on the Stanford University campus had been published in the January 1938 *Forum*. A few years later I had the opportunity to design a large house on a hexagonal module. I used one twice the size of that used in Wright's house. Also, instead of pigeonholing the bricks at the 60° and 120° corners, I used rhomboidal bricks manufactured for the job. I was very pleased with the flow of large surfaces, and the substantiality of the paced unfolding of form in this house undoubtedly relates to some of the present work.

An article appeared in *Architectural Forum* by the engineer, Fred Severud. Several structures, including the Johnson Wax Administration building, were analyzed and alternate schemes demonstrated. For the Johnson columns and roof sections, Severud showed an inverted pyramid instead of Wright's shallow cones. I immediately tried to do something of the same sort on a hexagonal plan. The scheme for my church was ultimately an outgrowth of this exercise. The development was moving in the direction of close-packing in three dimensions.

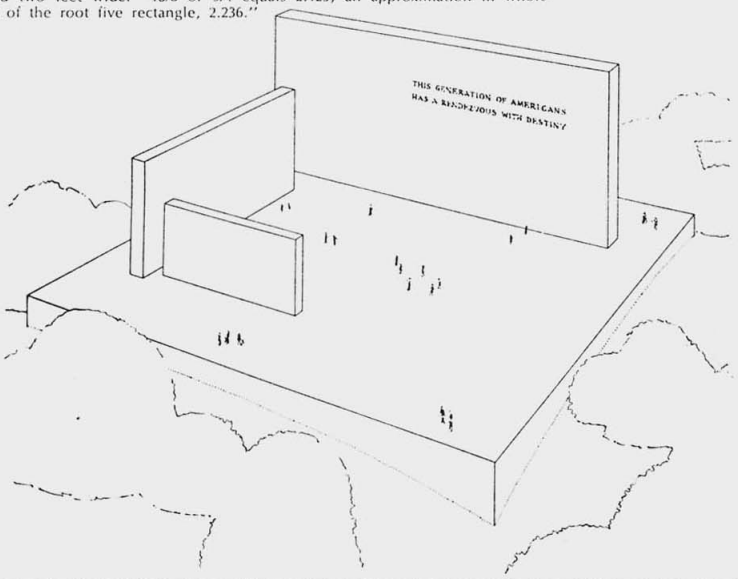
It was at about this time that I saw, for the first time, the kites, towers and other structures based upon the tetrahedron which Alexander Graham Bell had made in 1901. While the axes normal to the surfaces of a cube are three, those perpendicular to the planes of a space-lattice made up of tetrahedra and octahedra are seven. This allows for greater flexibility and visual continuity of surface than rectangular organizations. Something approaching the plasticity of more traditional sculpture, but within a continuous system of simple elements becomes possible. The hexagon offers possibilities for greater flexibility in planning and, even construction, for certain problems. But in spite of far greater advantages for building at least, the tetrahedron was taking me farther and farther from considerations of function and structure toward speculation in pure form.

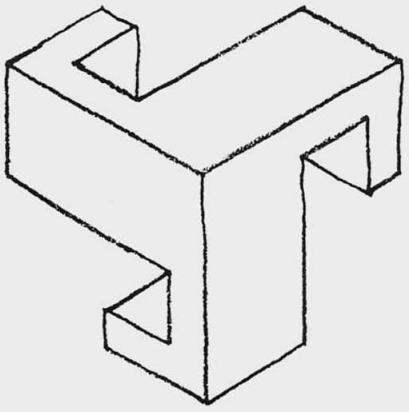
Model of studio-house for Mrs. Betty Parsons, Horton's Point, Southhold, Long Island, 1956 or 57, second of about eight versions.



Project submitted to the Roosevelt Memorial competition, Washington, D.C., 1960. White marble platform (deck) separated from marshy site. Simple prismatic quality of white marble slabs organized in a spiral and arranged in progression according to size. Creation of volume through slabs, intentional proportion of the slabs to stop and hold the viewer. The line across the top of the smaller two slabs and then up the corner of the third is similar to *Free Ride*.

A new sculpture piece, *The Wall*, 1966, is a slab eight feet high, eighteen feet long, and two feet wide. "18/8 or 9/4 equals 2.125, an approximation in whole numbers of the root five rectangle, 2.236."





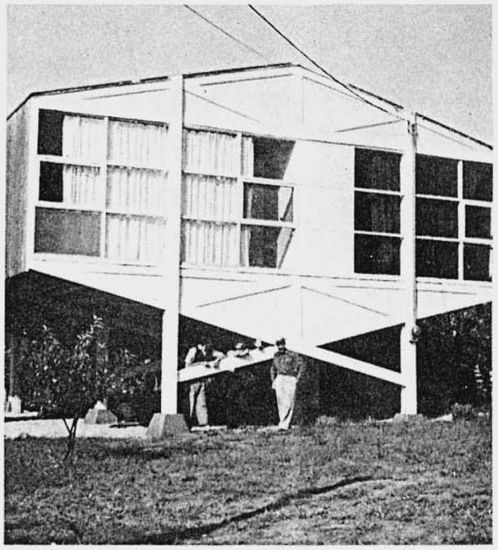
The Keys to. Given!, isometric drawing of piece conceived in 1965, 8' x 8' x 8' (to be shown in Philadelphia). "Someone had asked me to do a house. The site was splendid, and its complexity provided the opportunity for a scheme in which the same thing happened symmetrically along all three axes. Frank Lloyd Wright had wrapped up space and turned around it, but he had never done it the same way in all directions, or according to a strict measure. I made a schematic drawing; nothing came of the house, but I decided to make a model based on the sketch. When I turned the model upside down, I was astonished to see that it didn't fall over."

If I were to say what I had accomplished, one of them closest to me would be the French and Company gallery in the Parke-Bernet building. It was here that I perhaps realized my sense of scale and monumentality for the first time. (It's unrecognizable as it exists today.)

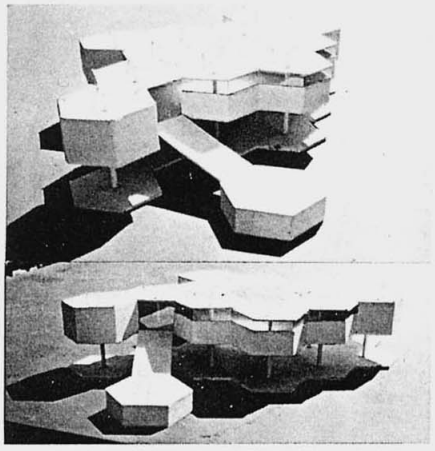
Corbusier is by far the greatest artist of our time — greater than Michelangelo — though he never did anything so great as the Medici Chapel. I'm not saying that Corbusier is finer. He is tougher and more available. The direct and primitive experience of the High Court Building at Chandigahr is like the Pueblos of the Southwest under a fantastic overhanging cliff. It's something everyone can understand.

Architecture has to do with space and light, not with form; that's sculpture. Craftsmanship and art are much closer than artists seem to be willing to admit, but the question is, where does the distinction seem to take place?

House for Robert Gunning, Black Lick, Ohio, 1940, the first house built by Tony Smith and the one most influenced by Wright. Wright saw it and liked it. Lipchitz asked to see the photos of it but declared it wasn't any good. Why? "Because of the overhanging roofs," said Lipchitz. "If I put my sculpture under those roofs, it's demeaned, like a domestic animal; if it's so placed as to be cut by the roof, the visual unity is destroyed; above the roof, my sculpture becomes a silhouette or weather vane. Architecture doesn't consist in shelter — that's for animals. It consists of walls. Man would have to build them anyway, to measure himself by. A wall's purpose is to measure. A roof is primitive. A wall is civilized, and needed to separate man from infinity and chaos."



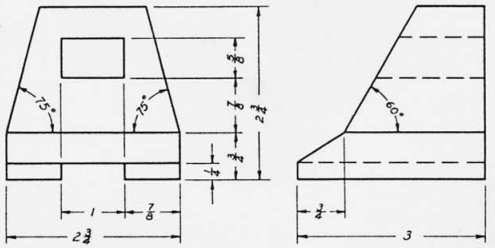
Theodoros Stamos House, East Marion, Long Island, 1951. "I had been looking at a book on bridges and decided to make a house with trusses. The structural elements are painted white to separate them clearly from the panelling, which is yellow. The three small panels are red, white, and blue."



Model for a Church, 1950, commissioned by Alfonso Ossorio as a demonstration of how developments in contemporary art could be incorporated in such design. Ossorio asked Jackson Pollock to design windows for a church (he had done his painting on glass), and Pollock asked Smith to design the church. Twelve hexagonal cells on stilts, close-packed; the altar is in the center under a skylight. The congregation faces the altar in the six surrounding bays, plus one bay for confessionals, two for sacristies. The Baptistry is to the left of the entrance. Pollock would have designed the clearstory windows.

Early wood construction, 2 feet high, done in Germany about 1953-54.

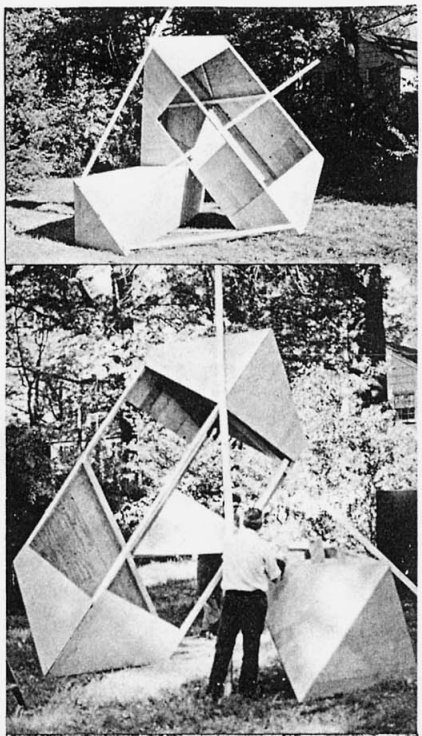
I view art as something vast. I think highway systems fall down because they are not art. Art today is an art of postage stamps. I love the Secretariat Building of the U.N., placed like a salute. In terms of scale, we have less art per square mile, per capita, than any society ever had. We are puny. In an English village there was always the cathedral. There is nothing to look at between the Bennington Monument and the George Washington Bridge. We now have stylization. In Hackensack a huge gas tank is all underground. I think of art in a public context and not in terms of mobility of works of art. Art is just there. I'm temperamentally more inclined to mural painting, especially that of the Mexican, Orozco. I like the way a huge area holds on to a surface in the same way a state does on a map.

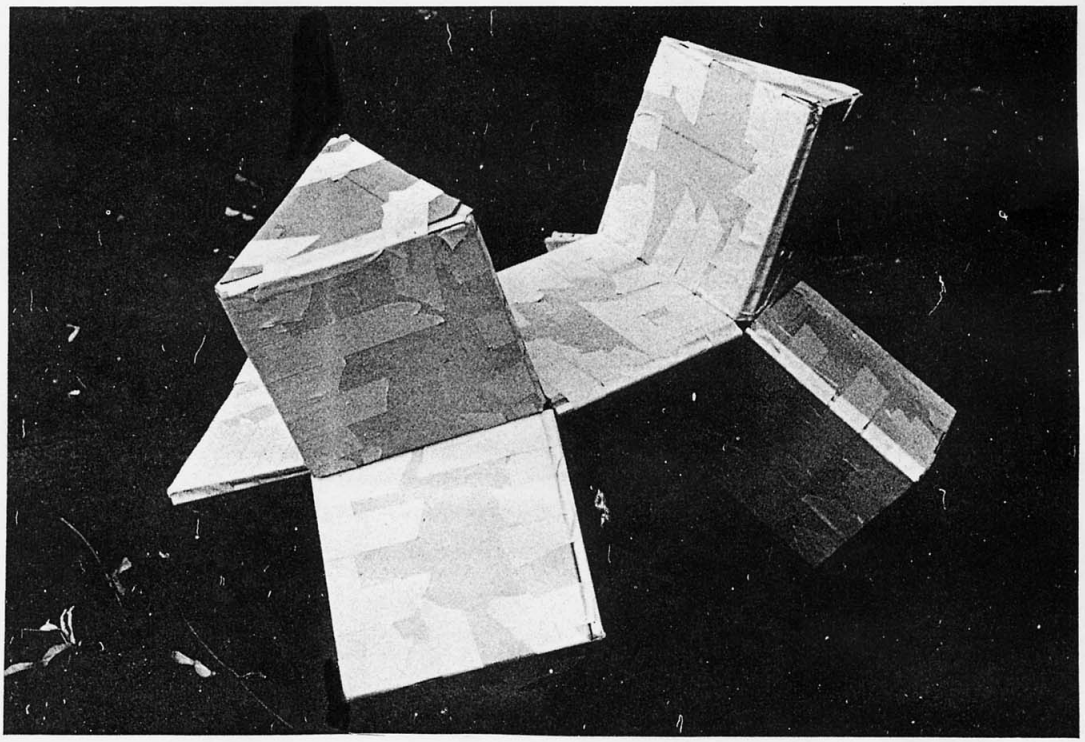


Example of printed engineering-drawing problem-sheet for students (Prentice-Hall) which Smith used at the Delahanty School of Drafting when he taught there in 1956-57. He liked the forms of many of these problems so much that he thought seriously of enlarging them into sculptures three or four feet high without any changes, "which would have changed their character entirely."

(below)
Spitball, under construction and finished, (before painting). Full-size mockup, 11'6" x 14' x 14'. Like *The Keys*, which has the same configuration in three directions and which revolves around an axis, and similar to the Roosevelt Memorial project, in what Smith calls "progressive symmetry." *Spitball* is for a pyramidal structure what *Free Ride* is for a cube.

The works of Tony Smith will be exhibited simultaneously at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, during the months of November and December, 1966. The Hartford exhibition extends from November 7 to December 31, the Philadelphia exhibition from November 21 through January 6. The exhibition is directed by Mr. Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., Curator of Paintings of the Wadsworth Atheneum. (Photos courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York.)



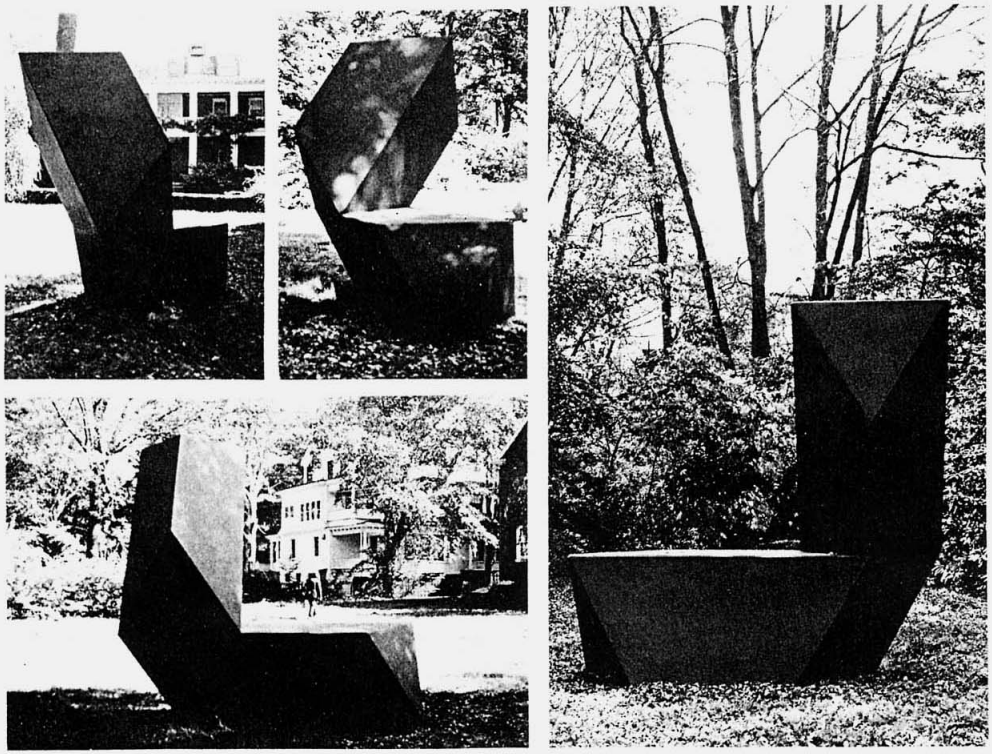


Mock-up (1966) of *Throne* made with one foot square acoustical tile. This piece was conceived in 1956 and was the first which Smith wanted to make from welded steel plates. This was suggested by the form. It was never executed, but it will now be made in stainless steel plates in the size of the mock-up. He also hopes to have it enlarged as a pneumatic piece in plastic with the triangular prisms laced together. The sides would then bulge to form sensuous curved surfaces entirely different in character from the flat squares and triangles of metal.

"I like the power of African sculptures carved from single blocks. They are statements in mass and volume. There is little that is lineal in them. There is nothing impressionistic about the surfaces. Every part, as well as the piece as a whole, seems to have its own center of gravity. The parts act as masses, weights, hunks. The reason my own pieces were done in black is that it seems the least arbitrary; it seems that any other surface would imply a different kind of choice.

"More and more I've become interested in pneumatic structures. In these, all of the material is in tension. But it is the character of the form which appeals to me. The biomorphic forms which result from the construction have a dream-like quality for me, at least like what is said to be a fairly common type of American dream. Aside from this psychological effect, I am not particularly interested in any demonstration of structure as such.

"*Throne* started with an idea that had nothing to do with sculpture. It was made in order to demonstrate an economical joint — one with four spokes meeting at the center of a tetrahedron. I like the form."



Amaryllis, plywood mockup, 11'6" x 7'6" x 11'6", (to be shown in Hartford).

I'm interested in the inscrutability and the mysteriousness of the thing. Something obvious on the face of it (like a washing machine or a pump), is of no further interest. A Bennington earthenware jar, for instance, has subtlety of color, largeness of form, a general suggestion of substance, generosity, is calm and reassuring — qualities which take it beyond pure utility. It continues to nourish us time and time again. We can't see it in a second, we continue to read it. There is something absurd in the fact that you can go back to a cube in this same way. It doesn't seem to be an ordinary mechanical experience. When I start to design, it's almost always corny and then naturally moves toward economy.

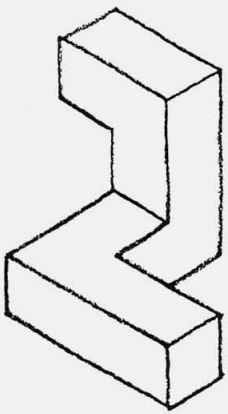
When I was a child of four I visited the Pueblos in New Mexico. Back in the East, I made models of them with cardboard boxes. While still quite young I associated the forms of these complexes with the block houses that Wright built in and around Los Angeles in the early twenties. Later I associated them with Cubism, and quite recently thought of the dwellings at Mesa Verde in relationship to the High Court Building at Chandigahr. They seem to have been a continuing reference, even though they were never in my consciousness except as that. In any case they seemed real to me in a way that buildings of our own society did not.

I'm not aware of how light and shadow falls on my pieces. I'm just aware of basic form. I'm interested in the thing, not in the effects — pyramids are only geometry, not an effect.

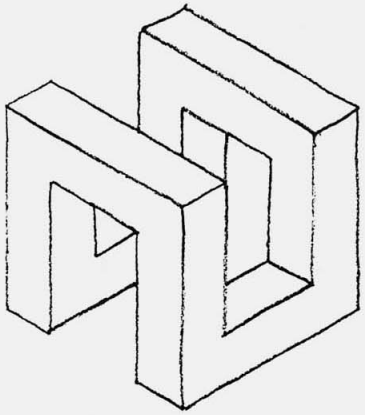
My speculations with plane and solid geometry and crystal forms led me to making models for sculpture, but what I did always made use of the 90-degree angle, like De Stijl. I only began to use more advanced relationships of solids after working with Wright and then related the thirty and sixty-degree angles to the ninety-degree angles.

We think in two dimensions — horizontally and vertically. Any angle off that is very hard to remember. For that reason I make models — drawings would be impossible.

I'm very interested in Topology, the mathematics of surfaces, Euclidian geometry, line and plane relationships. "Rubber sheet geometry," where facts are more primary than distances and angles, is more elemental but more sophisticated than plane geometry.



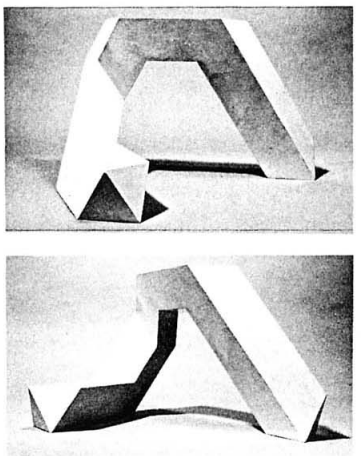
We Lost, isometric drawing of piece conceived in 1962, 10'8" high (to be shown in Philadelphia).



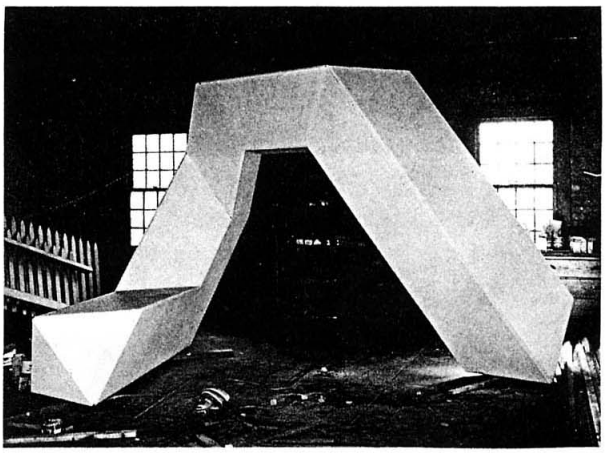
Night, isometric drawing of piece conceived in 1962, 12' x 16' x 12', section, 4 feet square (to be shown at both Philadelphia and Hartford).

When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get on to 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 which had not had any expression in art.

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.

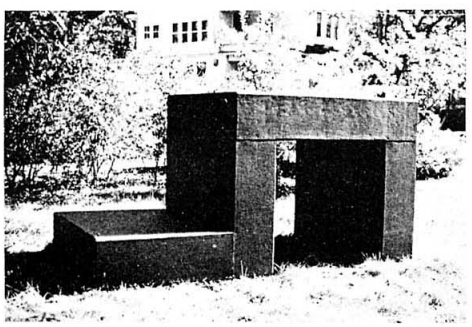


Cigarette, plastic model, 13" h.

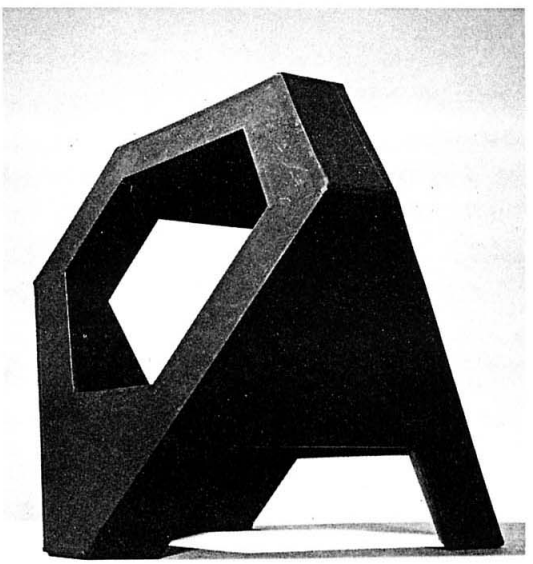


Cigarette, the version to be shown in Philadelphia, 7½' x 13' x 9' deep, (Hartford version will be twice as big). "The chamfered edges take away from the brittleness, the 'display look' and permit the eye to flow around the corners, making the pieces appear more massive."

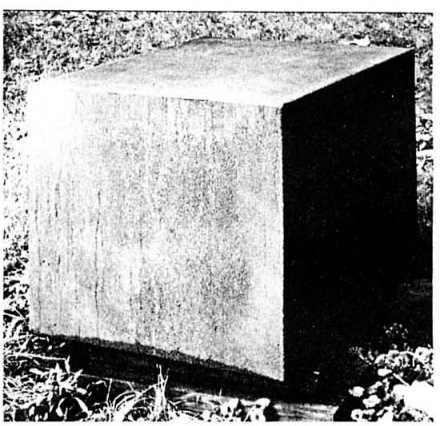
I think of the piece as pretty much in a certain size and related to ordinary everyday measurements — doorways in buildings, beds, etc. All the pieces were seen in greenery in the past. I might change a piece which was to be on a plaza to accommodate its scale, size, and color. *Generation* is the first piece I thought of as a citified monumental expression. I don't think of it as personal or subjective. I attempted to make it as urbane and objective as possible.



Playground, unfinished plywood mockup, 5'4" x 5'4" x 10'8", conceived in 1962. "I discovered recently that I had done a painting in 1961 with exactly the same profile."



Generation, cardboard model, 17" high; project for an outdoor piece in Hartford to be 30 feet high.



The Black Box, steel plate, 22½" x 33" x 25". Smith had given his students a problem, to enlarge their designs five times. This, the first piece to be put in metal, is a five-time enlargement of a black wooden file-card box, whose proportions Smith liked. One can see the two-by-fours under the piece, which keep it from appearing like architecture or a monument, and set it off as sculpture.