TONY SMITH

TONY SMITH TWO EXHIBITIONS OF SCULPTURE

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford — November 8 — December 31, 1966

The Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania — November 22, 1966 — January 6, 1967

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PREFACE

A one man exhibition of the sculpture of Tony Smith was proposed by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1965 and a similar proposal was made to the artist early in 1966 by the Wadsworth Atheneum. In view of the scope of his work and the lack of its previous exposure (only two works have been shown publicly) it seemed desirable to have two simultaneous exhibitions rather than one to be shown successively at the two institutions. This larger project was made possible by the artist's willingness to prepare in full scale and in a relatively short time the required number of pieces, most of which heretofore existed only in models or sketches.

The organization of the exhibition for Hartford was carried out by Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr., and for Philadelphia by the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art. The catalogue was edited by Mr. Wagstaff and designed by Norman Ives of New Haven.

In the construction of the newer pieces, invaluable assistance has been given by John Bennett, Arthur File, and Richard Tuttle. For the installation in Hartford, special thanks are given to Sterling Tooker and Lester Smith of The Travelers Insurance Companies and Lyndes Stone and Hugh Campbell of the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company. We would also like to express our appreciation to the Fischbach Gallery, which represents Mr. Smith, for their cooperation and support. Mr. David Pincus has generously lent the sculpture entitled FREE RIDE. A special note of thanks is extended to those anonymous donors who have contributed towards the fabrication cost of GENERATION. But above all to Tony Smith himself, who has given his time and energy and help so generously, we owe our major debt of gratitude.

SAMUEL GREEN
Director
Institute of Contemporary Art,
Philadelphia

JAMES ELLIOTT
Director
Wadsworth Atheneum,
Hartford

INTRODUCTION

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 and friend of Pollock, Still, Rothko, Newman, he has "always" painted and "always" made sculpture, which he has thought of as a private pursuit and purely experimental. ("I didn't think of them as sculpture but as presences of a sort"). Therefore he has not shown either, but put much of his energy into teaching art and design at, among other places, NYU (when Bob Goodnough, Larry Rivers, and Al Leslie were students there), Cooper Union, Pratt, Bennington, and Hunter, where he is teaching now.

From 1940 to 1960, after serving as clerk of the works on several Frank Lloyd Wright houses and after having spent five months with Wright at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, he developed a successful architectural practice of his own. He began to despair at the impermanence of the houses he had built, and the changes wreaked on them. From about 1960 he shifted his attention, therefore, to sculpture, and his civic sense of being a builder gave way to an intense consideration of form in sculpture which might provide a more permanent stake

in the ground and something for him to refer to as constant.
When I was putting together the show BLACK, WHITE, AND GREY late in 1963 (painting and sculpture without color, of a "minimal" esthetic), Ray Parker told me about Tony Smith but was sure he would say no to exhibiting. I went out to South Orange, and he lent me a piece, "The Elevens Are Up." Only about half a dozen people had seen the pieces set up in his house and backyard before that. The work was that private.
Since then, one more piece, "Free Ride," has been shown, in the exhibition PRIMARY STRUCTURES at the Jewish Museum in New York. A recent Longview Foundation grant is the only other official notice they have received.
These sculptures seem to evolve from architecture. Only in a few instances before has Tony Smith satisfied his sense of scale and monumentality through building — notably in making the Penthouse Galleries of French & Co. in the Parke-Bernet Building in New York in 1959, now altered beyond recognition. The pieces are therefore necessary, not at all a Dada gesture but extensions of a personality.
Tony Smith is Irish, Celtic, mystic but rational. He puts geometry together by chance. Mathematical speculations produce an earthy concrete fact. He hides his logic. The space lattice in which these pieces lie, the interior close-packed pattern of four- and six-sided figures of which they are composed is unnoticed and unseen in the single bulk, though their invisible order is always sensed. These inner components, willfully arranged by chance or by the chance of choice, fuse in the empty interior under a unifying skin, leaving bulk, without specific weight, over which the eye flows, around which one is forced to move as around a tomb or monument to feel the life of the piece as a whole.
These heavy, primitive, organisms embrace space through volume and deep thrusts. Romanesque rather than Gothic. Even a cube (Die) does not attempt abstract purity. The geometry is lost in its earthiness, its corporality.
They are related to early cultures intentionally or through sympathy — menhirs, earth mounds, cairns and to this culture with equal sympathy — smokestacks, gas tanks, dump trucks, poured concrete ramps. No focus, no detail, no symmetry. They are plain but constantly changing. They are grave without being heavy, ordinary and mystical at the same time. If they were completely successful, they would merge in the general variety of nature.

SAMUEL WAGSTAFF, JR.
Curator of Paintings, Wadsworth Atheneum

REMARKS ON MODULES

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 bi-lateral symmetry.

I had been familiar with the root rectangles of Jay Hambidge's "Dynamic Symmetry" since before I started high school. I had 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″ 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 Dept. 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 4″.

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 Stamford 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.

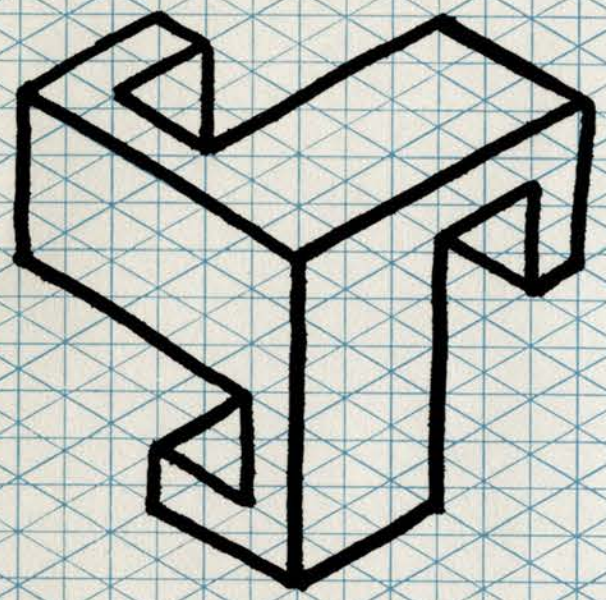
An article appeared in "Architectural Forum" by the engineer, Fred Severud. Several structures, including the Johnson Wax Administration building, were analyzed and alternate schemes demonstrated. For the Johnson columns and roof sections, Severud showed an inverted pyramid instead of Wright's shallow 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, tower, 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 far 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, in construction for certain problems. But in spite of far greater advantages for building at least, the tetrahedron was taking me further and further from considerations of function and structure and toward speculation in pure form.

TONY SMITH

These figures, whether based upon rectangular prisms, tetrahedra, or other solids, may be thought of as part of a continuous space grid. In the latter, voids are made up of the same components as the masses. In this light, they may be seen as interruptions in an otherwise unbroken flow of space. If you think of space as solid, they are voids in that space. While I hope they have form and presence, I don't think of them as objects among other objects; I think of them as being isolated in their own environments. □ I don't think of the pieces so much as examples of a type — such as the specimens that might fill out a stamp or coin collection. I think of them as seeds or germs that could spread growth or disease. □ The pieces seem inert or dormant in nature — and that is why I like them there, but they may appear aggressive, or in hostile territory, when seen among other artifacts. They are not easily accommodated to ordinary environments, and adjustments would have to be made were they to be accepted. □ If not strong enough, they will simply disappear; otherwise, they will destroy what is around them, or force it to conform to their needs. □ They are black and probably malignant. The social organism can assimilate them only in areas which it has abandoned, its waste areas, against its unfinished backs and sides, places oriented away from the focus of its well-being, unrecognized danger spots, excavations and unguarded roofs. T. S.



← **THE KEYS TO. GIVEN!**

Someone had asked me to do a house for his family. The site was splendid. Its complexity provided the opportunity for a scheme in which the same thing happened along all three axes of symmetry. Wright had wrapped up space and turned around it with ells and keys, but he had never done it in the same way in all dimensions, or according to a strict measure. I made a schematic drawing, but nothing came of the house. I made a model in order to impress the scheme upon my mind. Turning the model upside down, I was astonished to see that it didn't fall over.

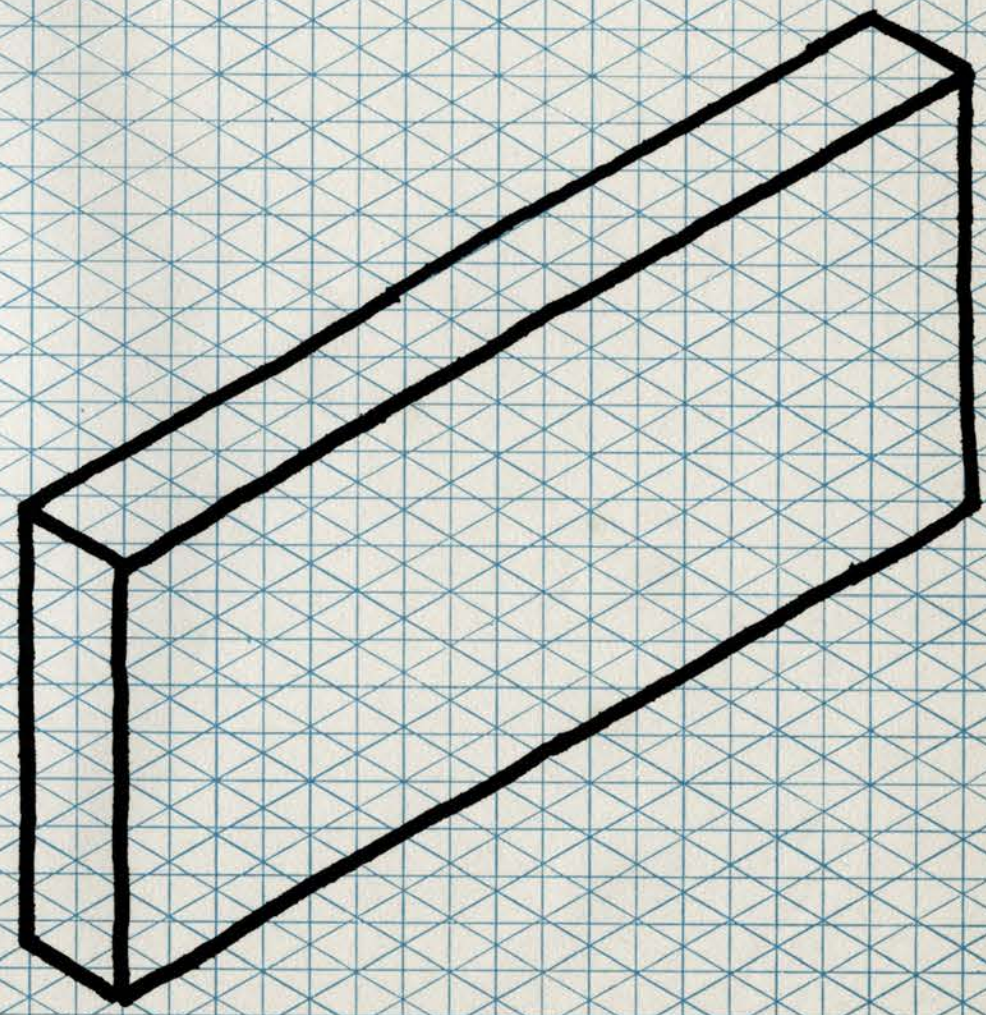
Paper model — 1965 8″ cube
Mock-up — 1966 8′ x 8′ x 8′ (P)

THE WALL →

THE WALL came about by pushing the ELEVENS around. Walls, being concrete in the first place, are easier to talk about than cubes. On the other hand, and for the same reason, everybody knows a lot about walls. If the ELEVENS were to be put in line, they would form a wall sixteen feet long by eight feet high — two squares. This is a root four rectangle. As it stands, THE WALL is eighteen feet long. 18/8, or 9/4, equals 2.25, or an approximation in whole numbers of the root five rectangle, 2.236, a square plus its Golden Sections.

Mock-up — first version — 1964
Present mock-up — 1966
8′ h x 18′ l x 2′ w (H)

(P) or (H) after dimensions of each piece indicates place exhibited, Philadelphia or Hartford.



← **MARRIAGE**

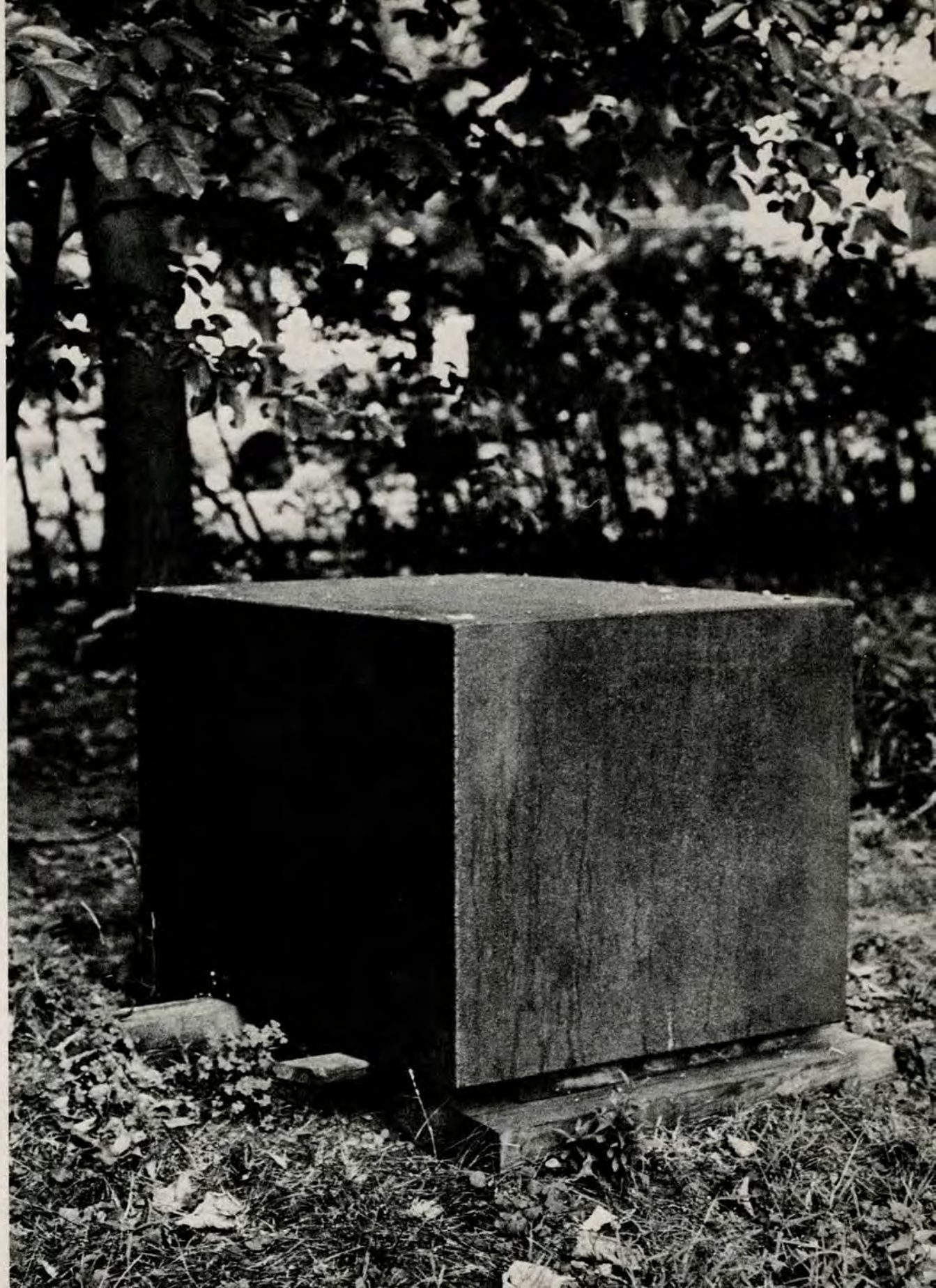
On Sept. 8, 1962 I made a drawing for a piece which I called THE WEDDING. This piece was never fabricated because I was paying off a loan I had made in order to do DIE. It was to have had the same section as FREE RIDE — 16" square. It went in, up, over, and down. The opening was 6'-8" — the height of a door. It was 6'-8" wide, and the same deep. After doing the ELEVENS, I tried to put several pieces together with the same prisms. The boxes for MARRIAGE were made in the fall of 1964. They were assembled in the spring of 1965, but the piece didn't work. In the three-quarter view, the opening wasn't visible, and the whole thing looked pinched. A new box, two feet longer, was made for the top. The substitution was made in the fall of last year.

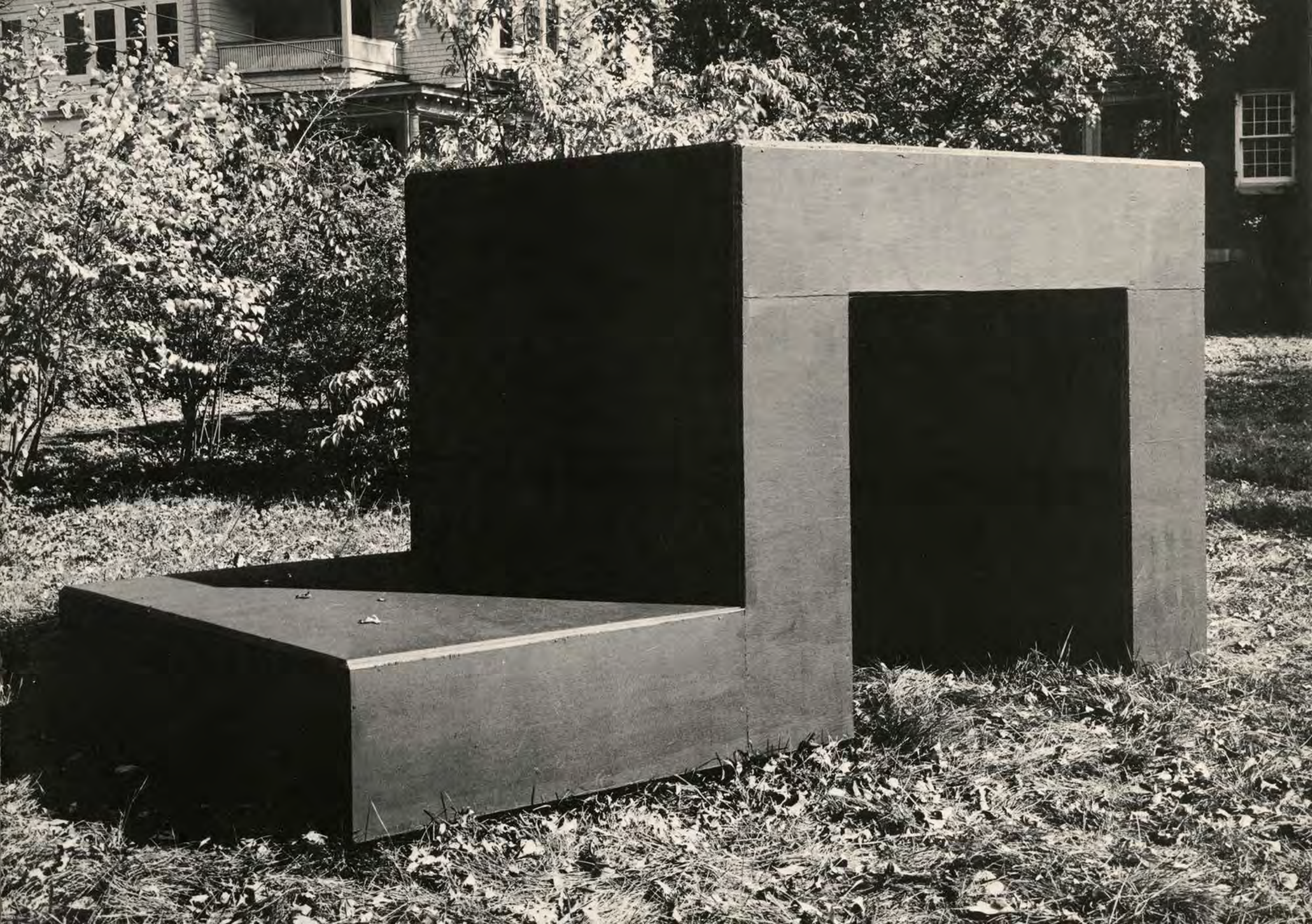
Drawing of earlier version — 1961
Mock-up — 1965 10′ h x 10′ w x 12′ d (P&H)

THE BLACK BOX →

Gene was typing an introduction for a catalogue. When he added a paragraph or made a revision, he read it to me. I was sitting in a very low chair, so that when I looked up I saw on the desk in front of him a wood box for filing 3 x 5 index cards — it had been painted black . . . I got back to New Jersey at about three or four in the morning but I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing the black box. I didn't want to take a chance on waking Gene too early, and I knew that he had to deliver his piece at a certain time — that allowed about fifteen minutes during which to reach him. I asked him to take his ruler and measure the box. He was so out of it that he didn't even inquire about why I wanted to know the size. I multiplied the dimensions by five, made a drawing, took it to the industrial Welding Co. in Newark, and asked them to make it up.

Steel — 1962 22½″ h x 33″ l x 25″ w (P)





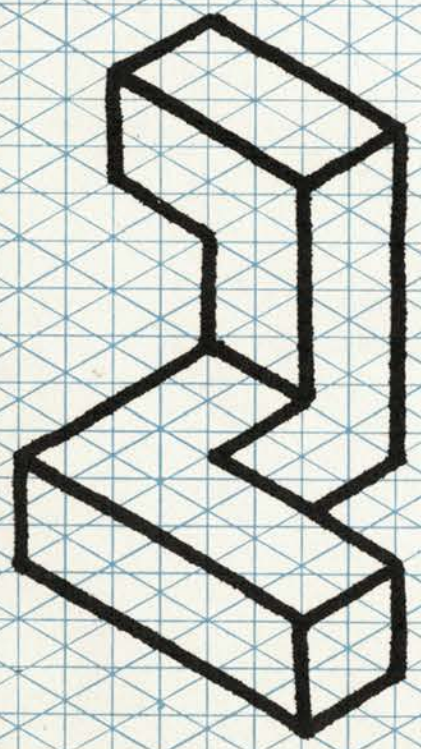
← **PLAYGROUND**

The profile of PLAYGROUND had been used in a painting done in 1961. I didn't realize this at the time that the sculpture was first drawn. I like shapes of this kind; they remind me of the plans of ancient buildings made with mud brick walls. The black horizontal sections of such buildings printed in handbooks have about the same relationship of black to white as many of these pieces. At least, there is an association in my mind.

Sketch — 1962
Mock-up — 1966 5′4″ h x 5′4″ w x 10′8″ l (H)

THE ELEVENS ARE UP →

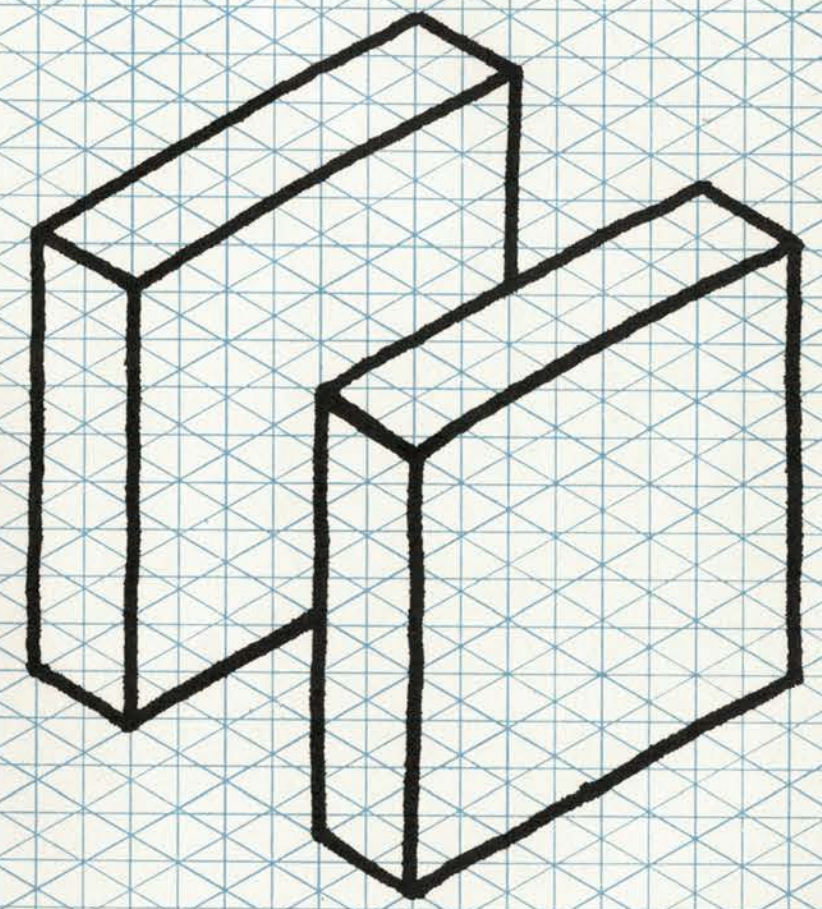
THE BOXES from which this mock-up is made were used for an earlier piece, which has evolved into WE LOST. It was called COSA NOSTRA. It also formed a cube, but by two sets of parallel prisms at right angles to one another. I didn't like it because of the crossing lines at the intersections. On Nov. 16, 1963, the two top boxes were wheeled into position directly over the bottom two, and the elevens were up. This title also comes from John McNulty's THIRD AVENUE MEDICINE. "It means that the two cords on the back of a man's neck have begun to stick out, the way they never stuck out before his illness." Mock-up — 1963 8′ x 8′ x 8′ (H)



← **NIGHT**

NIGHT was suggested by FREE RIDE. At first it had a more lineal quality. I had made only a sketch, and it seemed too decorative to bother with. Then, during the summer of 1962, I sat alone for a long time in a quiet place, and I saw night come up just like that. I changed the proportions in a sketch, but never made a model. Like MARRIAGE, it exists in the same size in both museums.

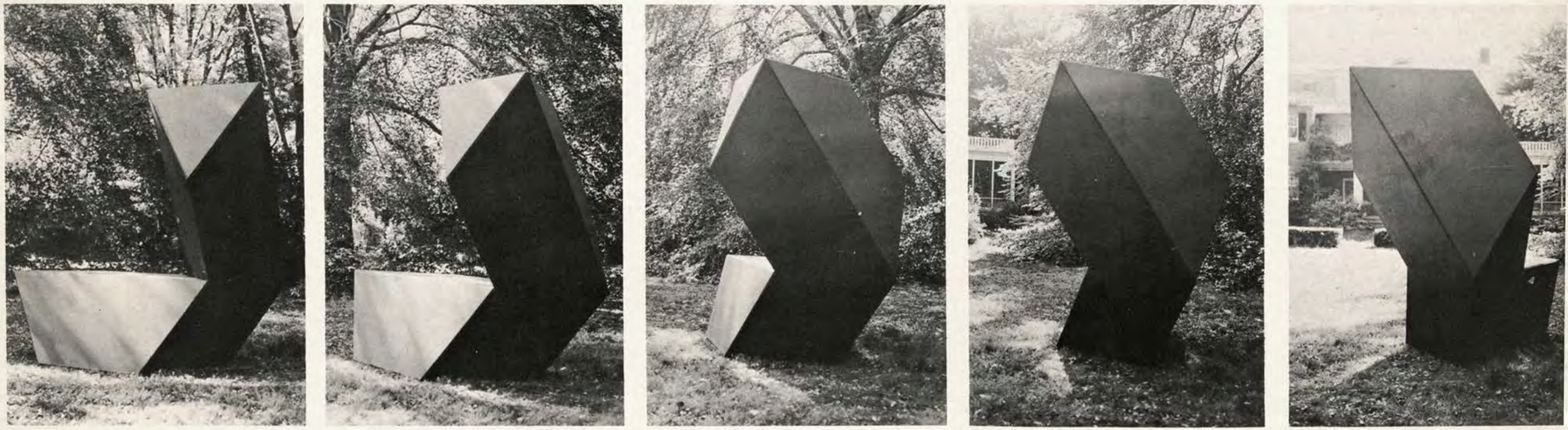
Sketch — 1962
Mock-up — 1966 12′ h x 16′ w x 12′ d (P&H)







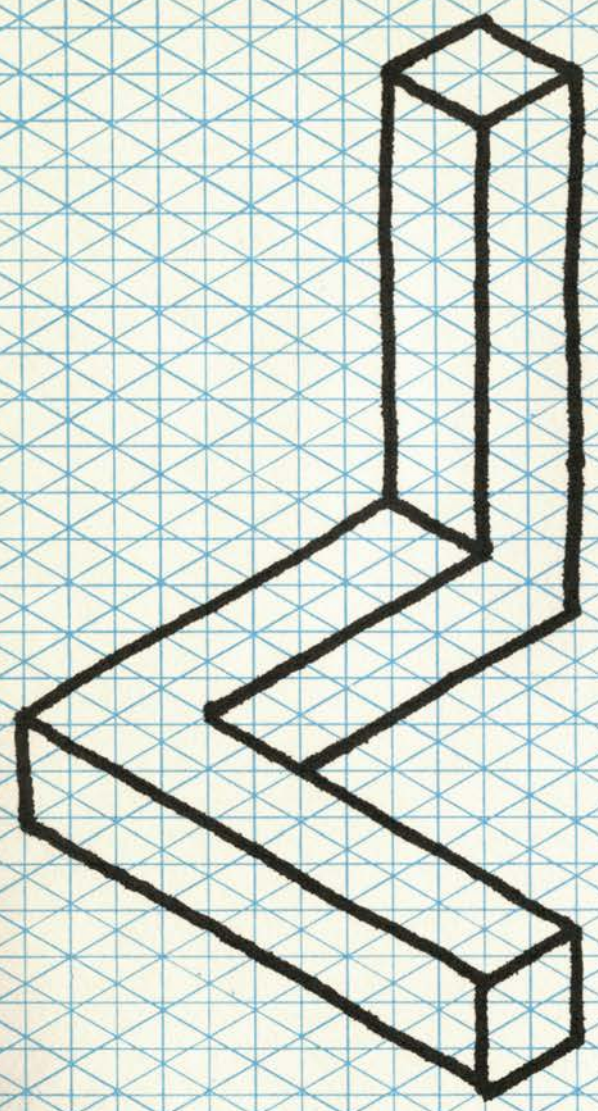
AMARYLLIS



← **FREE RIDE** →

ON the day of Scott Carpenter's orbital flight — Aurora VII — May 24, 1962, we were talking about gyroscopes, and looking at a gyro encased in a one inch diameter cylinder — one inch long. With its rate switch, the overall was just about the size of an Alka-Seltzer bottle. We were discussing the problem of designing a package of three gyros — one for each axis of navigation. For easier manipulation, I got three Alka-Seltzer boxes. There didn't appear to be any particular solution independent of installation, so we gave it up. Putting the boxes down on the table I strung them end to end along the three axes. When alone, I took another look, and decided to have it fabricated. This was ten days after the BLACK BOX had been delivered and was already showing signs of rust. I was very tired, and at the time of this decision I didn't consciously realize that the links formed the edges of a cube, and, of course, as boxes, they didn't. One more small cube had to be added.

Steel — 1962 6′8″ x 6′8″ x 6′8″ (H)



AMARYLLIS shown on preceding pages

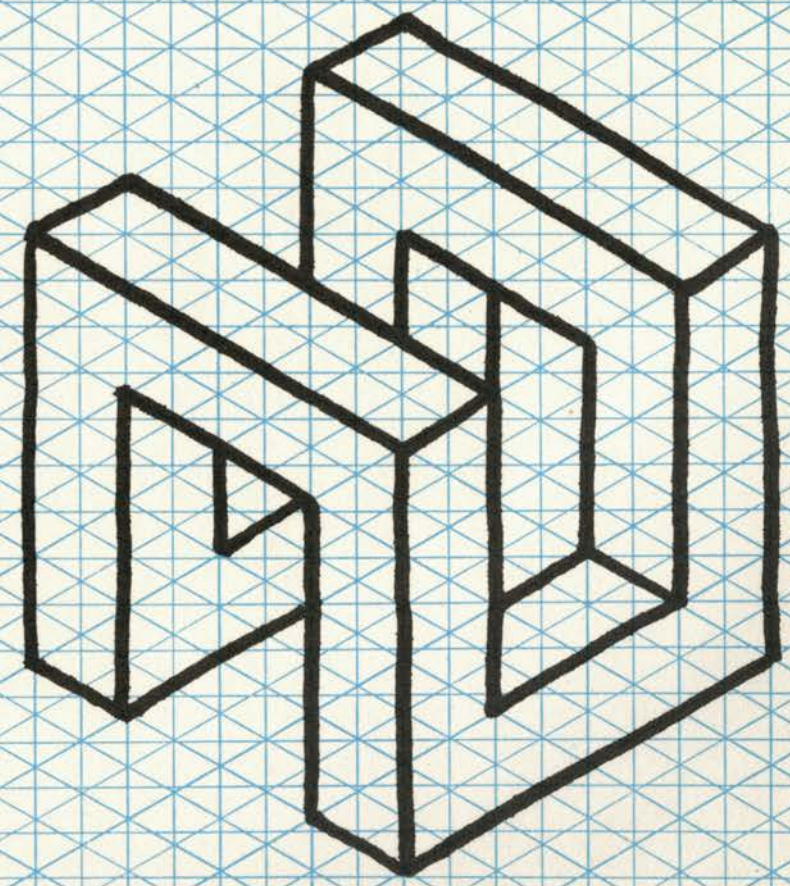
Following the same procedure as in WILLY, I had made a still more complicated affair which is not in the exhibition, THE GRACEHOPER in North Bennington. Later, a friend asked me to make a large piece for his place in Ann Arbor. I set out to make something like a cave. I wanted to make the space and light as tangible as possible — in other ways it was to be the architecture of an idiot. I didn't have the model of GRACEHOPER to work from, so I had to begin with a few separate units. After taping some of them together, I realized that by that method what I had in mind would take forever. Settling upon components made up of clusters such as the one I already had, I made another as a whole unit and stuck it to the first. Needless to say, the result was symmetrical. I thought it looked a little bit like Brancusi, and was so stunned by this that I stopped.

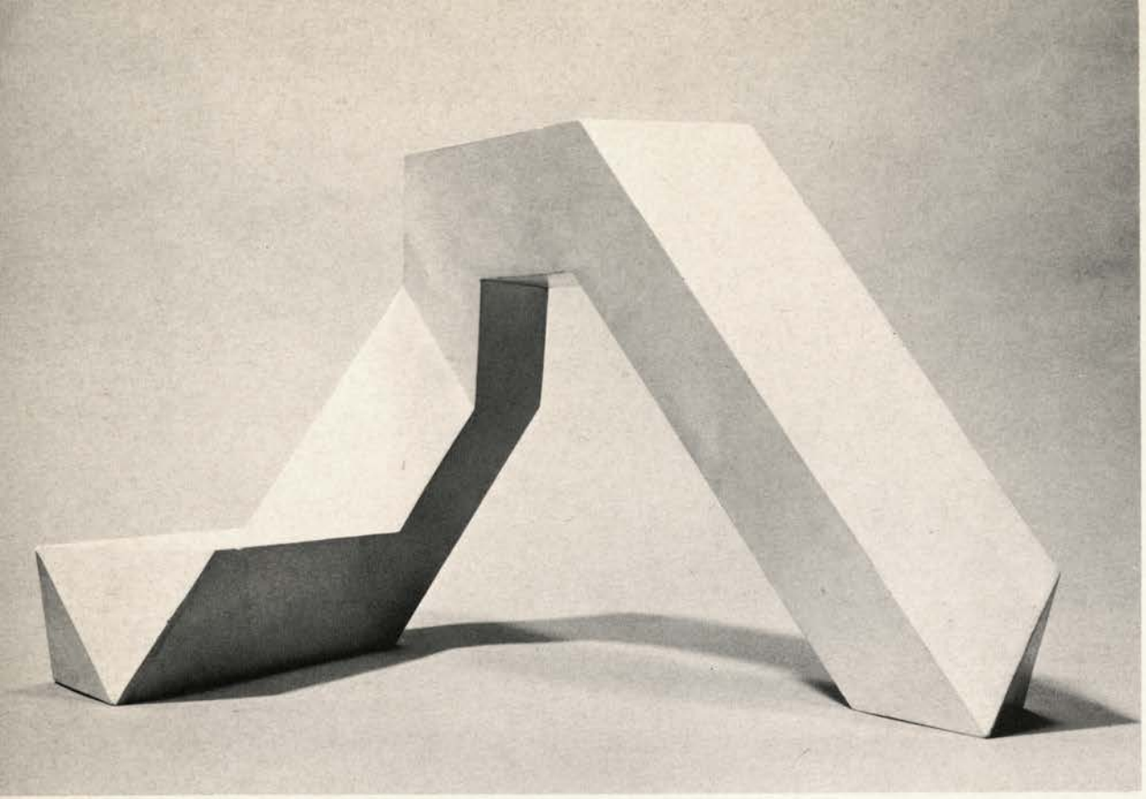
First mock-up — 1965
Present mock-up — 1966
11'6" h x 7'6" w x 11'6" l (H)

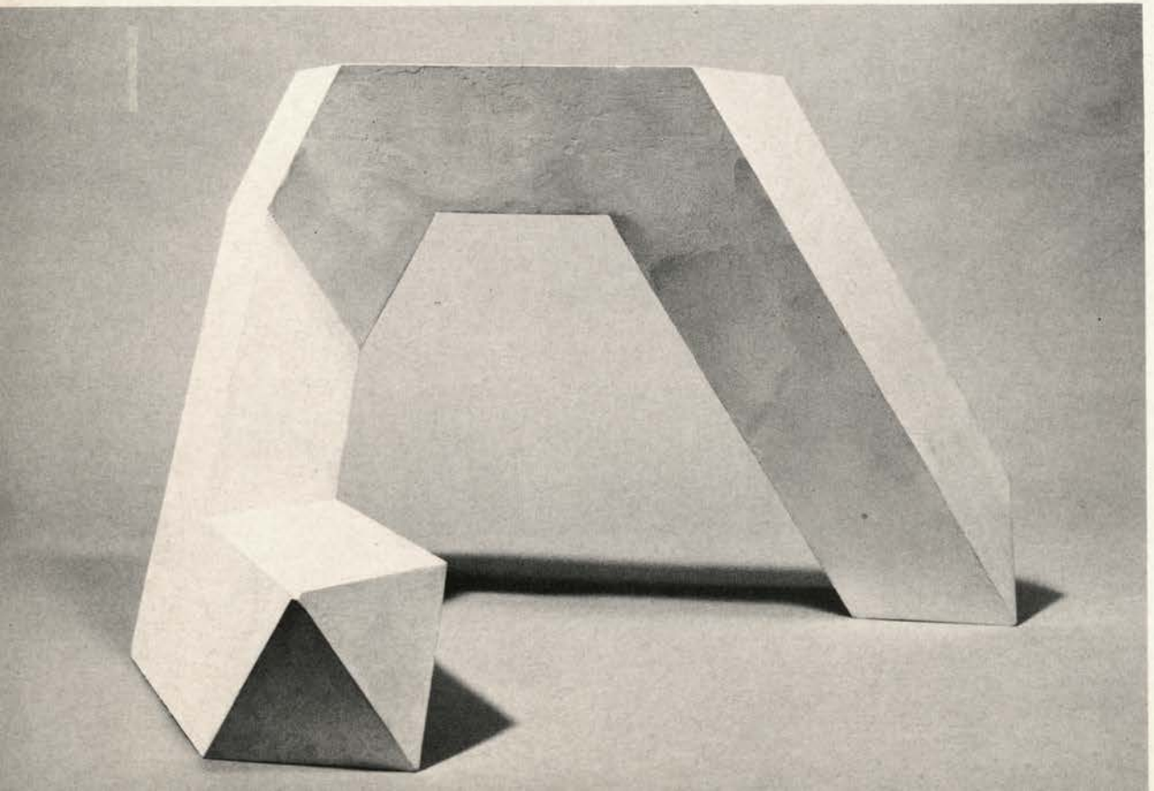
WE LOST →

This piece exists here for the first time in three dimensions, although there have been enough coffee tables on this model. For me the scheme evolved from a series of projects done after FREE RIDE. It seemed too obvious to execute, even if I could have done so at the time. After abandoning COSA NOSTRA, however, I felt that it was worth doing on a larger scale.

Sketch — 1962
Mock-up — 1966 10'8" x 10'8" x 10'8" (P)



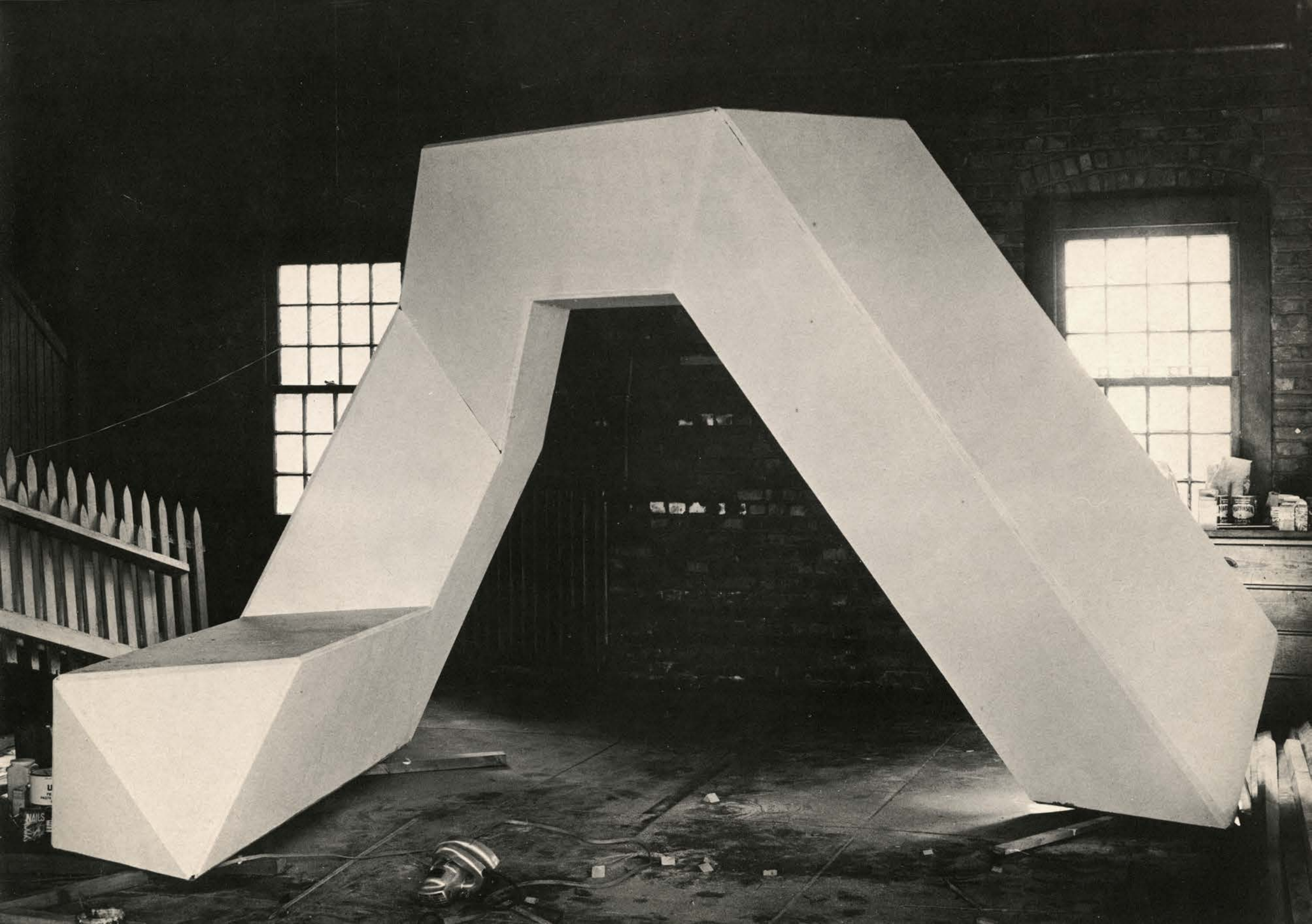


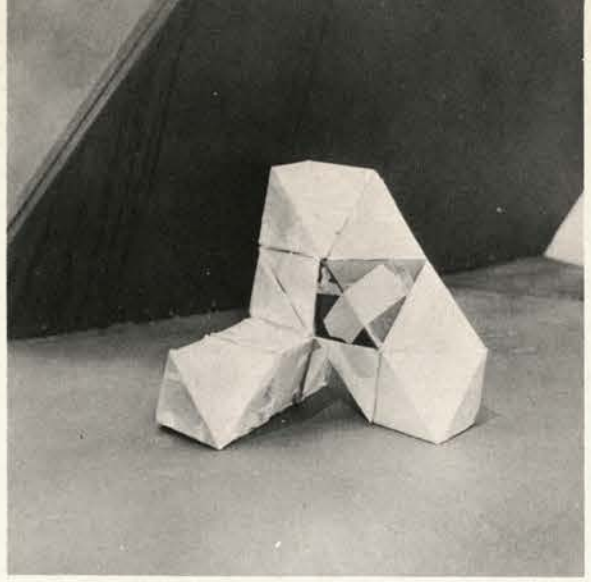


CIGARETTE

I had set out to make a serious piece of sculpture, and thought I had done so. Upon seeing the smooth plaster model, I realized that I had been taken in by the irregularities of the paper one. The piece was redundant, and had the look of a war memorial. Stripping away everything but the spine, I wound up with a cigarette from which one puff had been taken before it was ground out in the ashtray.

Plaster model — 1961 13″ h
Mock-ups — 1966 15′ h x 26′ w x 18′ d (H)
½ size (photo at right) (P)

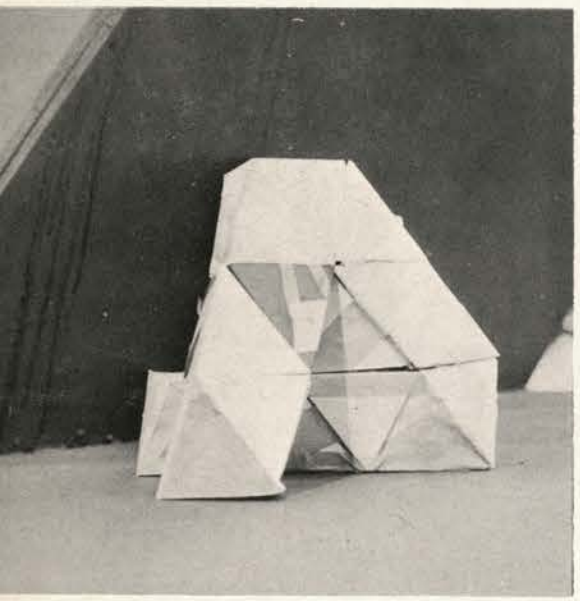

NAILS



← **SPITBALL**

This is based on one of the earliest exercises with the tetrahedron. I didn't set out to make a large triangular pyramid from a lot of small ones. Looking at the model for another piece, I made some adjustments in my head . . . The plaster models having disappeared, a new model was prepared from flimsy paper units. This was carried off by the Curator at Hartford, probably on the grounds that none would be needed for executing such a simple piece. I did make another model, but in my haste left off a whole layer of units. The final product is perhaps too plain to stand for something that has been outlawed.

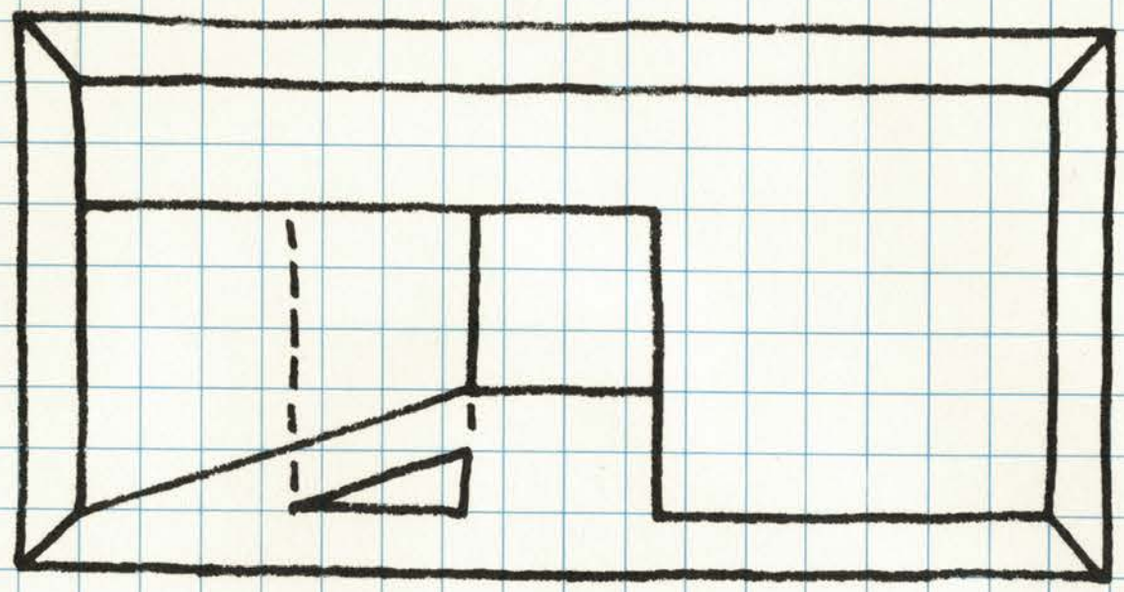
Plaster model — 1961 paper model 12″ h
Mock-up — 1966
11′6″ h x 14′ w x 14′ d (H)

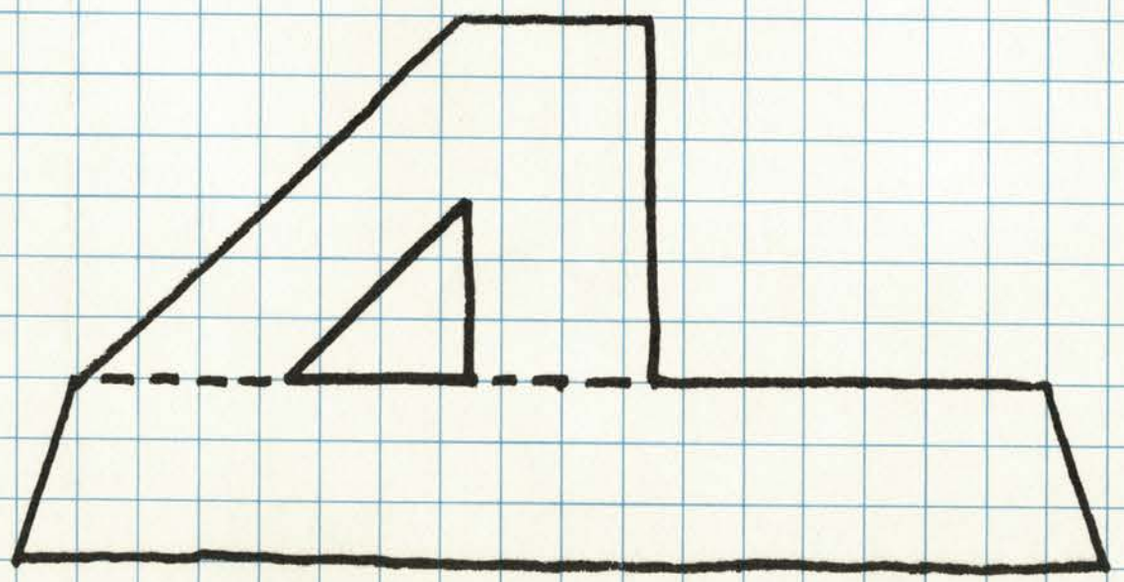


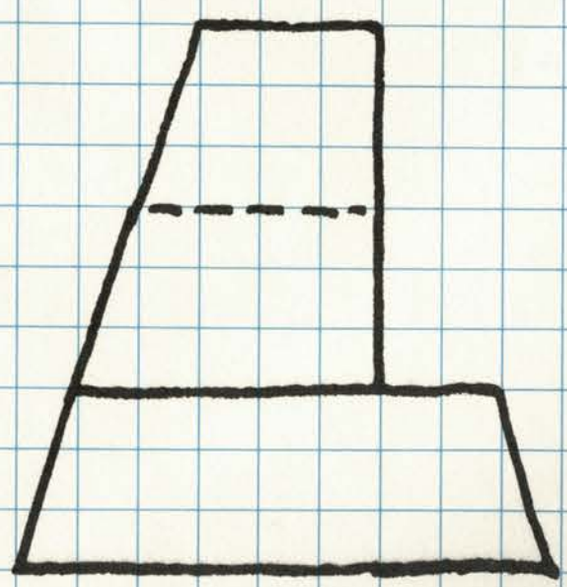
FIXTURE →

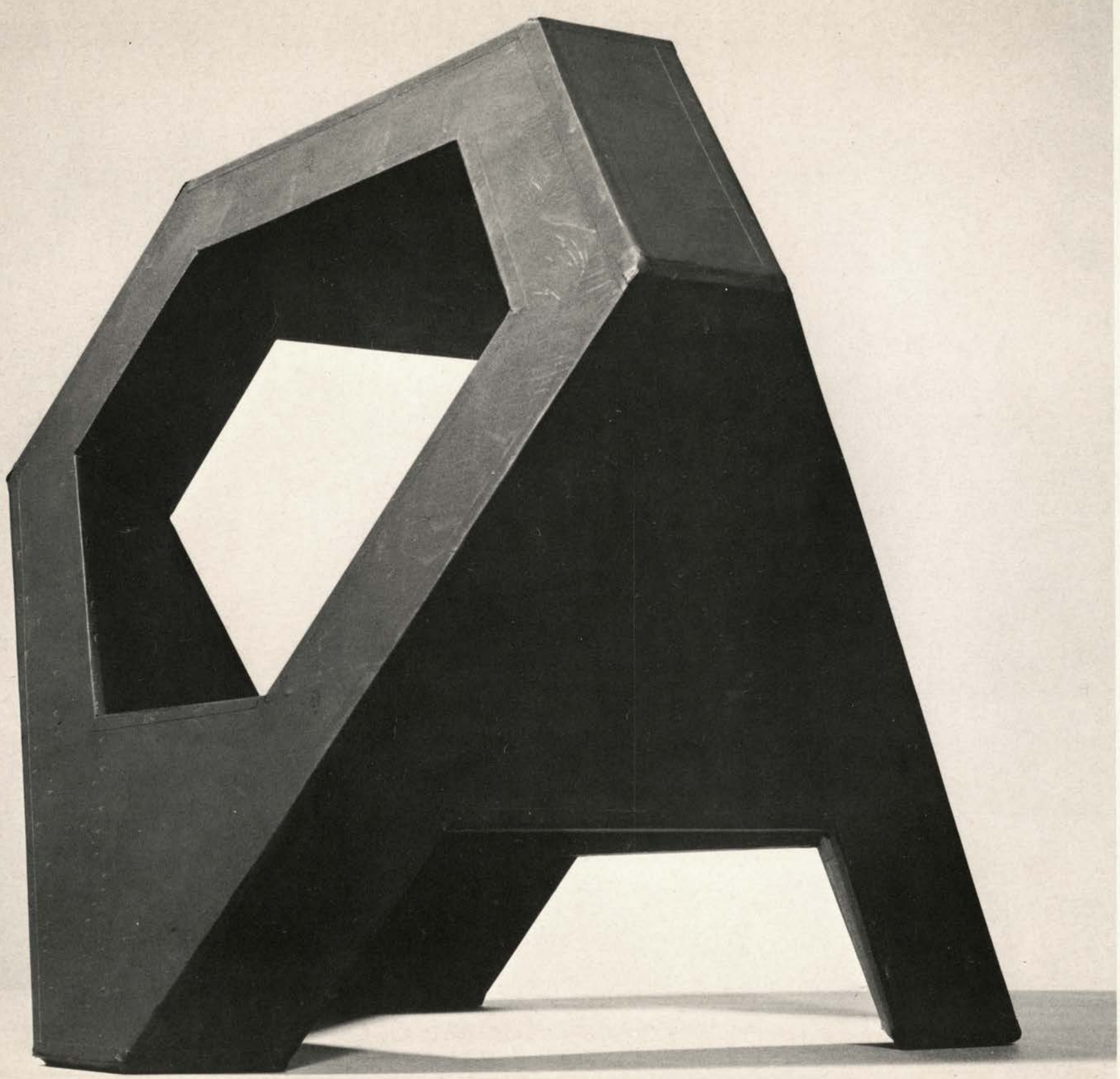
Unlike other pieces of sculpture in these exhibitions, FIXTURE is not based upon any modular component. The angle of the planes of the base is the same as that of the tetrahedral structures. Then, there are the vertical and horizontal planes; but the plane from the top to one end was determined by a straightforward desire for economy and simplicity. The piece is not thought of as having any life outside its immediate situation.

Installed — 1966 16′ h x 32′ l x 18′ w (H)









GENERATION

This piece was developed from one conceived quite differently in June, 1964. The first version was based not upon tetrahedral units, but on the four spokes of the tetrahedral angle, the lines which if dropped from the vertices would meet at the center of a tetrahedron. The actual spokes were elongated octahedra. The piece was about thirty inches high and was intended to be cast in bronze. It was called MOONDOG. Later I was asked to do a piece for a city square, and I thought that something more open than most of the work would be appropriate. On the other hand the existing model was very personal, and I thought that it might cause jay-walking. In attempting to give it a more dignified and stable appearance, I kept compressing the octahedra through about three versions until they became regular. It took about three more versions to bring it to the static quality that it has at present. The whole development took about a year, the model for the present work having been made in the summer of 1965.

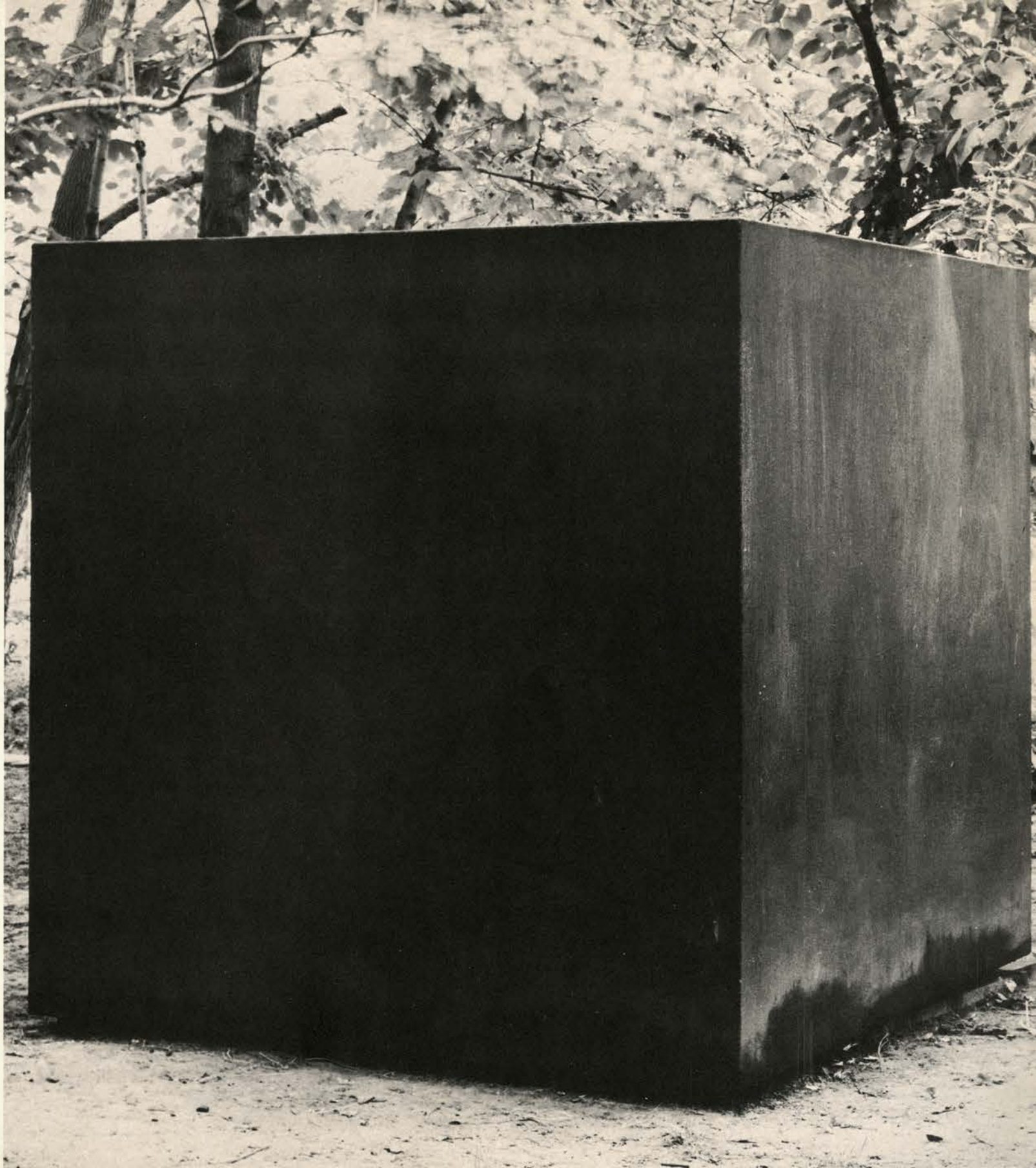
cardboard model — 1965 17½″
Mock-up — 1966 30′ h x 30′ w x 30′ d (H)

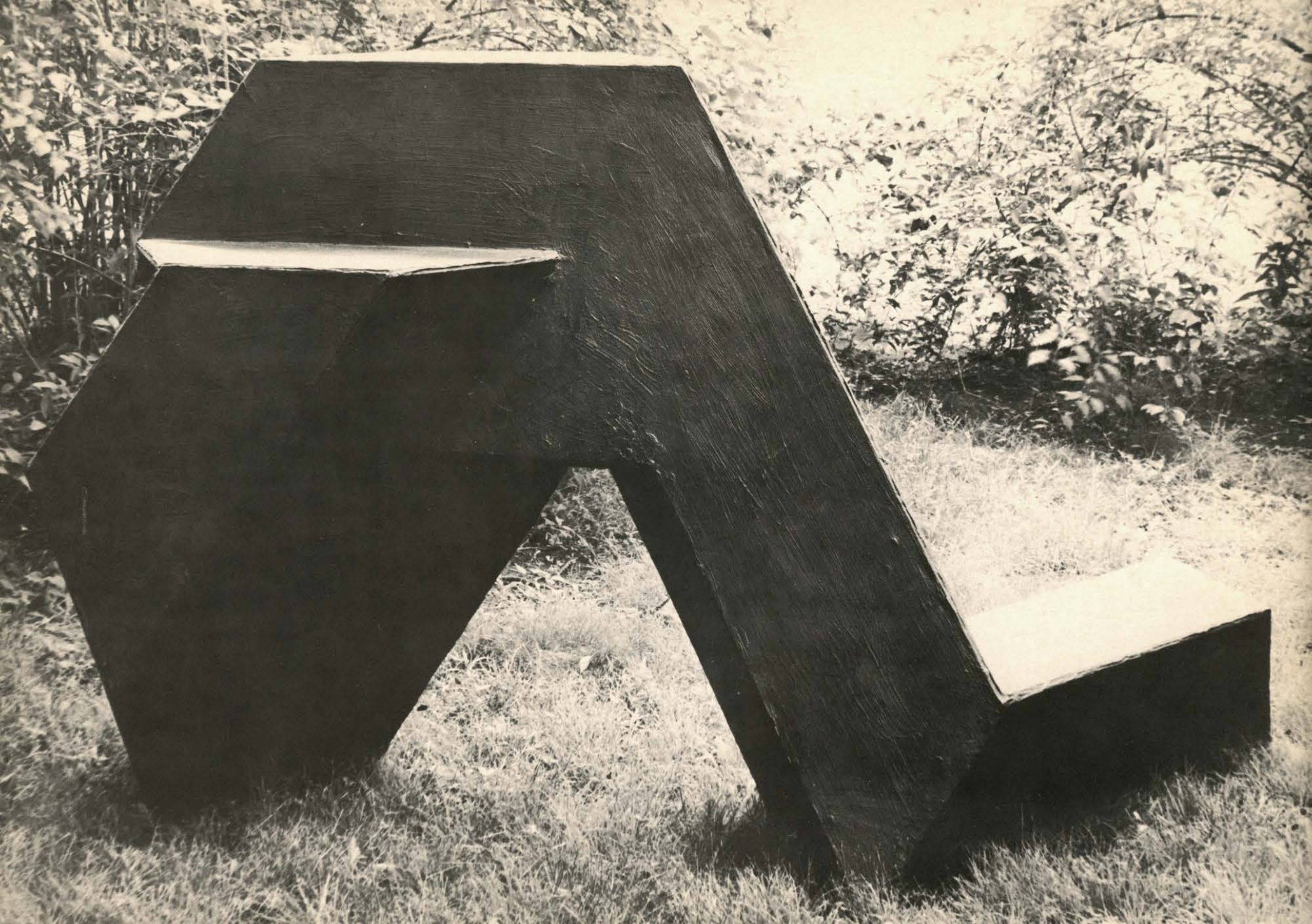
← **WILLY** WILLY was done at some time after DIE. The model was made from parts of that for SNAKE and of those for other pieces. I tried to put these components together as arbitrarily as possible. Again the base was determined only at the last. The monstrous result reduced SNAKE to a tame little dragon. It was a crawling thing that hadn't been designed for crawling. Paul Feeley named it after the character in Beckett's A HAPPY DAY.

Full size mock-up — 1962
7'8" h x 18' l x 12' w (P)

DIE → This is a complicated piece. It has too many references to be coped with coherently. I undoubtedly decided to do it after having looked at FREE RIDE for a while. That was its real inception. Herodotus says, "The most wonderful thing that was actually to be seen about this temple was a chapel in the enclosure made of a single stone, the length and height of which were the same, each wall being forty cubits square, and the whole a single block!" Recalling this several years ago, I designed a studio for myself in the form of a forty foot cube — eight feet to have been below grade. The interior of the studio I designed for Betty Parsons is a half cube. These are just specific references. The actual size of this steel box was determined by Leonardo's drawing. It is reproduced on the cover of a paperback, and it always seems to be in sight. Auden had written, "Let us honor if we can the vertical man, though we value none but the horizontal one." Six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under. I didn't make a drawing; I just picked up the phone and ordered it.

Steel — 1962 6' x 6' x 6' (H)





← **THE SNAKE IS OUT**

I don't know just when SNAKE was done. I had made a tetrahedral piece in brass in 1961, several plaster models, and one other piece in wood before SNAKE. The latter was probably made just after DIE. It began as a chance arrangement of units. At first there was no particular base, the final form being arrived at out of the need for stability. As in other cases the title came later. It was taken from John McNulty's THIRD AVENUE MEDICINE. "The snake is an ordinary little vein, or maybe it is an artery, that runs along the left temple of a man's head."

First mock-up — 1962 ¼ size
Mock-up in exhibit 1966
15′ h x 24′ w x 18′ d (H)

NEW PIECE (not shown in catalog)

This piece is based not upon rectangular prisms, nor on tetrahedral lattices, but upon modular units made up of components of the rhomboidal dodecahedron. There is a connection with the tetrahedral structures, however, in that the rhomboidal surfaces of this figure are the same as the sections of the others.

Mock-up — 1966 12′ h x 18′ l x 12′ d (P)

TONY SMITH

1912	Born, South Orange, N.J.
1932-33	Operated bookstore in Newark
1933-36	Worked as toolmaker, draftsman, and purchasing agent
	Attended Art Students League
1937-38	Attended New Bauhaus, Chicago, Ill.
1938-39	Worked on buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright
1940-60	Designed numerous residences and unexecuted projects

Taught at

1946-50	School of Education, N.Y. University
1950-53	Cooper Union
	Pratt Institute
1957-58	Pratt Institute
1958-61	Bennington College
1962 —	Hunter College

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66-67

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