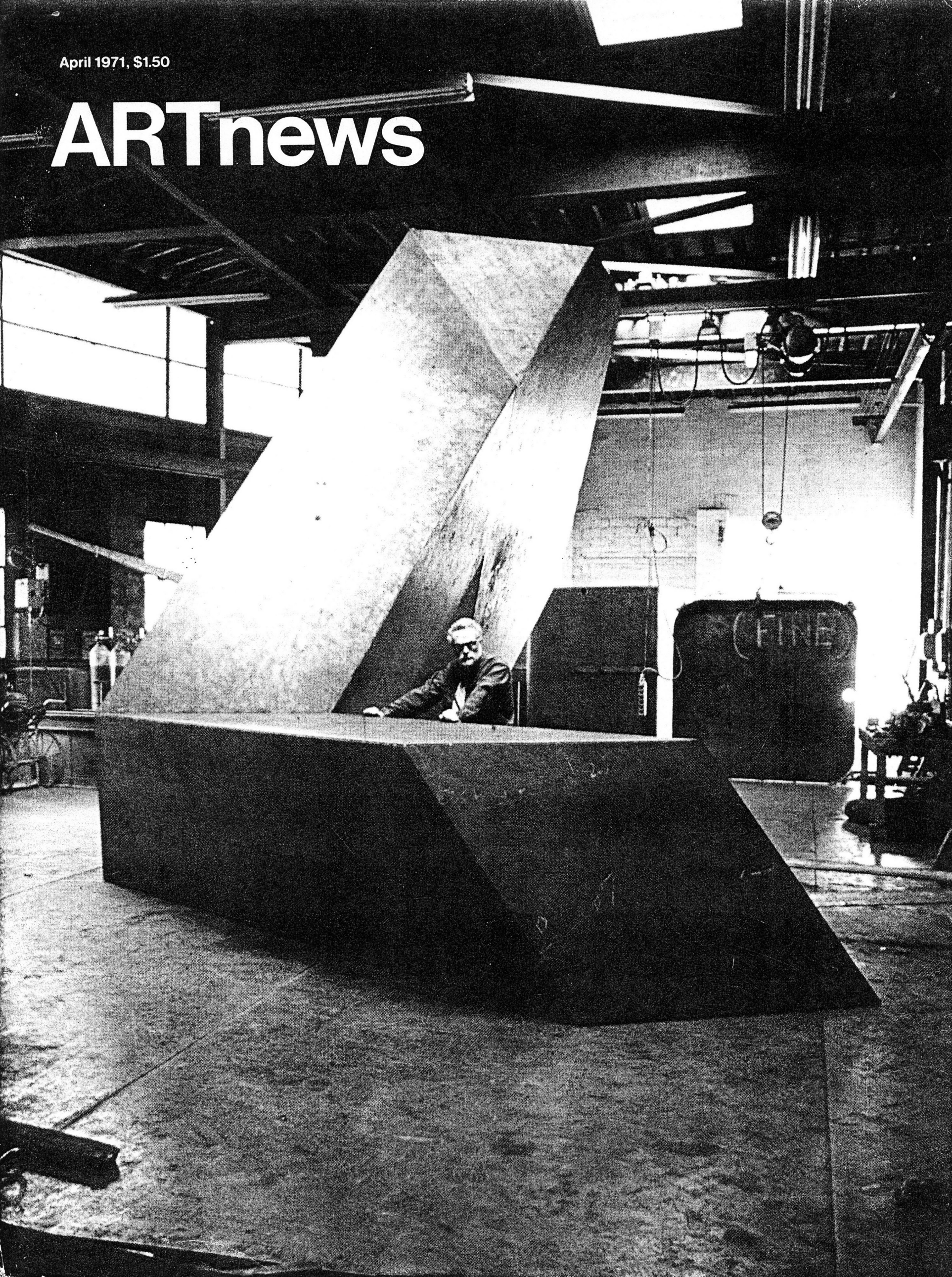


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# ARTnews



# Tony Smith: Talk about Sculpture

**Interview about concepts and projects with this architect-sculptor who works at the scale of the table-top or mountain-side, and who exhibits new pieces this month at Knoedler, New York**

Since around 1960, Tony Smith has produced a continually fluid and self-generating network of sculpture based on the concept of a continuous three-dimensional space-lattice and on a standard tetrahedral (and octahedral) module, the possibilities of which he feels he has barely explored. In the last two years he has worked on a number of commissioned sculptures much larger than anything he has done before, and, simultaneously, on smaller pieces suggested by parts and offshoots of the major projects. The interrelationships between all of these and the process by which each new piece arises from one or another of the old, or from an entirely new situation or site, are enriched by the complexity of Smith's background as an architect and painter, his knowledge of a sophisticated geometry related to crystallographic structure, and a generally acute and probing mind.

The large works that have occupied him from 1969 are, in brief: *Hubris*, commissioned by the University of Hawaii at Manoa, one of Smith's most open and regular pieces to date, which consists of a two-sectioned, 9-by-9 grid in black concrete, one half thin slabs at ground level, the other half the same grid raised to 3 feet 3 inches by a four-sided pyramidal module; *Batcave*, a complex environmental interior designed to "mold space and light" rather than material form, at the Osaka World's Fair, a new version of which will be shown soon at the Los Angeles County Museum; a gigantic triangular sculpture inserted in a California mountainside; a labyrinthine water garden for a delta; *Smog*, a huge new horizontal piece made from the dismantled components of *Smoke* (which was made for the Corcoran's "Scale as Content" show, 1967); *Haole Crater*, a sunken square "pavement" within a square stone sculpture, with a metal ladder leading down below the earth's surface; two related monumental sculptures on square platforms (*Arch* and *Dial*); and a flat 81-block grid proposed for downtown Minneapolis. All of these last works and *Hubris*, which deal with open and closed situations and sections or extensions of each others' forms, are structurally related to one another and stem from *Maze* (shown at Finch College in 1967), *Stinger* (in the Museum of Modern Art's "Art of the Real" show, 1968), and *Lunar Ammo Dump* (projected for the University of Illinois' Chicago campus).

The smaller sculptures from this period, now being exhibited at Knoedler (to April 24) were all conceived in the same three-month period in the summer of 1969 and relate particularly to *Hubris*, *Haole*

**Author:** Lucy Lippard's book on Tony Smith will come out this year in German (Gert Hatje, Stuttgart) and later in English. A group of her critical essays, titled *Changing*, has just been published by Dutton.

*Crater*, *Arch* and *Dial*, as well as to earlier works shown in Hartford and Philadelphia in 1966. Made from the same module and consequently of the same general scale, they form what Smith calls an open labyrinth, though they are not seen as a fixed group and were not made in any particular sequence (unlike the 1968 series, *Wandering Rocks*, conceived as a definite unity). The nine pieces at Knoedler's began as very small marbles, gifts for friends whose initials provide the titles. Last fall they were transformed into full scale plywood mock-ups and shown at the Newark, Montclair and Princeton University museums; for the current show they have been constructed in bronze with a special black patina. The following text was taken from a taped conversation with the artist at his home in New Jersey on Jan. 18, 1971.

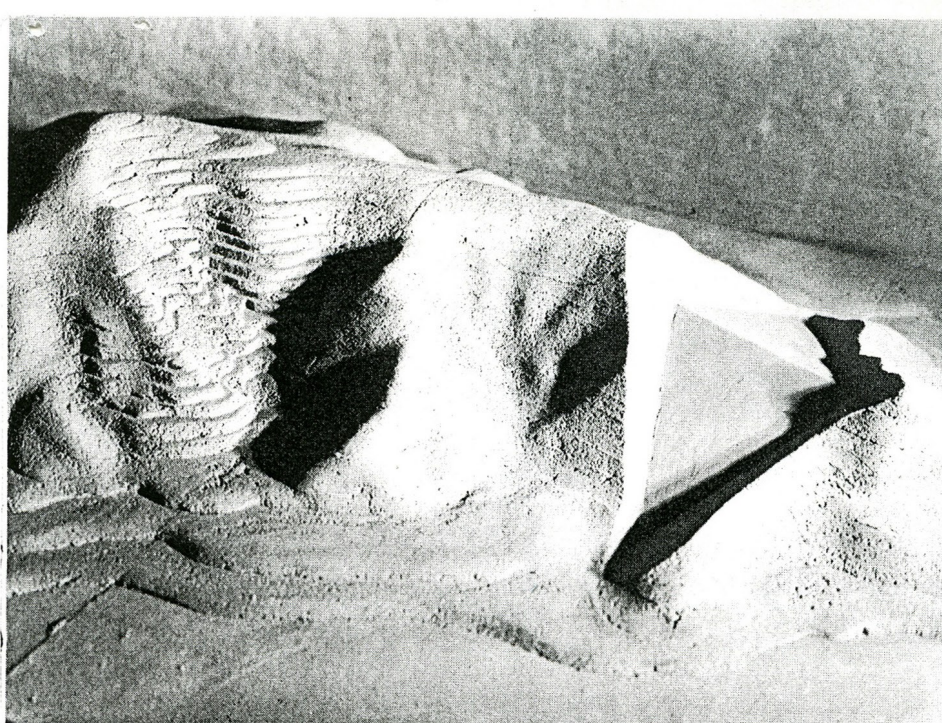
**Tony Smith:** I think the volume of my work has much to do with a response to contemporary life generally; I don't think it relates much to the art scene, although certain things just happen and may seem somewhat alike. I have always admired very simple, very authoritative, very enduring things. I feel that's what the new pieces are about. It isn't that I have anything against the ephemeral, it's just that I find there is very little, not in contemporary art but in contemporary life, that we think of as continuous, in terms of substantial, sort of 19th-century values, though the fact that we live in a period of great change probably affects my own work too. All times have had some sense of this. I find the art world very oppressive; it's hard to be passive in it. It seems to me that in the 1950s, everything I knew about was within a very narrow compass, where today I can't understand a lot of it.

**Lucy Lippard:** Seeing the new steel pieces in the factory this afternoon, dominating that big, rough, industrial space, they looked like they were going to be there forever.

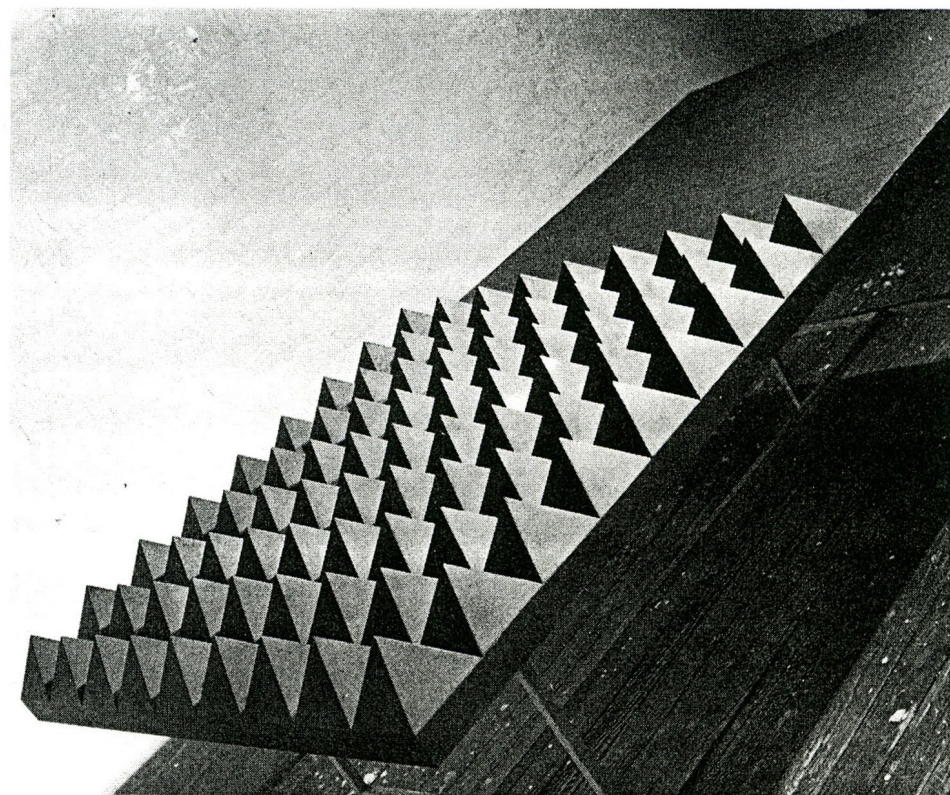
**T.S.:** I think a curious transformation takes place in making things of very solid materials. For instance, when I did the piece *For J.C.*, I merely thought of it as somewhat tricky, in the sense that there is a vertical-horizontal square, and then there is another square on a diagonal, then the four triangles are also a square, so they come to the same point. There are all kinds of things that could happen in that piece, so I thought of it as very Cubist. I did it for someone whom I think of as a Cubist and I thought it had a kind of humorous quality; at the same time, when you see it in bronze, it takes on a more somber quality and looks more monumental.

**L.L.:** Because of the traditional connotations of bronze?

**T.S.:** No. After all, the original maquette was more to the scale of a Cubist collage, and the association of paper...I don't think it's a question of bronze but of making it 80 inches high, which is the height of an ordinary door, and allowing these planes to expand and take on more substance because of their size. I think that the character of the piece has been transformed considerably, and I like this to take place.



Tony Smith: *Mountain Piece*, model for a gigantic triangular sculpture to be inserted in a Valencia, California mountainside.



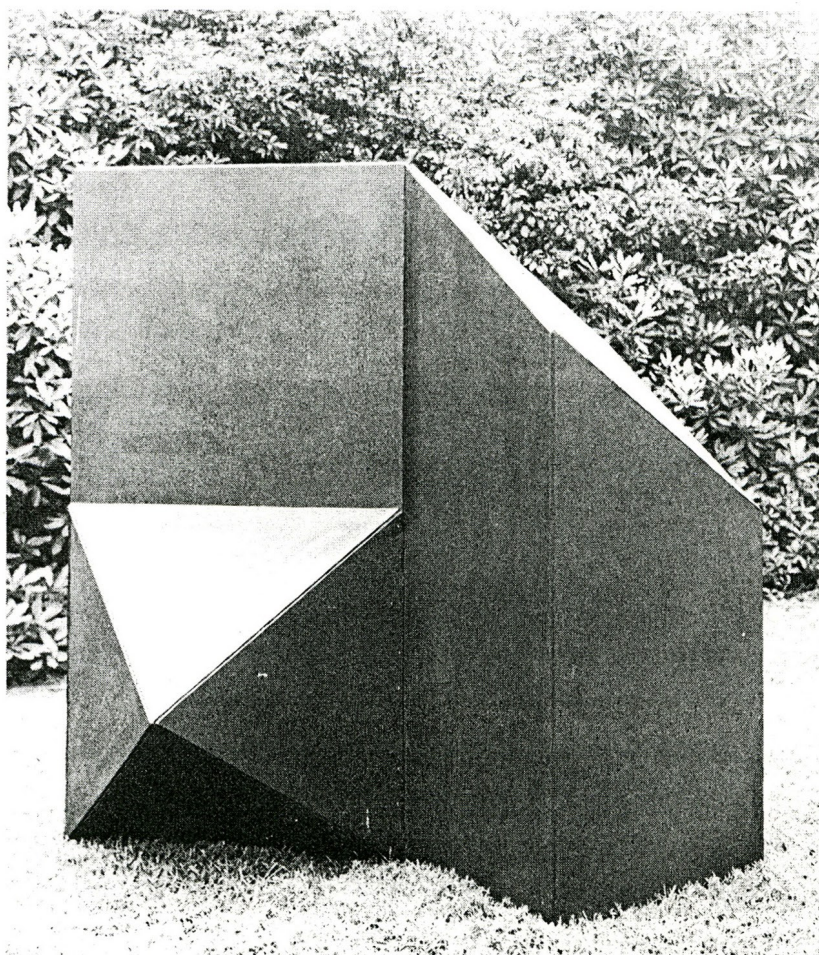
*Hubris*, a U. of Hawaii commission, will be a grid of concrete slabs at ground level, half bare, half supporting 3-foot high pyramidal modules.

L.L.: I wonder what exactly are the visual components of, or maybe criteria for, a totally abstract sculpture. Are visual puns associative and therefore less abstract?

T.S.: I think a certain element of unexpectedness, something done with great economy which nevertheless has an element of surprise...it has something to do with the unexpected without being frivolous or trite. There is certainly an element of surprise in my work, but it's not calculated. I suppose the best way to put it would be that in working

with the maquettes I think, well, that's sort of interesting; I wouldn't know how to seek it out because I can't visualize in advance. I would never have been able to visualize *Amaryllis* [1965]. In fact, sometimes I find it hard to reproduce these things, even though I should be fairly familiar with them. When I try to put them together I can't remember how certain things go, or the direction of certain planes confuses me. Sometimes when that quality comes out, I like it, I keep it. As a matter of fact, when I first did *Willy* [1962] I thought of it as quite horrible. I was just playing around with some pieces, sort of liked the way some of the parts went together, but I don't think that I would make a practice of that because for one thing, it would bore me.

For *J.C.*, 1969, wood mock-up, 80 inches high; the version in the Knoedler show is of welded bronze.



L.L.: How did *Smoke* turn into *Smog*?

T.S.: It was just shipped back here from the Corcoran and it was put over near the back fence. I thought the man on the other side of the fence might be getting tired of it there, so I decided to have it taken to the dump and burned. Then that night, I was actually asleep and was awakened for a few minutes; I thought maybe I could do something else with *Smoke* before I threw it away. I thought I could put it on one level, instead of the double-storied original, but I felt the angle of the pieces coming to the ground would be so acute that it would lose any quality, you know, where the sloping pieces hit the ground; it would be so low it would lose quality and any sense of value. Then I decided to put those little triangular prisms on, in order to raise it from the ground and create a sense of space. Then, just for symmetry, I felt I needed to put the same caps at the other intersection. The hardest problem was to arrange the 45 pieces so as not to make a completely symmetrical impression in plan. No matter how I did it, the patterns repeated. Then I figured out a way of doing it on a piece of paper about 2 by 3 inches, and I gave it to the boys and told them to put the pieces in that order, but the little piece of paper blew away. I tried to repeat it and couldn't remember it, so I went through the same process again. I don't think it was as good as the first version, but it was the best I could do. But I was pleased with it. Even though I didn't put the piece together very well, and a lot of parts are roughly joined, I feel it still has enough continuity. I guess the ground gives it that sense of cohesion. I must say I've had all kinds of ideas about this piece that I never had about others. Even though *Smoke*

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was intended to accommodate a lot of people, I didn't feel that the people were essential to the piece, whereas here, when I see people looking at it, or when the boys were putting it together and were having lunch out there, the image complemented by people is very strong. I think of it as something for a park or a place for street people. Even if people aren't active in it, there is a sense of creating diagonals. They may take something away from it, and they also soften it, but it is also as though an entirely new three-dimensional form passes through it and gives it a sense of fluidity. In that way it relates to *Water Garden* more than anything else.

When I did *Hubris* I really didn't think people would go in among those pyramids. I don't know whether you have ever seen any pictures of the mountains in Honolulu, but they have very sharp crests and sharp curves. I had thought of *Hubris* as very hostile and I found out the students didn't think that way at all; they go barefoot and thought of running through it, racing, which seems to me quite a feat—to go from one of those things to another with no place to settle your feet. At any rate, it's very hard for me to get into *Smog*, so to a large extent I see it from the outside. That's the way I like to think of it.

L.L.: The lateral extension of *Smog*, as opposed to the verticality of *Smoke* and most of the early work, say before 1968, reminds me of the Chicago piece, *Lunar Ammo Dump*. What happened to that project?

T.S.: Well, it was postponed for three years, partly in protest against Daley and all that, then they never brought it up again. I don't know if it'll ever be revived. I'm kind of sad there is no good record of it, because there was a certain grandeur about it. It was 132 feet long, with two walls on either side of this amphitheater, so that its width was much greater than its length; it was spread out at a point where the pavement of the mall broke in two because of the theater; it was made up of two rows of six boxes on each side, 24 in all, each 12 feet square, 12 feet apart in each direction, and 8 feet high. This proportion would have sat in there very easily; it wouldn't have had a lot of muscle, but it would have made nice places for people to wander. The pavement is black granite so there wouldn't have been any kind of strident contrast to the general yellowish red of the campus designed by Walter Netsch who, by the way, was perfectly content with the piece.

L.L.: What's its relationship to *Maze*?

T.S.: Just that it is a very simple thing, I think it's one of the best things I've ever done. You know, I don't think of *Maze* as being in an open space. I think of it in a closed space as it was at Finch College [in 1967], with the space around it being just as much a part of it as the space through it. Someone once thought of it as a free-standing monument. Well, to me that would be very much like a war memorial [or like Smith's own Roosevelt Memorial proposal] and I didn't think of it in that way. As a matter of fact, a while before I did any of these pieces I did a lot of projects that were somewhat like *Maze* in that they were, let's say, excavations, where the excavation would reach a certain depth, but then all the earth that was taken from the excavation would form an embankment on the sides, something like *Haole Crater*. Sometimes I would have some kind of organization of rectangular prisms or something in the plot so you would be able to see it from the raised part of the mound. I had been interested in things of this sort for a very long time. As a matter of fact, I often thought of making sunken gardens. I remember a specific place where a house had burned so only the excavation was left, so I put the house to one side and the excavation became a sunken garden. Quite a few of my houses have been partially below the surface. The first house I did, out in Ohio, is partially below the surface, that is the earth comes up to the sill line on the outside and then the floor is below. At Fritz Bultman's studio in Provincetown, one side of the building is about 4 feet below the surface. And then my scheme for Betty Parsons'

house—the floor dropped about 2 1/2 feet below the ground level. I have always been particularly interested in excavating and then piling the dirt up; a lot of it has to do with cutting into the side of a hill and then using excavated earth beyond that as fill.

L.L.: Your idea of the voids and solids being equally important reminds me of Carl Andre's idea of sculpture as "cuts into space," solid as a hole and hole as solid. And what about your mountain piece?

T.S.: I haven't seen his work. Of course the mountain piece is related. Right now it's just waiting until they find a place in the vicinity to use the fill for building a road or something; the property is so big they can't dump the fill at random. I've always been much interested in projects that deal with the land in a large way but I don't know exactly how to approach anything of that sort. Except in a few cases, like the church I have been wanting to do for a long time, and a couple of other things of that sort, I never did very much in the way of projects. For instance, when people asked me about houses, I would always say, well, you get the land and I'll talk to you about the house. I feel that way about earth projects. Generally, I wouldn't know how to go about one, because I'd be faced with an infinite number of possibilities. I think much better when I have something specific to work on. In just the same way these pieces happen in the models themselves. I never think of them on paper.

L.L.: What happened to *Water Garden*?

T.S.: I never worked on that again. I'd like to, because I'm very fond of the idea of making the paths a maze, so people wouldn't always be able to get out. At certain points they would have to retrace their steps and see the moving water in a different mood. If you walk along where it is flowing one way, you get a different feeling than when you are walking in the opposite direction. There again, you see, it's halfway between the Osaka Cave and the flat pieces like *Hubris*.

L.L.: In what sense?

T.S.: In the sense that it can't be characterized. There are so many units and it is not moving toward any final stability. Instead, it is still a very organic thing.

L.L.: Are you still painting?

T.S.: I haven't had a chance to paint lately but I have started to do a lot of drawing.

L.L.: It's struck me that your paintings have been mainly concerned with curved shapes and the sculpture with angular ones.

T.S.: I think my interest in painting remains that of dealing with the interchange of figure and ground. I don't think of certain shapes. I am mainly involved with trying to make an equilibrium over the surface based on fairly close values. The reason I tend to use those convex shapes is that I feel an area of color has its own center, and I resist shapes that radiate or suggest style and structure. I think that goes partly with my dislike of fragmentation, of busyness and disturbing overlays of speed and noise. To relate that to sculpture, the same thing happens in three dimensions that happens in two. Forms tend to have their masses, their own centers of gravity, but it seems (and this is a hangover from architecture) that I think of walls, which enclose space and also define the exterior space.

From an urban point of view the activity is just as important as enclosed space. We find round plans among nomadic peoples because the public state is at the center of the group; the nomadic hut is a very organically defined area, not defined in any formal sense. It's only when people begin to live in towns that the need for plane walls becomes necessary because, for one thing, buildings being right next to each other so as not to waste space, it is simpler to use plane walls and also courtyards, streets, squares. While nomadic people have round plans, in urban communities, domes and such features are raised above street level. They don't ordinarily rise from the ground, which indicates people want to look at centrality somewhere, like in

the sacred nature of the dome. But at the same time they don't have to live in a world of concave/convex surfaces pushing in on the space; the public space is free of forms. I think my own work has architectural vestiges in that sense and that may also be one reason why I like things placed so the spaces between and around forms have a certain clarity. If I should do curvilinear sculptures, I would try to give them a kind of shape again, so there would be a balance, as there is in the paintings, between inside and outside.

L.L.: So the inflated sculptures you've been planning for so long and can't find means to execute would merge your painting and sculpture ideas?

T.S.: Yes, if I could do it. But there again I think of the pneumatic sculptures as being naturally suited to color. It would be difficult to make inflated pillows that would be purely prismatic; the sense of internal pressure tends to produce forms. That may be true of making gas tanks with metal because all the pressure is on one side, but if you're making masonry walls, unless it is for residences or something like that, there isn't any differentiation in pressure, and therefore there's no real necessity to make them curved.

L.L.: Do you have some idea of a logic in the relationship between color and structure in sculpture?

T.S.: I feel that there *should* be a logic to it.

L.L.: Can you think of any current work that has it?

T.S.: No. Or perhaps Kelly. But most colored sculpture is in classical architecture and sculpture, and the essential premise is primitive, giving clarity to certain kinds of form, but very often using colors symbolically, and also without any of the comprehension of colors that we have today. If you think of sculpture as fundamentally primitive, really primitive, you see that colors are used very much in terms of contrasts in light and shade, and even though they may have used reds or browns or some other colors, it isn't color in the modern sense. It is very pleasing, but it is pleasing in a....

L.L.: In a cosmetic sense?

T.S.: No, I wouldn't say that. I think it is simply a sense of form that relates more to pattern or ornament, without thinking of ornament as something bad in itself. I'm not using the term pejoratively, but I am simply saying that if you make an entire wall or floor out of red and black tiles, it is not exactly color in the modern sense. It is based rather on the availability of pigment and clay and all that. You certainly don't get any spatial sense of color in anything of that sort. A lot of high sculpture from some other periods has to do with the fact that it ages very beautifully. Contemporary technology gives the possibility of new color relationships.

The only colored piece I ever did was intended for a southern city and I thought in strong sunlight the use of colors in the classical sense would be logical, and compatible with the piece. It was going to be on a piazza with more or less monumental buildings, fountains and trees; I felt that since the buildings were whitish concrete, the associations of my work with blackness might just not be the same in this part of the country. I had the feeling that there it might just look dirty....

Color is a three-dimensional phenomenon, but it doesn't have what I'd think of as sculptural quality.

L.L.: I like the way Oldenburg uses color.

T.S.: I don't know. Take Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, the part where he talks about all kinds of bread. I think you could go into a Jewish bakery and find half a dozen kinds of bread that I would find sculptural. To me, hamburger rolls would fit in with what I said about convex forms in architecture—totally contained. Hamburger doesn't become part of the environment except as existence. What I am trying to say is that I find that those things in *themselves* have a fantastic elegance of form, and that when you make them out of some other material, they lose that fundamental elegance which, in the case of bread, only the process of baking can give. The idea that bread rises, that it gets brown, that it has this particular kind of surface tension, that something different happens on the bottom than on top. These things are fantastically subtle.

Even the hamburger roll, just taken for its own visual quality, is quite astonishing. You know, the culture behind making something like a roll is incredible. It is not a simple thing, whereas making anything on earth as if it is part of a carnival really is a simple thing. Baking is a complicated thing. It may be easy enough for some kid to learn to bake, but the process of baking and the art of baking, the beauty of what it produces—if you think about things that have been baked and the way they are cut and seeded and everything...

L.L.: A whole sensuous process.

T.S.: More than that. The whole symbolism of different countries and different breads and things like that strikes me as absolutely astonishing. But in relation to sculpture—there are certain functions. Bread doesn't do anything for the environment except in terms of a temporary situation.

L.L.: That's a funny distinction between internal and external.

T.S.: It seems to me that what is contained...I relate to the total, or container, as architecture. That plant over there is an organism and it is designed for its own life, whereas the table is designed for my life, and the table relates to the wall and the floor. The bread and cheese are for consumption, whereas a work of art isn't.