Sticks & Stones

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Tony Smith's *10 Elements*: humanizing the factory-made

ART

By April Kingsley

Under the impact of the 20th century, sculpture underwent the most profound modifications of any art form; painting and architecture altered particulars, but sculpture changed in essence. There has been no comparably revolutionary development in the entire history of art. Before being smashed to shards by Picasso's *Guitar* in 1913, sculpture had always been based on the human figure. From the time the first prehistoric Venus was etched in stone or squeezed out of clay, sculpture depended upon the body's wholeness and central core, its symmetry, axiality, frontality, and upright balanced posture. Responding to the tensions of pressured modern life, Rodin began to fragment the figure, a process which the best contemporary figurative sculptors—such as William King, George Segal, Sidney Simon, and Mary Frank—continue and compound in complexity.

MARY FRANK (Zabriskie, 29 West 57th Street, to June 8) often confounds our expectations of figurative sculpture by dispersing her multiunit ceramic figures along the ground (in what Carl Andre has called "the engaged position") in an effort, it would seem, to maintain contact with essentials while her forms are breaking up into waves of expressionist gesture. Frank has long been noted for her allusions to past art, from cultures as disparate as Sumer and 19th-century Paris, but she seems to be focusing lately on developing a vocabulary of expressionist marks, in her sculptures as well as in her monoprints, which convey emotion with heightened intensity. Conversely, ANNE ARNOLD (Fischbach, 29 West 57th Street, to June 6), known for her whimsically preposterous, quasi-Pop manipulations of the anatomies of ordinary domesticated animals, has begun to make life-size ceramic statues of exotic breeds of dog that look like distant cousins of Mexican Kalinas, Indian temple toys, and Tang figurines.

The bulk of modern sculpture, however, is abstract, and its associations are with such things as landscape, architecture, still life, highways, boats, and construction skeletons. Architectural references are the most frequent, and thus it may be TONY SMITH's background in architecture that makes so many people see him as the finest sculptor in America today. He's 67 and we had been hearing he'd been in poor health, but his new work at Pace Gallery (32 East 57th Street, to June 9) has the brusque audacity we'd associate with a young upstart. Intended as a quasi-retrospective, there is a continuous slide show of earlier works and an extensive and sensitively written catalogue by Sam Hunter. The show consists of two huge pieces—multiunit "Wandering Rocks" sort of work called *10 Elements*, made of nonregular geometrical solids, and *Throwback*, a marvelously quirky and compelling construction of fused regular geometrical solids. *Throwback* recalls earlier unitary pieces like *Willy*, *Cigarette*, and *The Snake Is Out* in twisting back around on itself, and in being composed of tetrahedrons and octahedrons. The illusions of parallel alignments and congruent volumes, the lovely concordances of form, also occur in *10 Elements*, but the anthropomorphic allusions to reclining animal or human forms do not. Instead, associations can be made between *10 Elements* and a whole range of things, from gravemarkers to packaging to games to Japanese gardens.

Smith's modular units, regular or not, always convey the potential for being architecture if proliferated or expanded. Perhaps architectural reference became the mainstay of Minimalism in the unsettled '60s because it offered a subliminal sense of security—the safety and protection we associate with the four walls and roof of home—which replaced the lost "mother" and "father" figures of pre-Modernist sculpture. The postwar generation realized they were on their own and made their "pads" (not houses) as individualized as possible. The apartment cell or cube, however incongruously, became a symbol of freedom. Box sculptures, usually black, always closed off to human intrusion, generally inert and impassive, came to be the quintessential "sculpted" object of the '60s. Tony Smith made such pieces, but he tended to load them with humanizing ramifications. He describes *Die*, for instance—a six-foot-square black steel box—as being related to another piece, *Free Ride*, to temples, his studio designs, a Leonardo drawing, and a coffin or grave, then says, "I didn't make a drawing, I just picked up the phone and ordered it." His intuiting, aleatoric approach to sculptural proportion and shape is a deliberate way of putting the human, irrational, accidental side of life back into pieces that look, and indeed are, factory made.

Sculpture that approaches the architectural requires large viewing areas, of course, which Max Hutchinson intuited long ago with the same unerring instinct that his eye for sculptural excellence has always demonstrated. His two-level Sculpture Now, Inc. (142 Greene Street, to May 26) currently accommodates ROBERT STACKHOUSE's *Sailors*—two gigantic, over 50-feet-long wooden ship structures stacked one above the other on the street floor, and, on the floor below, an enormous construction of planks and steel scaffolding, called *Work Contract #9*, by CASPAR HENSELMANN. Stackhouse's "boats"—one skeletal (the ghost ship) and one a lively blood red—seem like flesh and bone rent apart. The artist's concern for swelling curves, naval architecture, and implications of function have been suggested in his work before, but are specific here. Reclining in the belly of the lower boat and gazing at its shrunken shadow above, one can contemplate the ship as metaphor for our passage through life, or the sexual implications of its shape, or even McLuhanesque notions of outmoded, functionless objects becoming art.

Henselmann's piece invites much more active viewer participation. One climbs on his scaffolding, walks his ramp, and dodges between his shored walls. Renting standard construction materials allows Henselmann tremendous flexibility, removes postshow storage problems, and encourages allusions to American do-it-yourself ingenuity, construction sites, playground equipment, et al. It discourages drawing parallels with conventional sculpture, which will probably benefit him in the long haul, though it isn't much help to the average viewer's immediate understanding. Henselmann is one of the more interesting sculptors around today; though his work has gone through such a rapid and profound evolution over the past 10 years, it may be difficult for the casual observer to grasp.

Trademark consistency has larger audience appeal, of course, but it only comes easily to a few. WALTER DE MARIA (Heiner Friedrich, 393 West Broadway, to June 2), for example, either takes art out into nature, usually to some remote spot in the desert, or nature into the gallery, literally filling it up with dirt in one instance. *The Broken Kilometer* represents only a minor variation on that double theme, in that it is the gallery mate to his 1977 *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, which had identical solid brass rods driven end to end one kilometer into the ground. Here the rods are laid out in five orderly rows, equidistant from one another and lit by high-intensity lamps located above and behind the cordoned-off viewing area. The effect is of a shimmering but inaccessible floor of gold, like gold bars in the Treasury or priceless objects behind bullet-proof glass. Ecologically minded conceptualist Donald Burgy called the piece a phenomenal resource depletion, and painter Budd Hopkins described De Maria as the Cellini of Conceptual art, but many viewers seemed impressed by the piece and by the huge gallery space it occupies. De Maria always has his pieces fabricated in highly polished, costly metals, but they generally have strange, even sinister overtones which cut their luxuriousness like lemon juice cuts sweetness—*Spike Beds* and the *Lightning Field*'s sharply pointed spears, for example.

CARL ANDRE is a '60s Minimalist who has been so internally consistent for two decades that one would think he'd feel trapped within the strict limits he sets for himself. He uses only natural materials (wood, stone, or unpolished metal) in identical unjoined multiples distributed directly on the floor or ground according to a grid, never at random. But just as Tony Smith feels he isn't yet "sufficiently acquainted" with his tetrahedrons and octahedrons "to say when their usefulness (for me) would come to an end," Andre seems to have an inexhaustible repertoire of formulations to make with metal squares or 12×12-foot rough-cut timbers. The density of his masses, their weighty feel, allows him to command even the huge Dag Hammarskjold Plaza (to June 9) with relatively few beams, shrinking the space by packing it with tightly interlocked units.

GILLIAN JAGGER uses soft dusty edges in her "Stones of Many Angels" at Lerner-Heller (956 Madison Avenue, to May 26) to counteract, ever so subtly, the sense of heft and roughness of the stone slabs and bits of sculpted detritus she is simulating in rockite cement. They seem fitting to the haze of reverie on ancient remains that surrounds you when you enter her world, a world where distinctions between now and very long ago are nostalgically blurred. ■