Figures Cut into the Air

The Ballet of Mathematical Elegance

by Mark Daniel Cohen

David Smith: A Centennial

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David Smith: A Centennial

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> *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*
> (Everything unknown is taken for magnificent)
> —Tacitus, *Agricola*, section 30

> "I begin to think, Watson," said Holmes, "that I make a mistake in explaining. 'Omne ignotum pro magnifico,' you know, and my poor little reputation, such as it is, will suffer shipwreck if I am so candid. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?"
> —Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Red-Headed League"

1

Every attempt to write of art serves to damp the heat to the crucible. Every effort to make plain what can be perceived at the heart of the aesthetic conundrum manages to make the mystery of it appear plain. If art is anything—and we hold in our hands perpetually the possibility of standing at the precipice, the doll of the thing teetering before the mind's eye, precarious at the brink, we toy permanently with the chance that art may be nothing whatever—then it is surely a portion of the life of the mind, an aspect of the intellectual enterprise: a form of knowing, a formulation to reveal. If art is, then it is an imagining by which we become aware, and what we become aware of is some aspect of some truth, some accuracy that is unknowable, or not so well known, in any other manner. By long-standing acknowledgement, by common sense and the self-evidence evident to our inner eyes, the awareness brought by art is something other than the quotidian, a knowledge less ordinary than the one in which we trade by daylight, than the intellectual cash we pass among each other in the glaring light of noon. It is a luminescent night of the illuminating mind, a dim and shimmering scenario that pulses and shifts invisibly behind the dramas portrayed on the spotlit and fictional stage. But to become aware of such awareness, to tell ourselves what art has brought us to know, to be conscious of it fully, to know it brightly, tears out the heart of the very knowledge we presumably have achieved. It tinkers apart the conjuring gestures as if ripping out the gears and springs of a clock taken down from the mantel. To say to ourselves what we have aesthetically said brings our saying to nothing. It evaporates under the gentle pressure of the palest of breaths. It melts under the delicate friction of the dawning whisper of consciousness.

It is the peril of aesthetics to lie of what it embraces, to enfold what it tries to disclose. To speak openly and precisely of the nature of art is to misrepresent

by its nature the nature of what is spoken. It is not a risk of aesthetics alone. The perhaps more normative manner of approach, the track of the art historical—the determining of the pedigree of the artistic gesture, the placing of the object or event in the necessarily theoretical flow of artistic development and the accounting of its anteriority and implications for the future, the determining of whence it comes and where it leads—does nothing more to reveal the intrinsic, or even conditional, nature of the thing itself, for it displaces the initial object of concern with a story of its background. We are left with a knowledge of actual and proposed (future) history but with no understanding of the pawns that are maneuvered in the game. The work of art has been deposed for the tale of its eventuality. In short, the subject has been changed—the meaning of the art has been substituted by the meaning of the history it plays, like an actor in a theater who knows and delivers his lines but whose mind cavorts in his moments of silence according to secret impulses all his own.

For they are not the same thing. What art conveys and what art history entails are as different as mystery and mundanity, as foreign as a speech sung by Aeschylus and a plot schemed by Euripides. Art history is the explanation of the development of a means to an end. Aesthetics deals in the ends only: the purposes to which the historical process is deployed—not a teleological orientation, for that is mere sleight of hand to return us to the historical, but the motivations, efficient rather than final causations coupled with the interim accomplishments that bubble up along the way, like the ruminations in the cauldron. Aesthetics seeks the reasons that anyone would bother with art at all. For history takes for granted that everything that happens would happen, that given the pertinent factors of influence everything that should happen will happen, and the pawns, simply, are us. The ambition of history is to account for everything that contributes to eventuality, to take into account everything except freedom, and if art is anything, and particularly if it is a precinct in the district of knowing, a pasture in the geography of authentic awareness, it is *freedom*.

And so the considerations that confront art with art history position us in the situation of Macbeth—when we are observing history we are with the witches, watching what we do as if it were done by others, others whose reasons compel them before our eyes, and when we are in history we act with full discretion, or so it seems to us, but the witches are observing. We cannot be in both places at once, and yet we are in both places at once, and so our situation is absurd, for two boxes cannot contain each other, one cannot stand at both ends of the microscope at the same time. But the truth of the matter is—we are the microscopes. Susan Sontag once warned us that the "historicizing perspective" is the "gesture whereby man indefatigably patronizes himself," but that assumes we have a choice about our patronizing, and as Nietzsche instructed us at the beginning of "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," the expense of the freedom to act is the periodic demolition of awareness, the strategic move of forgetting, the ability to choose to live *unhistorically*. To act is to live by the knowledge we cannot say to ourselves

without falling into history, and so the question remains whether the will to act permits us to be conscious at all and whether the knowledge that matters can matter if we know it.

And we confront a similar disability from the other side. The failure to contemplate the implications of art—the reluctance to elucidate the meaning of the work in order to avoid adulterating the aesthetic aspect of the art, to tell ourselves with clarity what we have learned, to phrase it in terms that are self-evident in their significance—deposits us in the deliberate position of knowing nothing of what has been achieved. We become, at our own hands, incapable of saying anything to ourselves regarding what we, we claim, have learned—we know nothing of what we know. We then are left with the single alternative of an uncritical respect—an enthusiasm for what we do not understand. For us to grant our approval of what we do not bother even to evaluate puts us in the position of practicing a superstition. The love of art transforms into a mindless adulation, for there is no form of intelligence that resembles stupidity—the two never look anything alike. And we descend into "art superstition," which has taken on its various forms in our time, although one cannot help but feel that there is nothing new in this: we talk of the "artist's intention," although no one seems able to say much of what it is in any instance; we speak of everyone finding his own meaning in the work, although no one seems to finish the thought or so much as engage the question of whose work the work of art thereby becomes; we consider the contextuality of meaning and so proliferate the possibilities of implication that we mist over and obscure the fact that no one finalizes the approach with the positing of a potential coherent meaning resultant of some context some place; or we stand before the art and nod knowingly. And one would have thought the principal purpose of the intellectual practice, wherever it is undertaken, is to dispel all superstitious impulses.

So it appears that the circle closes around the back. The attempt to phrase artistic meaning in terms that can be clearly comprehended and communicated betrays the work of art by dispelling the aura of depth perception and depth of thought, by installing an ordinariness that is inimical to art's core purpose. It is, in short, to interpret, and Sontag long ago counseled us that to interpret is to remove the art for the sake of hearing ourselves think. On the other hand, to refrain from thinking about art is nothing more than to refrain from thinking—it deserves no better classification—and the art superstition, the sheer avidity for the thing, takes the place of all knowledge, arises as satisfied ignorance, and as is ever the case with the superstitious grip, we move then like a herd. We lose our souls. Both the interpretation to make sense and the complacency that requires no sense be made serve to displace the art; they substitute themselves for what it was we thought we were seeking and for what it was we expected we would obtain. In both cases, the art, for the viewers, for those for whom it was intended, comes to nothing.

The difficulty in knowing with precision what is known through art describes a core epistemological problem: given the implicit and ineluctable self-reflexive nature of awareness, is it possible, fully and properly, to know what we know,

or, more simply, is it possible to know? For, clearly, intrinsic to knowledge is the awareness of possessing the knowledge, the self-awareness of the knower, knowledgeable of oneself as knowing in the moment that one knows. More simply still: all awareness is a species of self-awareness—to know something in the sense of responding to it without concretely being aware of it, or oneself, or of oneself responding, does not seem to qualify as consciousness. It is a contradiction in terms. We must know that we know, else we are unconscious. It is presence of mind that marks the conscious moment, and so the displacement of the object of knowledge occurs of necessity, and the presence of mind disturbs the presence of anything else—the primary subject of mental focus becomes the exercise of mental focus. For to reflect on anything is to place one's own face in the mirror of awareness—one's sense of oneself in the very moment of reflection occludes that which we attempt to reflect upon. Whatever we attempt to know, it is always we who are in the way of the knowledge. The object of thought is ever behind our images, our own protocols of self-aware meditation, the thing we think about is bound within the circuit of the airless bell jar of contemplation, and we see nothing so well as our own smudged fingerprints coating the glass.

The difficulty is not that of the relation of thought to the world. It is the difficulty of knowing anything, of knowing per se, for whatever we attempt to make the center of our focus slips out from under the mental gaze, lost somewhere behind the tunneling awareness of us watching us watching us. The situation is comparable to the problem of contemplating the now moment: any moment we attempt to gaze into becomes evidently a moment remembered, as we discover inevitably that the now moment is the one in which we are making the try at awareness, not that in which we were what we now are trying to be aware of ourselves as. The now is always behind our backs, serving as the backdrop of thinking, as its medium, and not as our center of attention. Nor is it a matter of time, and we may think about this more appropriately as the problem of the "here moment," for the chronology is not what is at issue. Whenever we attempt to focus upon ourselves as acting in the world, we who are focusing are somewhere else in mental space, *not in the world*, observing ourselves in action—standing at the eyepiece of the microscope. However one casts the matter, Macbeth is always with the witches, looking at and thinking about himself as an actor in some other world, in some other place—when he chooses to think.

The problem arguably is the central engagement of philosophy. If philosophy is the field of inquiry into the nature of knowledge, if it is the exploration of the ways in which we know and what is necessarily known prior to the embarkation into the empirical, which lies within the purview of the sciences, then the issue of knowledge that is unknown and threatens to be unknowable looms at the heart of the concern. In short, since philosophy is itself an exercise in thought, a strike at knowledge, is philosophy possible at all? For lying at the heart of this problem is the question: is there a lingua franca that takes us from thought to object? Can the thought of the thing and the thing ever coincide? In principle, there shouldn't be, for the system of thought and

the system of the world are structurally unlike—in principle, there should be no system that could stretch across and integrate evenly with both, there should be no systematic relation possible between them; since they are not alike, it should not be possible for a third system to be like them both—and so inference and physical causation should not agree. Inferences out of rational inevitability should not be able to follow events, to flow at their side. And yet, rational inferences do. Something is off.

Even so, the necessary focus of thought on the thinker, the imposition in every instance of our faces on the mirror and our fingerprints on its glass, forces a question: Are we standing at the wrong end of the echo chamber of our own thoughts? Are we always one moment, or one mental inch, displaced from the validity of our own thinking? Given that thinking places us out of the world, that we as actors in the world, as ever the primary focus of our thinking, are always not the ones who are doing the thinking, is thinking an action it is possible for us to take? Or, when we attempt to think, is it the witches we are hearing? Is it some other voice coming to us? And if so, then when we attempt to think deliberately on some particular matter, how can we trust what we receive, given that we know nothing of its provenance? And whose image is it reflected in the mirror?

Yet, inferences do follow the progress of the world, and we do know something accurately. The evidence of all the testing is that we know much. So there is something more to the process than this system of considerations. Something has been omitted from the equation. We must learn something more about the matter of how we learn, the matter of how and what we come to know. To do that, we require more data, data that stands outside of the range of these contemplations, which render themselves so sedately and obligingly into the internal contradictions minced by this neat logic. And to gather such data, we must resort to one of the precincts in which new knowledge is forged, in which new protocols of knowing are made possible; we must examine what is occurring there. The most controlled and deliberate practice of the recasting of the methods of knowing, of the formulation of knowledge that lies outside the internal frustrations of our knowing, is art. For it is evident that, despite our inability to make clear to ourselves what art means, some of us possess an understanding of art sufficient to create it and some of us possess an understanding sufficient to have a feeling comprehension of it. The mere fact that art exists, unless it proves to be utterly meaningless, constitutes in itself a compelling body of data. Which is to say that art is the laboratory for philosophy, that art is the experimental situation in which philosophy obtains what evidence and proof it may.

2

David Smith has been known, decreasingly over time and for reasons that probably made more sense at the time, as the one sculptor of the Abstract Expressionist movement. However, one can observe some sense to the

attribution if one examines the roster of Abstract Expressionist painters for the two modes into which they divide—those who employ abstraction through the commission of spontaneous gestures to capture and evoke the emotional state of the artist at the extended moment of imaginative creation, who practiced what Harold Rosenberg titled “Action Painting,” among them, Pollock, Franz Kline, and, by his own admission, Robert Motherwell; and, on the other hand, those who employed more geometrically regular formalisms to convey something other than emotional response, by their own admission, something of the “sublime,” including Rothko and Barnett Newman. There are aspects of Smith’s work that suit both modalities and both ambitions, and the second is more revealing.

The centennial exhibition, which appeared at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and, at the time of this writing, is appearing at the Centre Pompidou and is slated to travel to the Tate Modern later this year, is a lavishly supplied deposition that provides an ample opportunity to comprehend Smith’s mode and his accomplishment. Set chronologically, as it was arranged at the Guggenheim, the exhibition includes over 120 sculptures covering the entire range of the sculptor’s career, from 1932 to 1965, the year of Smith’s death. Smith was an artist who frequently worked in series, sequences of works grouped by title, often laboring on sculptures from more than one series at a time. Included here are numerous early works, a wide range of works from throughout his career that come of no series, and a substantial number of examples of every major series: *Medals of Dishonor*, the *Landscape* series, *Agricola*, *Sentinels*, *Tanktotem*, *Forgings*, *Voltri*, *Voltri-Bolton*, and the *Cubis*.

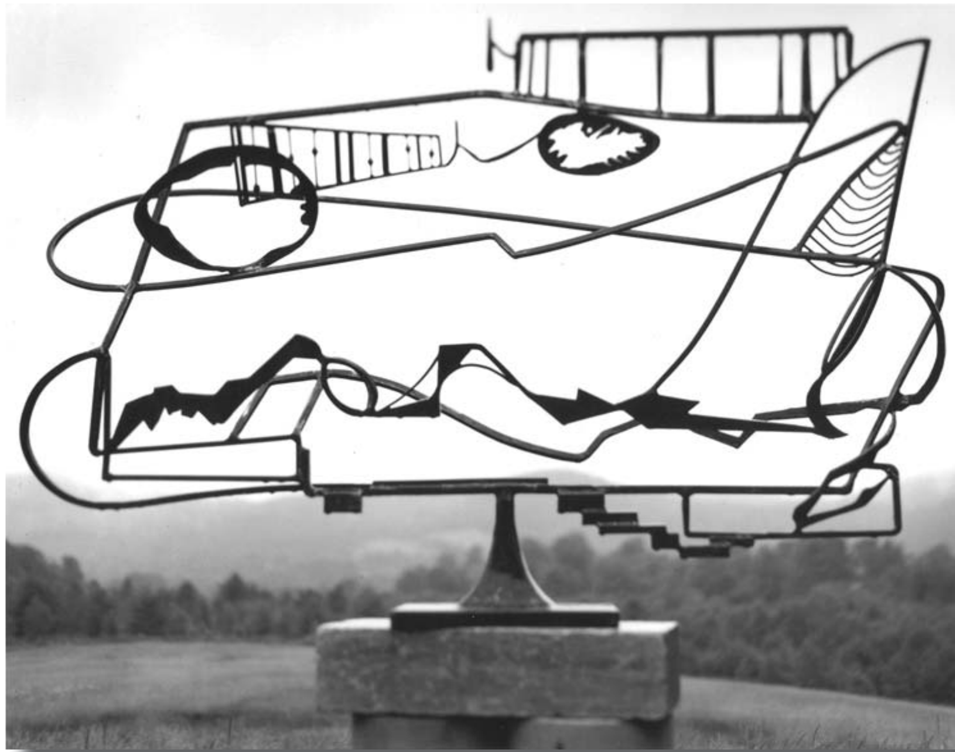
The principal impression of all this is of a titanic moral will, or an enormous proclivity, which may be much the same thing, for accomplishing work. Given that all of the works are metal sculpture, either welded or forged as their primary method of manufacture, the sheer physical willfulness, the capability for limpid though clearly laborious execution, is commanding. Smith just made sculpture, and one cannot imagine he could have devoted much time to making anything else of life’s business. As much as this exhibition is testimony of a body of work, it is as well documentary evidence of the nature of dedication, of the quality of having a purpose, of a devotion that manifests itself not merely in thought but in action, a living passion that compels a life as much and as naturally as breathing makes a life possible—this is what it looks like, after the fact, actually to do something.

Within a body of work this extensive, there is, of course, a wide range of styles and motifs—so much so in Smith’s instance that one is struck by the compelling breadth of aesthetic dreaming, by the seemingly unstoppable fulsomeness of imagination. As one wound one’s way up the spiraling ramp of the Guggenheim, and upwards in the time plan of Smith’s professional life, it felt as if there could be no end to the variety of visual instigation. Any roster of reports of transportive moments is necessarily incomplete. It barely delves past the surface, but it does prove a case by demonstration: that there is artistic life, the authentic aesthetic charge, to the engagement with

any number of Smith's works. A mere beginning: In *The Letter*, 1950, there is a visual loquacity of babbling chatter that stands itself before you like a schoolroom lesson on an unknowable inscription, strange characters written on an invisible board in the air, glowering down on you and waiting for you to throw off your dunce's cap and admit finally that you do in fact understand what it is saying—that you did do your homework. In *Australia*, 1951, we are given a physical realization of arguably the core motif of Modernist Art—anti-gravitation. (It can readily be claimed that Modernism in the visual arts begins with Malevich and his elimination of gravity, of the down vector, which eradicated the horizon line, and with it the vanishing point at infinity, and fundamentally changed the idea of visual space. It should be noted that Malevich made clear he obtained the idea from seeing photographs of the earth taken from the then newly invented airplane—aerial photography created the Modernist visual expanse.) Here, Smith commits one of his most compelling moments of a repeating ambition: to raise the sculpture off not only the pedestal but the floor itself, to hover its broad body in the air by balancing it on what is functionally one leg that, although it must be centered on the ground, is positioned very far off-center on the sculpture and is unnoticeable at first—you don't initially take in where the work extends down to the floor. And the sculpture then leaps through the air that supports it, like an aboriginal animal bolting abruptly out of the unknown forests of the artistic mind.

David Smith, *The Letter*, 1950
Welded steel, 37 1/2 x 25 x 12 inches
(95.3 x 63.5 x 30.5 cm)
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute,
Museum of Art, Utica, New York
Photo: David Revette Photography, Inc.,
Syracuse, New York

There is the half-arrogant, half-embarrassed, self-bemused demeanor of *Wagon II*, 1964, which stares at you in perplexity as it waits for you to figure out its predicament (some number of Smith's sculptures seem placidly to be waiting for you to figure them out): with one of its four wheels noticeably larger than the others, all it could do if ambient is run in circles. There is the haughty dignity and self-enclosing confident verticality of the works of the series begun in 1955, titled the *Forgings*—distinctive in Smith's *oeuvre* for being the only sculptures he did not assemble out of disparate metal pieces but fashioned



David Smith, *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951
Welded steel, 49 1/2 x 75 x 16 3/4 inches (125.7 x 190.5 x 42.5 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase
Photo: David Smith, © The Estate of David Smith,
Licensed by VAGA, New York

with a forging hammer. There is the fusion of the two stances in many of the works of the *Sentinel* and *Tanktotem* series, which appear mildly uneasy and exposed in their somewhat loopy oddness of inappropriately arranged elements—like someone caught off-guard when you unwittingly open an occupied dressing room and locate a customer half into his proud new pair of pants—even as they seem serene and insouciant in the perfect completion of the ingenious principles of composition that ideally arrange their elements. There is the sly, surreptitious intelligence of *Home of the Welder*, 1945—a personal documentation of artistic confession in which tools and materials of the metal sculptor's occupation are welded into a diorama that might have been a three-dimensional mental snapshot of a corner of his studio. It appears deadpan, but things are not as simple as they seem at first, and a sense of deeper intelligence rises up from below like a pentimento seeping through to the surface, or blood spreading across a bandage—the intelligence of what lies beneath. The tools and materials entered into the work are real. Yet here, they are no longer that which made the work, they could not have been the actual tools employed to make this work—they are components of the work. Not only should they be what precedes and makes possible the work—they are, in literal fact, instances of the pre-conditions for the work, separate from it for their status as causes of it. But they are, in literal fact, the work—the result of what they should be doing, should be in a position to do. They are what they are, in fact, and, in fact, what they are not. In their paradoxical posture, they stand at both ends of the microscope: as what must come before and makes possible what they fashion, and what has been fashioned—in two places at once, each box inside the other. As a logical conundrum, *Home of the Welder* precedes substantially, as well as outdoes, the benchmark work of such apparent impossibility—Jasper Johns' *Painted Bronze Beer Cans*, 1960, in which the two cans have been cast and painted with such palpable accuracy, they appear as good as the real thing. They appear to be the real

thing, turning to chaos the very idea of simulation, of representation, with the thing the image of itself *as mere image*—until you go to drink the beer. Then, there is a truth.

For all the vastness of variety of effect, tone, and composition in Smith's work, there is also a distinctive degree of similarity, perhaps beyond the degree inevitable in a strong imagination, an imagination that is incapable ever of looking like something other than itself, an imagination that submits spontaneously to the first requirement of excellence in any of the arts: that one should not need to look at the signature to recognize whose work one is contemplating. The consistency of manner certainly goes beyond that which is imposed by the method of manufacture, by the working in metal that is not cast but is fashioned directly as metal, using the tools of the industrial metal-worker. In this, Smith denotes his first mark of presence in art history: he is the inheritor and first major sculptor to take advantage of the incursions into new manner and style by Picasso and Gonzalez.

But beyond the Cubist formulations that derive from the initiators of welded metal sculpture—pick-ups of the new stylistic conventions one finds in such early pieces as *Agricola Head*, 1933, and *Sawhead*, 1933—there is a visual language of David Smith, or not entirely of Smith but marking his touch to the material. When aspects of that language arise as motifs or standard practices—when they demonstrate themselves as aspects of evident "content"—they are easily recognized and have become part of the arsenal of references for Smith: they show up regularly in the popular criticism. Primary among them is Smith's practice of "drawing in space." Another Cubist—obtained technique, derived specifically from Picasso and transmitted to sculpture by Smith, it is his manner of welding sheets and rods together in an open netting of abstract forms that invariably indicates the presence of an immaterial plane—a "surface" upon which he is sketching. Used frequently, one may take as an example *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951, and observe the implication: the sculpture lacks, for the first time in the art form to our knowledge, a central mass. The work becomes a skeletal disposition of tracked forces, actions in the void that trace their vapors like a time lapse, like a retention of vision of something never seen, too fast to be noticed, and sculpture—the visual art of felt mass, the physically material rendering of imagined images—becomes something conceptually immaterial, literally a figure cut in the air.

This is the aspect of Smith's work that relates to Action Painting, to the form of abstraction that records the momentary emotional state of the artist, and although we know that nothing so densely and strenuously rendered as welded sculpture could be as spontaneous and immediate in its impulse as a painting, it does not matter. The effect is convincing—it does seem as if Smith dashed off the sketch in the air before his conscious mind, his self-aware and deliberate thought, could interfere with the sincerity of confession—and the fact of the matter is that we never have known that Pollock or Kline was truly confessing his state of mind, and that too does not matter. It is never the artist

who is the issue in the art. When there is art, the artist is nothing. And when there is not, there is nothing whatever.

The other influence on Smith contributing to the uniqueness of his manner—and the uniqueness of the individual thought is always founded in the adoption of anterior thoughts, or styles of thought; no mind creates itself, no mind fails to have a mind behind it—is that of Surrealism: another article of identity Smith shares with the Abstract Expressionists. The impression it left can be seen clearly in his use of glyphs: the wormy marks that seem to function as obscure and inscrutable inscriptions in some alien tongue. They arise and prance about in a great number of his works: *The Letter*; *Wagon II*; *Voltri VII*, 1962; and many more. They are more basically adoptions of the biomorphic-abstract forms of what is reputed to be vaguely organic rather than geometric configurations but that ultimately are nothing more than geometric forms employing curved rather than straight lines, no more organic or less geometric than a square. The abstracting is in the smoothing out, or regularizing, of the curve—moving the form away from life experience in that there is little in physical reality that is geometrically simple—and it puts Smith not only in the debt of Arp and Miro but settles him squarely in the single sculptural tradition of the twentieth century, and the last authentic sculptural tradition we have had, by aligning him with Brancusi.

These practices and motifs—the curvilinear sketching literally in the open air, the curving glyphic forms, the anomalous aggregates of discovered elements welded into strangely lyrical unities—are what Smith is now known for. They regularly appear in the reviews of the popular press. This is the profile of his reputation. However, these attributes do not tell us why Smith should be known at all. To a great extent, what they testify to is technical innovation—Smith greatly expanded, virtually created, the vocabulary of welded sculpture, he made possible the achievements of all future sculptors in the mode. In essence, he laid the groundwork. But to have established new forms of expression, to have formulated a new artistic language, is not in itself to have said anything. There is no testimony in this to a meaning in his work. Even Clement Greenberg, who championed Smith as the greatest sculptor of his generation and one of the great American sculptors of any period, admitted as much: “But the means in art never guarantee the ends, and it is for the individual and un-derived qualities of Smith’s art that we praise it, not for its technical innovations.”

What Greenberg celebrated instead were Smith’s formal innovations, the sculptor’s original compositional strategies, which Greenberg saw as new tactics for accomplishing an aesthetic effect while continuing to meet traditional standards of judgment and expectation for artistic relish—the works avoided bad taste; they never fell to the status of “gaucherie,” never descended to the level of “garden statuary, oversized *objets d’art*, and monstrous costume jewelry.” What appealed to Greenberg was Smith’s “formal energy.” He admired the artist’s “unity of style,” the “rugged felicity” of the manner in which a “ ‘classical’ spareness and speed” achieved a “streamlining

without emasculating [Smith's] invention . . . [Smith's] sculpture for all its energy presents an elegance like that of Picasso's and Braque's high cubism." But this is the language of pure sensation, of "style" in the most demoted sense, in the sense exclusively of manner of conception and execution without a concern for further import, for the implications of the manner. This is the language of decoration, of the interest in avoiding gaucherie, merely of the look of the thing. As a concern with problem solving—and that is what discussion of integrating intricacies of surface with velocity of effect amounts to—this is a matter of "shop talk," a concern with how to get things done rather than with what is worth doing. As such, it is simply a variation of the issue of technical innovation—just another means that does not guarantee the end. What is still not addressed is whether there is a meaning in Smith's work, whether Smith has anything to say, and whether we can tell ourselves what it is, rather than do as Greenberg did: restrict ourselves to the suburbs of the real issue, working constantly around what ultimately matters, working there strenuously to say something that sounds right—as Greenberg often seemed to do, with "rugged felicity"—and always talking around the point.

There is a natural impulse to believe that this all is about something, that Smith does have something on his mind, and it is quite evidently something enormously elusive. In fact, Smith appears to be an ideal model for the kind of intellectual obscurity that is the subject of this meditation. For all the ruggedness of his work, there is a delicacy about Smith's achievements, there is something behind them that is fleeting, that is immediately before one's eyes and yet is impossibly inscrutable—something that withers at a breath. At the root, at the gut level, Smith's sculpture wants to be taken as abstract not primarily for technical or stylistic reasons but because he seems so palpably to be speaking in some strange foreign language—*because he seems to be speaking*.

The sheer alacrity of his imagination, the energy that Greenberg observed, the vast degree of variation operating within the rigor and definitions of an accomplished and recognizable style—the velocity of his dreaming—suggests that Smith drew upon a source, that there was a well of inspiration, a fund of ideas that formulated themselves in his work. It speaks of a spontaneity of expression, an ease of fomenting of sculptural ideas that Smith seems merely, as if this were some small thing, to have followed. Certainly, it was how he spoke of his life's project. In discussing the intrinsic nature of an artist, he observed, "Identifying himself as the artist, he becomes his own subject as one of the elements in nature. He no longer dissects it, nor moralizes upon it; he is its part . . . I've made [this work] because it comes closer to saying who I am than any other method I can use. This work is my identity. There were no words in my mind during its creation, and I'm certain words are not needed in its seeing; and why should you expect understanding when I do not?" Greenberg noted the spontaneous impulse when he complimented Smith on the ability to "act unconsideredly on every impulse."

The operative phrase in Smith's observations is "identifying himself as the

artist." Clearly, the hypothetical scenario is not one in which some person claims the mantle of "artist" and then follows whatever impulses come to him, the results therefore by definition being art. That is an error for our time. It is rather that the individual qualifies himself as an artist by entering into the enterprise of authentic art, and then the impulses he follows will be those of an artist. In short, there is something there, somewhere from which art draws its water.

And it is well and good for Smith not to need words, not to require "understanding," but that will not do for us, even if Smith could not understand why. He may well have known himself to be legitimately "the artist," but we do not, not until we understand what has been accomplished. If Smith was drawing from the well, then presumably something is being expressed through his work, whether deliberately on his part or not, whether knowingly or not, and it is our business to determine if he knew what he was talking about—if this is the real thing. Or, more to the point, since it is we who nominate Smith from among the uncountable number of candidates for our respect to be found from the artists thrown up by the gallery system and then disregarded, and from the far greater number never even acknowledged by the system, and since we continue to do so every time we attend to his work, the question more appropriately should be: *Do we know what we are talking about?*

To know that, we must know what Smith's work is talking about, what its meaning is—even, if there is a meaning. Otherwise, we have fallen into the art superstition, and worse, we have focused our mystified respect by the direction of what is in the end merely a merchant system. We have been sold Smith, among so many others. Should we have been? Should we continue to permit ourselves to be? Should we love what we are told to love?

Smith's protestations of ignorance are really claims of an alternate knowledge. They are knowledgeable claims. More significant, they are not credible. Beyond the fact that they fit all too well the image of the inspired artist who needs not know what he is doing to know what he is doing, it is simply not probable that, if there is the intrinsic importance that Smith implicitly asserts, the artist, who among other things is the person who must be most intimately familiar with the work, would come to know nothing of what is there. If such close exposure to the work does the artist no good, informs him of nothing, then what can we expect it to do for us, who will never know it so well? Certainly, Smith drove by spontaneous impulse, working, or at least "thinking," more rapidly than his interpreting mind could follow. The meaning of individual works likely would not come to him, or need not for him to accomplish them. The mirroring structure of self-aware thought that watches itself do as it does what it does would preclude the full investment of the creative mind—that is the very heart of the problem. But it is not likely that Smith would come to realize nothing of his overall project, that he would know nothing of the nature of his art *per se*.

At moments, Smith does give us clues to the buried meaning—he does let

slip. In writing on his *Landscape* series for a 1947 catalogue, Smith observed that for him, "a landscape is a still life of Chaldean history." The "Chaldean" reference is biblical: in Genesis 11:31, Abraham is said to come "from Ur of the Chaldees." Smith is referring to his work as coming from the very beginning of our civilization, as expressive of impulses that reach back to the origination, to how we thought and what we knew when we began. Thus, we see the significance of drawing in space and of the glyphs of so many works, of *The Letter*, *Wagon II*, and *Voltri VII*—Smith claims he is "writing" in an original language, in an artistic language that precedes the degradation of civilization. One may say that it is a position in league with that presented by Ernst Cassirer, for one, in *Language and Myth*—language, human expression, began not with prose but with poetry, which possessed the capability to express with full immediacy, with purity of feeling, with the capabilities of the mythic mind. As civilization develops, the capacity for abstract thought does as well, at the expense of language's initial poetic power, which is retained in one realm: art.

In Cassirer's own words:

> But although language and art both become emancipated, in this fashion, from their native soil of mythical thinking, the ideal, spiritual unity of the two is reasserted upon a higher level. If language is to grow into a vehicle of thought, an expression of concepts and judgments, this evolution can be achieved only at the price of forgoing the wealth and fullness of immediate experience. In the end, what is left of the concrete sense and feeling content it once possessed is little more than a bare skeleton. But there is one intellectual realm in which the word not only preserves its original creative power, but is ever renewing it; in which it undergoes a sort of constant palingenesis, at once a sensuous and a spiritual reincarnation. This regeneration is achieved as language becomes an avenue of artistic expression.

To "speak" artistically is to speak in our first language, in the language of our first world, in which we knew more than we now, ordinarily, know. Put differently, the Dionysian preceded the Apollinian, and, as we know, we can return to it only by means of art.

But, what is the nature of that first language, the language to which Smith assigns his art, and how can it be read? In a title of one of his sculptures, Smith gives us another and more substantive indication.

The work is *Helmholtzian Landscape*, 1946, a small collage of painted abstract metal elements that looks distinctly like a Miro composition. In itself, it is no more revealing than any other of Smith's more Surrealist works, but the

indication here is in the title. To my knowledge, Smith did not say to whom "Helmholtzian" was intended to refer, but there is only one likely possibility: Hermann von Helmholtz, the nineteenth-century physician and physicist who, among his numerous achievements, devised the principle of the conservation of energy, created a theory of perception, and authored a treatise on the nature of music.

In Helmholtz's theory of perception, sensations are determined in their qualities largely by the nature of the sense organs that "perceive" them. Our sense organs, in essence, create the sensations they report, which are then conveyed to the brain and ultimately to the mind by a sequence of nerve stimulations. Sensations are, in Helmholtz's terminology, signs of what it is in the world that initially stimulates them, rather than images of what they sense—they indicate something that they do not simulate. But they are not entirely internally devised. Sensations are responsive to the world in the way we track them, in the way they change as we peruse them: if one turns one's head, what one is seeing is fabricated, but the understanding of the difference in direction is reliable. Equally reliable are the sense of distance and delay in perceived physical interactions. A bit more refined—our understanding of space is intuitively given, an internal formulation, but it is the way in which we comprehend our exposure to "lawful regularities" among what there is in the world, whatever it is. That aspect of our perceptions of space is true.

For Helmholtz, art holds a special position in the hierarchy of our forms of knowledge. Art, and Helmholtz emphasizes in this poetry and the plastic arts, is oriented on the most reliable of our perceptions, those that best reveal what is authentically given us regarding the relations in the world. It is the business of art, because it is the capability of art, to isolate those aspects of experience that reflect necessary relations in what is perceptible and disregard reflections of accidentally related qualities—those relations that are imposed by the workings of our sense organs.

(It should be noted that Helmholtz's theory of the workings of the sense organs in creating the larger substance of our perceptions is virtually identical to Nietzsche's theory in his essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense." Portions of Helmholtz's theory are included in his book *On the Sensations of Tone*, beginning on page one, a book that Nietzsche read in April 1873, two months before writing *his* essay.)

All our perceptions are unreliable in that they offer no verisimilitude. Our language is similarly deluded in that it reflects and works with things as we perceive them. What then is the language in which art can do better, the language that Helmholtz recommends and with which Smith aligns his sculpture? What is the first language?

Our impulses aid us as we view the broad range of Smith's works, when we come upon the *Cubi* series, his final series, which he began in 1961 and worked on through 1965. These are most people's favorites from among Smith's sculpture and for legitimate reason. There is a sense among them of

something having arrived, all the promise and invention of the enormous body of prior works having come ultimately to this. There is a sense of culmination to them. When one thinks of David Smith, one thinks first of these sculptures. They are inherently likable, but more than that, they seem inexplicably right.

The *Cubi* series is Smith's series of geometric works, in that here he is working with what artists turn to when they wish to signal that the matter of importance is to be found in the geometry of the work: the simple forms of plane and solid geometry. Here we find the side of Smith's work that corresponds to the other mode of Abstract Expressionism, that of Rothko and Newman, in pursuit of something other than immediate emotional expression, and here we have the answer: the better language is the language of mathematics, more specifically, of geometry—the language by which we register and calibrate principles of relations, the language Helmholtz trusted.

David Smith, *Cubi I*, 1963
Stainless steel, 124 x 34 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches (315 x 87.6 x 85.1 cm)
Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase,
Special Purchase Fund
Photo: © 2005 Detroit Institute of Arts

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Setting abstraction aside, the subject matter of art is ego-oriented, which is to say that it suffers from a tremendous naivety. Art with subject matter in the normative sense is set to a human scale. What's more, it is dedicated to human issues. This is not true just of art concerned with social issues, where the point goes without saying—it is equally true of art that aspires to other concerns available to the imagination, to the life of the mind and of the spirit, even, and equally, to the art of the sublime, for all its ambition for the transportive experience and the vision that penetrates the veil of earthly illusion. The nature in which we live is simply not awesome, regardless of how it strikes us in our quotidian experiences. A mountain range is not monumental. It is puny in comparison to colliding nebula. It is merely a pile of tectonic wreckage. A peaceful stream is not soothing inherently. Inherently, it is neither particularly smooth and quiet nor particularly vibrant and exercised. Its range of options is just not that great in comparison to things as they are, except to such as we. Nothing we know directly is comparable to black holes, or supernovas, or collapsed dead stars. We are extraordinarily naïve in what we permit to impress us, and in the values and insights we root in those impressions, for we measure everything against ourselves, and what truly out-measures us is beyond that scale of worth. It fades off in the imaginative distance, and it includes most things in the universe.

It was undoubtedly this that Pascal comprehended when he regarded the scale of the universe and said, "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me."

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then.

It is easy to disregard Pascal's reaction as the naïve response of the earth-bound mind when first confronting the scientific facts we now know so well, but Pascal is right, and it is we who are naïve, and all of us are congenitally earth-bound. Our imaginations are for the most part engulfed by flat-world thinking. Pascal grasped what can never be rendered harmless by knowing attitudes: the stunning realization that we will never appreciate how insignificant we are. We are simply not capable of it. And it undoubtedly, as well, was what Plato had in mind when he observed that "no human thing is of serious importance."

The terror of that which is so vast, so out of all imaginable scale that it eradicates us by its return gaze is so entrenched, so ineluctable, that it is a portion of our very natures. And it can be said that in the face of a science that refuses to turn away from this truth, Phenomenology is the attempt to reinstall the human scale, and the human naivety, through the study of perception and the pre-conditions of experience in place of empirical fact and ontological speculation. It can be argued that the Phenomenological error—the impulse to establish the human scale of perception as the yardstick for all philosophical speculation—is an infection, a carrier of the contagion of the humanly naïve, and as such, that it is a function of the very fear Pascal felt, that it is a gesture of terror, an act of philosophical cowardice, an attempt to tame the mad dog of the universe so that it will not maul us.

David Smith, *Cubi XXVII*, 1965
Stainless steel, 111 3/8 x 87 3/4 x 34 inches (282.9 x 222.9 x 86.4 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, By exchange, 1967
Photo: David Heald, © The Estate of David Smith,
Licensed by VAGA, New York

Abstraction is the mode of art that deducts the human naivety, that removes from the imaginative conception all reference to what we now know to be the mis-conceived scale of values and impressions of significance. It eliminates from its formulations all use of imaginative language that carries the contagion, that dreams on the scale of that which is innately insignificant. Its language is rather that of pure form, which is to say that, whatever its mode of abstracting, its language is geometry, for geometry is the very substance of

all shape, all form. Geometry is the pre-condition for shape, for it is the pre-condition for expanse, for the possibility of anything beyond instantaneity, which means it is the possibility for anything at all, and not merely “things,” not merely discrete objects of the world and of the imagination, but the world and the imagination themselves, which can exist only in that they have geometric specifications. Which is to say that geometry is the medium of existence and of thought, and all specification of existence or thought has a precise geometric nature.

Hence, geometry is the language that remains when we deduct the language rooted in our naivety, the languages, verbal or visual, whose vocabulary is derived from our perceptions, from the human-scaled experiences. More broadly, mathematics is the one language we have in which even the attempt at defensible significance can be phrased. Helmholtz knew it, but he also knew that what was required was the most advanced geometry of his time, a geometry that the principal philosopher before him who had grasped the need of geometry did not have. Helmholtz observed that Kant’s theories were limited, and some of his central assertions dubious, because he “was influenced by the mathematics and the physiology of the senses of his time.” He could not have known that the tenets of Euclidean Geometry are discretionary and not necessary—it is simply that he wrote too early. However, if one updates Kant, as Helmholtz did, by recognizing that the core tenets of geometry are not limited to those of Euclidean Geometry, then Kant’s approach is sound and geometry in its proper core stipulations is, in the way Kant used the term, transcendental. And as if to ratify Helmholtz’s conclusion, using the geometries of multi-dimensional space and of space with positive and negative curvatures, twentieth-century physics spanned the universe.

Which is to observe that mathematics is the language of both science and of art—not just of abstract art, which is reduced in mis-conceptions to the point of rendering nothing but pure form, but all art, for art is rooted in composition, in harmonic relations of parts, in numeric ratios. One need only think of the Golden Ratio and the point is made: anything composed is composed in mathematics. Math is the language in which lyricism is pronounced. And mathematics is the first language, and not only because it was there for us in the beginning, because it was there before us. Look at such works as *Cubi XXVII*, 1965. Despite the clean, polished, and gleaming surface of the steel, in its basic form there seems something ancient about it, as ancient as Stonehenge, as ancient as the pyramids, as ancient as Pythagoras. Here is the Chaldean still life Smith aimed at.

And as the language of art, mathematics is also the language of philosophy. The naivety arrives when we look to the world in which we live for it is we who do the looking—it is our faces in the mirror. But there is knowledge that comes of knowledge, and we find it arising in two arenas: in mathematics, as Kant knew, and in art. Thus, it is both in math and in art that the a priori synthetic is found and can be delved. Thus, art is the laboratory of philosophy, through the harmonics of composition, through its mathematical nature, which is the

language that can be clearly thought, the language fully of daylight. In that language, we find the meaning of geometry, and of artistic composition—it is the intrinsic structure by which ideas give rise to ideas, the pattern of the growth of pure thought.

Even as math is a language of intellectual daylight, it is the language of mystery, like Musil's "daylight mysticism," filled with wonder, as any mathematician will note—the mystery of things brought into self-aware thought, lacking the naivety of the human scale, lacking the occlusion of the face in the glass. And it is the language of life. One can see it in the effervescent dance of the forms in *Cubi I*, in the mounting aspiration of aesthetic dreaming that rises into the air like an elegance of sparkling light. And one can see it in some of the most challenging and intellectually remunerative art of the Modernist period, which despite the established story is to a surprising degree to be found in sculpture. In Naum Gabo, we find bravely failed attempts to convey perceptually the nature of non-Euclidean geometry, tries at pushing perception to begin to instigate some idea of the structure of the world as we must suspect it exists beyond the range and limitations of our perception, as it must be behind the face in the mirror. In Kenneth Snelson—who among his other virtues is beyond question the most intelligent artist working today—we find bravely successful demonstrations of the architecture of the void in which all material existence is suspended and of the immaterial expanse within which thinking engenders itself. And thus we find the proof—offered in schematic ballets of polished aluminum rods and steel cables that seem to lift and pirouette the very air as if it were a sanctuary of meditation, as if the world around us were a Platonic retreat created for the purpose of having us live a life of nothing but intellectual fascinations—that the two are somehow one.

What Snelson tells us is that, with art in which the emphasis is on the geometric, art in which everything specific to human perception has been removed, the face is still in the mirror. Art works such as the sculptures of Kenneth Snelson, such as those of Smith's *Cubi* series, are not deep explorations of emotion, or social commentaries, or biographical confessions. Nevertheless, what they reveal is a portion of human nature. What they show is as much a part of us as are heartbreak, and joy, and freedom, and tragedy, and fate. If art is a dredging of what is central in us, then the geometry without which it could not exist, the geometry that creates the lyrical possibility of its being art, is its revelation. When we see the abstract forms that are what remain when the naiveties of human perception have been eluded, it remains that we are seeing ourselves. As much as we are the microscope, so too, we are the mirror itself. The two boxes of images, the image of ourselves and the image of the world, are inside each other. We are Macbeth.

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