



MINIMAL DIFFERENCES

I'M WRITING TO RESPOND TO HAL FOSTER'S ESSAY "Antinomies," written for the sixtieth-anniversary issue of *Artforum*, in which he reflects on comments made by artists Tony Smith and Eva Hesse in separate *Artforum* interviews—the former published in December 1966, the latter in May 1970. Proposing a theoretical connection between the two, Foster states that "in each case the artist associates Minimalism with Nazism." As executive director of the Tony Smith Foundation, I want to look more closely at some of the issues raised by Foster regarding Smith's comments and work. "Talking with Tony Smith," Samuel Wagstaff Jr.'s 1966 interview for *Artforum*, is indeed an important chapter in the trajectory of Smith's career as an artist. And Smith's comments would spur Michael Fried's central argument in "Art and Objecthood," a seminal essay published a few months later in the pages of this same magazine.

Fried's references to Smith's comments, combined with a slew of other exhibitions, interviews, and articles around the same time, would position Smith within an evolving discourse on Minimalism, catapulting the artist into heated debates about modernist sculpture, monumentality, and representational art. Yet, while timely and situational, the identification of Smith as a "Minimalist"—the superficial label was ascribed to him on the basis of the nonreferentiality of his sculptures

alongside their formal and material attributes (not to mention fabrication techniques)—did not adequately reflect the breadth or complexity of his intellectual and creative pursuits. It has taken some sixty years since that interview was published to begin to extract those early readings of Minimalism from later analyses of his sculptures. I believe it is important to forestall another misreading of Smith's work—this time within a fascist architectural aesthetic.

Foster, citing a now-historic anecdote, points out that Smith's recollection of a nighttime drive on the New Jersey Turnpike speaks to his preoccupation with scale, with monumentality. True enough, it was driving at night on the newly asphalted turnpike, moving through a vast unmarked landscape experienced in relation to human scale, that Smith vividly recalled. The turnpike in relation to the dark landscape was perceived as monumental. The experience of it was sublime, and Smith pondered whether that sublimity could compete with representational art. I think the references to scale and monumentality are key to understanding his comments. Foster says Smith wanted "his sculpture to partake of the scale of architecture." Smith in fact wanted his sculpture to be monumental. And the term *monumental* has been applied, almost ubiquitously, to Smith's art since he and his large-scale sculpture *Smoke* were pictured on the cover of *Time* magazine in October 1967 to accompany an article titled "Master of the Monumentalists."

After reflecting on Foster's essay, I believe this experience and concept of "monumentality" is a better way to consider the aesthetics of Smith's work that Foster likens to the Nazi-era Zeppelin Field and drill ground in Nuremberg—a jarring reference, as Foster points out, that immediately follows the oft-cited turnpike passage in the interview.

That "brutal juxtaposition," as Foster calls it, should not be overlooked. But it does not necessarily follow that we should readily associate a pursuit of monumentality with the glorification of Nazism. Is that conclusion what Foster is after? He does not say but rather writes of feeling "long troubled" by intimations gleaned from Smith's brief reference in a heavily edited interview. I think that there is more to explore and, as with many long careers in art, that a more nuanced interpretation is possible. In a footnote to "Art and Objecthood," for example, Fried refers to Smith's comment about the German airstrip. But whereas Foster positions Smith's reference within the context of a Nazi arena and the capacity of architecture to orchestrate movements through space, Fried chose to situate Smith's allusion to the Nazi setting far differently, writing, "Smith's supreme example of a Surrealist landscape was the parade ground at Nuremberg."* That statement reflects

*Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967) 12–23.

on the experience of temporality identified with Surrealist painting, which helps support Fried's argument about the theatricality connected to the temporal experience of what became known as Minimalist sculpture in the main body of "Art and Objecthood."

In the early 1950s, when Smith made that nighttime drive with his Cooper Union students, he was not yet a sculptor. He was still working as an architect, having finished several large architectural commissions while taking on smaller design projects for clients like gallerist and artist Betty Parsons. Although practicing architecture would eventually cease to occupy his attention, there was no definitive break from "thinking" architecture. Design would continue to influence his work across the board, even as he committed to making sculpture by the early 1960s. His early paintings from the 1930s through the '50s, along with his writing from the same period, similarly show a definite preoccupation with Surrealism. Shortly after the 1951 turnpike drive, from 1953 to 1955, Smith lived in postwar Germany—in and around Nuremberg, in fact—while his wife, Jane Lawrence, an opera singer, traveled and performed throughout Europe. Letters and other writings in the Tony Smith Archive show that Smith, left to his own devices, often wandered and explored the landscapes and urban spaces in and around Nuremberg while contemplating his future as an artist. To Foster's point, in the conversations with Wagstaff that make up the 1966 *Artforum* interview, Smith was obviously trying to ground his recent sculpture in the monumentality and scale he admired in architecture. The reference to the turnpike very closely connects temporally to his return from Europe in the mid-'50s. It is very likely, therefore, that he linked the two experiences in order to give a vocabulary to his own developing understanding of what he was working through (and toward) with his sculpture.

The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial competition in Washington, DC, consisted of a tripartite composition of monolithic walls: three white-granite elements, envisioned to define a truly monumental space. The design reflected the same interests that Smith would a few years later pursue in his sculpture: individual elements arranged into a unified whole to be experienced collectively. The FDR Memorial design—especially as illustrated in Foster's essay, where it appears alongside a photograph of Albert Speer's 1937 Zeppelin Field grandstand in Nuremberg—is clearly meant to draw parallels to an alleged interest in Nazi architecture. Yet

this forgoes an analysis of what that work means to the compositional nature of Smith's early sculpture, not to mention the ongoing pursuit of monumentality in his work. Therefore, I would caution against making such a direct connection. Moreover, I would caution against even choosing to illustrate the point using this particular photograph, which shows the arena's dramatic interior and vast public seating rather than the low, unassuming concrete steps set back and running the length of the exterior, which Smith calls out specifically in the interview.

In fact, as Foster writes, Smith's association with the aesthetics of Nazi architecture was "more about scalar impact." Since Smith mentions his 1960 design for the FDR Memorial in the interview, Foster naturally gravitates to it for his argument here. But if it's the case that the associations are grounded in "scalar impact," not the aesthetics of Nazi architecture, there are other representative works that would bring us closer to exploring Smith's interests in the intersections of experience and monumentality, the sublime, and the unaccountable proportion of human scale in relation to built or natural environments. Indeed, that is what Smith was doing when

The sublime is what Smith referred to when driving down the highway. Another project, less well known but equally important within this context, is a proposal for a mountain in Los Angeles—another work related to the U.S. freeway system. The unrealized *Mountain Cut* also corresponds with Smith's interest in the incremental shift in human perspective in relation to the landscape. In 1968, the curator Wagstaff identified the potential use of a site at Round Mountain in Valencia, California. Round Mountain is visible from today's I-5, which connects Los Angeles and San Francisco. Smith envisioned it as a monumental outdoor work. He proposed to radically transform the topography of the mountain landscape by excavating its upper portion and inserting an enormous tetrahedral concrete form into the void. *Mountain Cut* was conceived and designed to be seen from below and from a distance by people who were in motion, driving on the nearby freeway along the axis of the mountain. Viewers' perception of Smith's landscape intervention would shift and change as they passed by in their automobiles.

Foster writes that a project like the FDR memorial "might" be read as a scene for a "different kind of collectivity." I believe that is true. In fact, a large corpus of unpublished writings in the Tony Smith Archive (which

will be revealed in time) is testament to the artist's extraordinary interest in and commitment to the democratization of public space and the importance of urban spaces for communal life. And yet too little is publicly known about such a well-known artist—an unfortunate circumstance the Tony Smith Foundation is committed to correcting. Currently under way is an eight-book publishing project by the MIT Press that will include not only four volumes of a catalogue raisonné—dedicated to Smith's sculpture, architecture, painting, and drawing—but also a companion series called "Against Reason." These latter four books, published alongside the catalogue raisonné volumes, will offer contemporary readings and interpretations of Smith's work by an array of artists, writers, and designers from an equally wide array of disciplines.

The important point here is to portray Smith's oeuvre within the broad discourses the artist himself embraced and to counter readings that, in this and other cases, wrongly position his work as something it is not.

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Hal Foster responds:

Thanks for the thoughtful letter. It helps me to clarify—or to restate—a few points made in my piece. This is very tricky material, of course, and I don't blame James Voorhies for mistaking my argument. But mistake it he has (I trust not intentionally so).

The associations with Nazi structures were made by Smith and Hesse, not me. My purpose was to parse them and, in doing so, to complicate them, not to reduce them reductively, and least of all to equate them with Minimalist structures (proto- or otherwise). Hence my criticism of commentators who have indeed made "direct connections" of the sort that concern Voorhies in his letter. Again, in my view, if any relation does exist, it takes the form of an antinomy, not an equation. As far from casting aspersions on Smith, I actually celebrate him for his dialectical turning of potentially oppressive "scalar impact" to potentially democratic spatial order. Voorhies agrees with me—quotes me in fact—on the key issues. His real disagreement seems to be with the layout of the piece.

I'll step aside from his shadowboxing, then, and simply say that like all others who admire Smith, I look forward to the publications Voorhies promotes in his letter. □