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David Smith's Equivalence

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David Smith American, 1906–1965

Artists of David Smith's generation often sought to produce artworks that challenged the conventions of artistic "expression" and the expectations—technical, formal, psychological, interpretative—that accompanied them. Smith (like his contemporaries Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky) was one of a group of artists whose formal innovations were guided both by a desire to align themselves with avant-garde art and by a pressing need to distance themselves from European affiliation. In Barnett Newman's words, these artists wanted to liberate themselves from "the impediments . . . of Western European painting" in order to "create images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches" of European culture.[1] A technical innovator, among other things, Smith would eventually become one of the first American artists to use welding as an art form in the 1930s.

While Smith shared those sentiments, his early sculptural practice reflects the influence of such innovative sculptors as Alberto Giacometti and Julio González, and the painters Picasso, Kandinsky, and Mondrian. At the same time, Smith's works consistently demonstrate the artist's sustained effort to resist easy stylistic solutions, an independence that is the result as much of his particular technical practice as it is of the driving force behind his work: sculpture's potential to activate an equivalence between the reality of a physical body's experience in an environment and its embodiment in sculptural form.[2]

Smith's anthropomorphic constructions from 1950–55 reflect the artist's interest in the abstract human figure in his mature work. Earlier experiments in Surrealist imagery, containing bird and animal elements set within open iron frameworks and composed along directional lines, exhibit a calligraphic lyricism Smith later abandoned in favor of planar and volumetric forms welded together.[3] The linear quality of his early work yielded to the manipulation of heavy, regular geometric shapes, burnished steel planes, cubes, rectangles, and cylinders, usually arranged vertically to reflect the posture and orientation of an upright human body.

Smith was particularly concerned with re-creating in sculptural form the felt experience of his intersection with nature and the environment. In 1959 he wrote: "The nature to which we all refer in the history of art . . . is no longer anecdote or robed and blindfolded virtue . . . [The artist] no longer dissects [nature], nor moralizes upon it; he is its part. The outside world of nature is equal."[4] To make a sculpture that is equal to nature is perhaps best accomplished not through mere imitation or illustration but by establishing an equivalence—a qualitative correspondence—between a certain formal practice and one's sense of being "in" nature.

Four Units Unequal[5] consists of four rectangular tooled and burnished stainless-steel boxes supported one above the other by four rectangular steel plates welded at right angles to the long side of each box. The dimensions of the boxes vary; the longest is twenty-eight inches across. Smith intended this work, like those of his later Cubi series (for which this sculpture is a precedent), to be placed out of doors. The artist used a carborundum grinding wheel to finely scratch the steel,[6] a process that yielded a surface that does not show water spots and obviates the need for special coatings of paint. Additionally, Smith was very concerned with how his sculptures looked, wishing them to be visually compelling. The patterns created by the grinding wheel create an aesthetically appealing surface of spatially ambiguous swirls that recall the gestural painting of Smith's friend and contemporary Jackson Pollock.

The most striking visual effect of this technique, however, is to make the surfaces of the sculpture appear transparent. The viewer seems to see *into* the boxes, which are no longer

Four Units Unequal, 1960
stainless steel
70½ x 28¼ x 14¼ in.

opaque volumes impenetrable to sight but are now dematerialized forms. Nevertheless, the work asserts a resolute physicality. The sculpture—vertical, balanced, symmetrical—seems to correspond to our own bodily position and orientation; its arrangement of boxes along a steel skeleton imitates our own arrangement of legs, torso, neck, and head along a spine. Just as the work faces us, we pass into its place and become equally involved in the reality of placement and space.

Smith wrote, "Most of my sculpture is personal, needs a response in close proximity and the human ratio."[7] He found the ratio he sought by establishing an equivalence between sculpture and viewer. The reality of Smith's art is not felt in the difference between us "in here" and it "out there." Rather, it is constituted and made self-evident by the transposition of the object and ourselves, no longer separate, but identical. Our attention, when it becomes general and structural rather than specific and particular, allows us to make such exchanges between inside and outside: it becomes attuned to the equivalence of mind and nature, of body and world.[8]—*M.S.*

5. Samaras, "An Exploratory Dissection of Seeing," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (Dec. 1967): 27.

David Smith

1. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now" (1948), in Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 173.
2. See Claude Cernuschi, *"Not an Illustration but the Equivalent": A Cognitive Approach to Abstract Expressionism* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 67.
3. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Sculpture of David Smith: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Garland, 1977).
4. Smith, "Tradition and Identity" (1959), in Garnett McCoy, ed., *David Smith* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 146–48.
5. *Four Units Unequal* is the third in a series that includes *5½* (1956), now in the Harvard University Art Museum, and *Five Units Equal* (1956) in the Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York.
6. Albert Marshall, "A Study of the Surfaces of David Smith's Sculpture," in *Conservation Research*, Studies in the History of Art 51 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1995), 96.
7. David Smith, "Notes on My Work" (1960), in Jane Harrison Cone, *David Smith, 1906–1965: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1966), 102–4.
8. See Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 4, 191.

Chapter 12: Garden

Alexander Calder

1. Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with W. W. Norton, 1999), 288.
2. Carmen Giménez and Alexander S. C. Rower, eds., *Calder: Gravity and Grace* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), 27.
3. Haskell, *The American Century*, 288.
4. Giménez and Rower, eds., *Calder: Gravity and Grace*, 37.
5. Ibid., 33–34.

Marisol

1. Grace Glueck, "Not Pop, Not Op—It's Marisol!" *New York Times Magazine*, March 7, 1965, 45.
2. "Transforming Found Objects: Marisol," *Art and Man* 16, nos. 4, 5 (Feb. 1986).
3. Eleanor Heartney, "Marisol: A Sculptor of Modern Life," published at www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa661.htm, 4.

George Rickey

1. Peter Selz, *George Rickey: Sixteen Years of Kinetic Sculpture* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1966).

George Segal

1. Sam Hunter, *George Segal* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).
2. John Perreault, "Plaster Caste," in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
3. Segal, in Martin Friedman and Graham W. J. Beal, *George Segal: Sculptures* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1978).

Chapter 13: Annex

Richard Artschwager

1. Roberta Smith, "Art: Richard Artschwager at the Whitney Museum," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1988.
2. Catherine Kord, *Richard Artschwager* (Frankfurt am Main: Galerie Neuendorf, 1990), 12.
3. Ibid., 22.
4. Artschwager to Billie Milam Weisman, June 22, 2000, Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation archives, Los Angeles.

Joseph Cornell

1. Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 214.
2. Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 16.
3. Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 137.
4. Dawn Ades, "The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell," in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Joseph Cornell* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 33.
5. Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 187.
6. Waldman, *Joseph Cornell*, 28.

Joe Goode

1. Goode discussed the pluralistic approach to teaching in Paul Karlstrom, "Interview with Joe Goode," Smithsonian Archives of American Art, published at http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/goode99.htm. According to Goode, every department had a different director, and students frequently argued the pros and cons of current art movements.
2. According to Goode, "Irwin didn't care what you painted like or what your image was. He was more concerned about what kind of reason you had for doing it. And Emerson was very important because he had this link to history because he had known Motherwell, and he knew Clyfford Still, and he knew Franz Kline, and also some of the artists in Europe." See Karlstrom, "Interview with Joe Goode."
3. Ibid. Milk was delivered regularly, because Goode's wife had recently given birth to a baby girl.
4. Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 26.

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