



**Terminal Iron Works**    **The Sculpture of David Smith**    **Rosalind E. Krauss**

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## **The Sculpture of David Smith**

Rosalind E. Krauss

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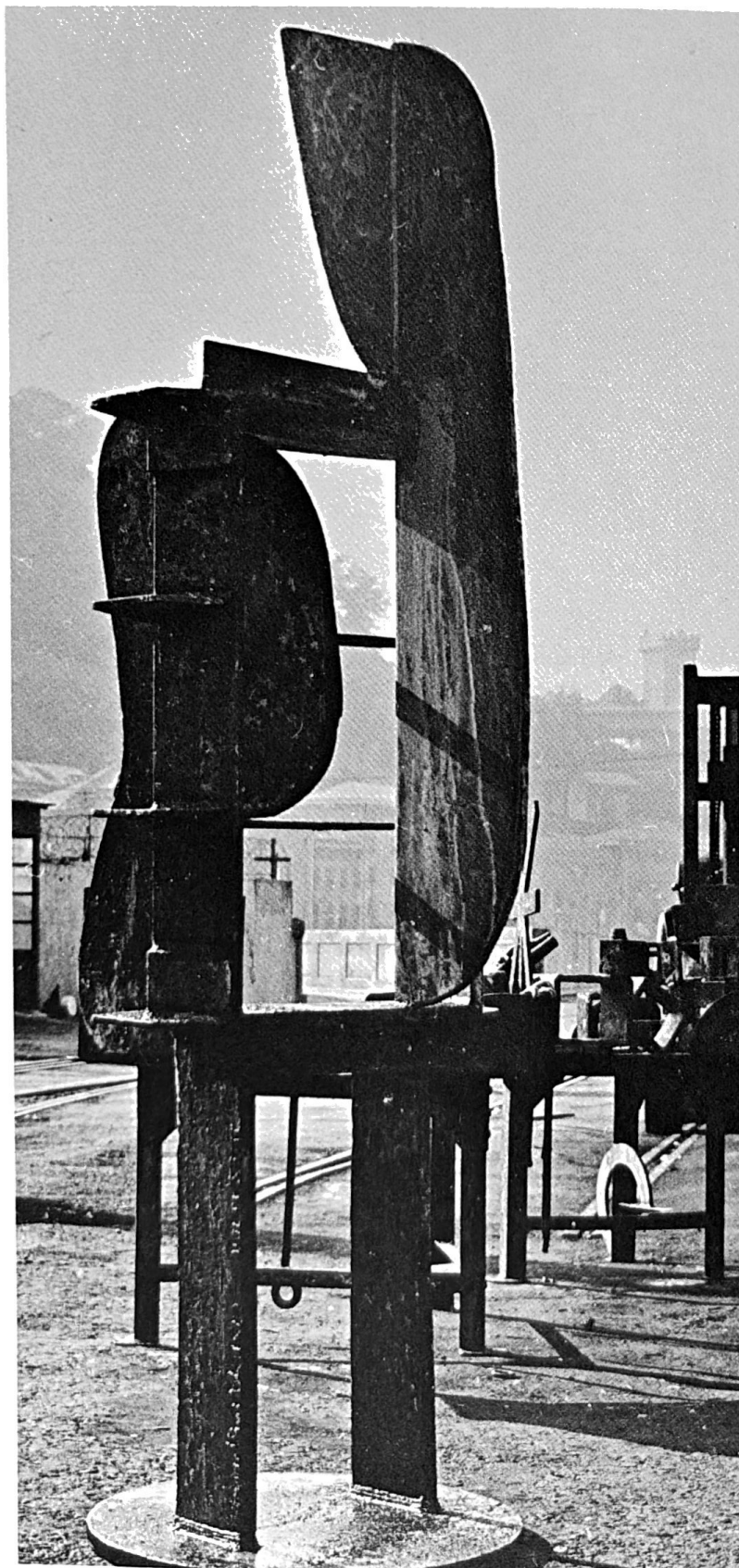
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where. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that nothing else in the work would have seemed to guarantee its presence.

*Voltri VIII* (Figs. 128 and 129) shares with *Voltri XVII* both the conjunction of a rigidly hieratic front face with a voluptuously curvilinear profile and a lack of transparency between these two aspects of the sculpture—an opaqueness that has nothing to do with the actual openness or closedness of the object. With *Voltri VIII* there is once more no conceptual core to guarantee that the various views of the work will give a coherent impression. And it is this ambivalence that Smith continually forces the spectator to confront, much the way a Cubist painting constantly brings us up against the naked fact of the picture plane. In Cubism it is our very effort to coordinate the various segments of the depicted object, to adjudicate between the conflicting levels of implied space, that (in Greenberg's words) "undeceives the eye" and causes us to acknowledge the conflict between our expectations with regard to the painting and its utter material aloofness. The arbitrariness of *Voltri XVII* likewise confronts us with our efforts to rationalize the objects we see before us. In defeating our expectations and thereby upsetting our systems for the acquisition of knowledge and control, Smith analyzes for us our greatest illusion with regard to the sculptural object: the assumption that possession is the automatic correlative of desire.

Drawing with the  
Found Object

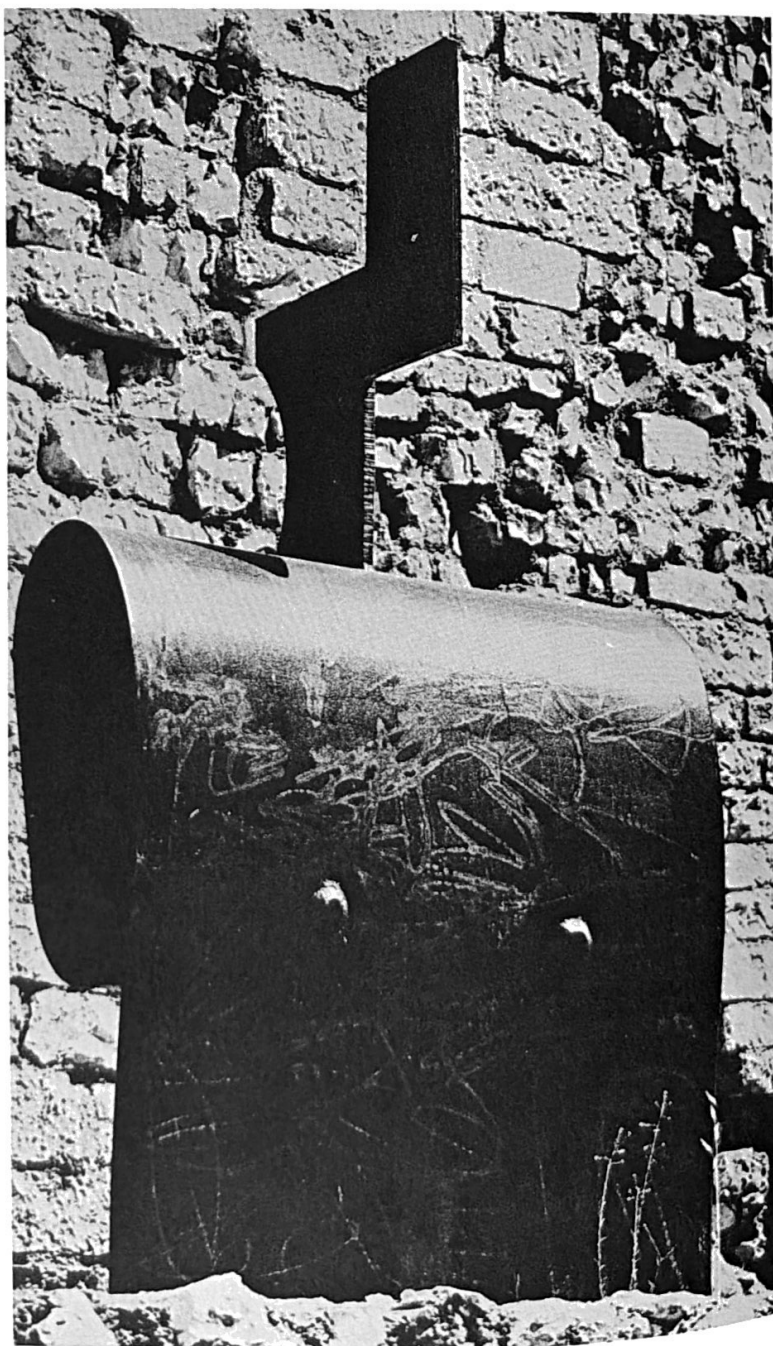
In looking from *Landscape with Strata* to *Blackburn* and *Voltri XVII*, I have traced the formation of a tactic by which a kind of parody of the monolith is used to attack its basic premises. The entirely flat, entirely frontal sculpture of works like *Hudson River Landscape* and *The Banquet* might seem to be a logical extension of this strategy, since nothing would seem to defeat the coherence of the three-dimensional object so much as a sculpture that tended to disappear as we moved around it. However, in the landscapes of the early fifties this is not the case. I have already said that as soon as Smith established a roughly rectangular format and drew in steel rod inside it, he found himself invoking the muse of painting, which was like opening the Pandora's

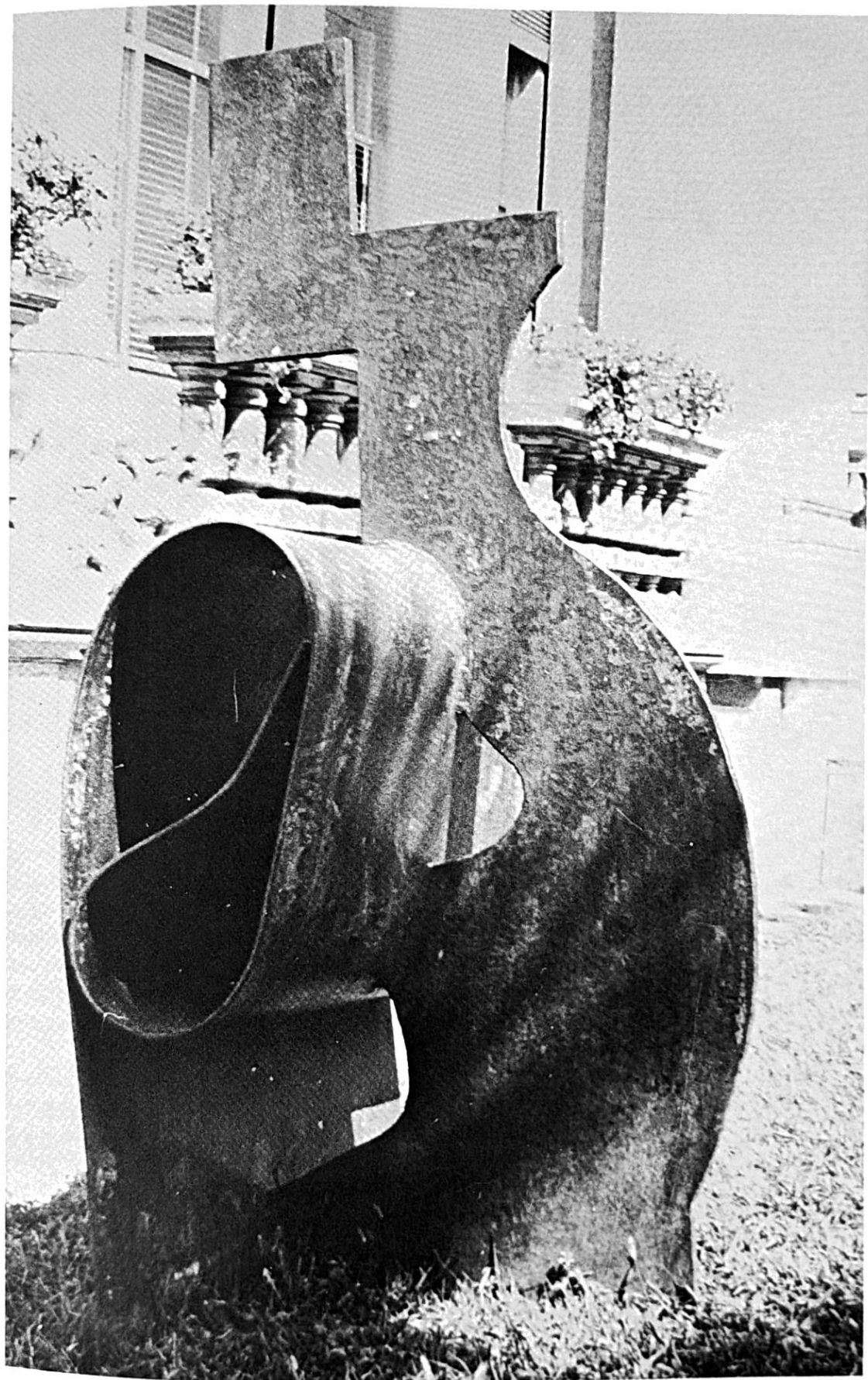


126  
*Voltri XVII*. 1962. Steel,  
95 × 31 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 29 $\frac{3}{4}$   
inches. Private collec-  
tion.

127  
*Voltri XVII*. (alternate  
view)

- 128  
*Voltri VIII*. 1962. Steel,  
79½ × 52½ × 33¾  
inches. Estate of the  
artist.  
129  
*Voltri VIII*. (alternate  
view)



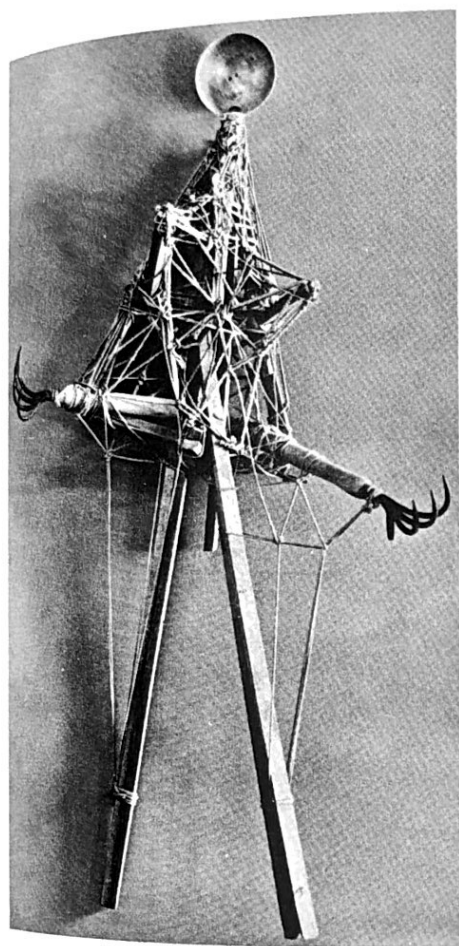


box of the traditional illusionist picture. Ironically, "drawing in space" simply affixed to steel line the same sense of vestigial weight and density that adheres to even the most stripped-down or schematic drawing as long as it appears within a traditional pictorial field. It seems fairly clear that this was why Smith stopped working with extruded and bent steel rods and, turning instead to the cursive shapes of tools and fragmented farm implements, began to "draw" with found objects. But right away he faced a new danger, for the found object was—rightly—one of the prime weapons in the Surrealist arsenal.

For Breton, the importance of the found object lay in its function as a metaphor for the way the solitary id incorporates and absorbs objects from the outside world. Dropped as though from nowhere into the stream of the finder's life, the object seemed able to form ripples of association and memory. Although by definition the object's discovery had to be fortuitous, at the same time it had to be a long time in preparation. One of Breton's favorite instances of the discovery of such an object was the spoon that he and Giacometti happened upon while at the Flea Market. The object's significance lay in the fact that it was not just any spoon: it was linked backward in time to the request for a particular sculpture that Breton had put to Giacometti several months before. It also recalled specific sexual fantasies Breton had about his future. Therefore in Breton's eyes it became uniquely *his* spoon, for his dream life and his past entitled him to it.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously the Surrealist sculptor could not operate on the assumption that objects that spoke with this kind of immediacy to his own unconscious needs and desires would elicit the same response in another viewer. In fact, the logic of Breton's thinking about the found object would pretty much guarantee that they could not. But the Surrealist sculptor could use the found object to simulate a sense of discovery and possession by introducing the object into the context of the viewer's already developed understanding of the human body and its structure. In this kind of sculpture, either the

<sup>23</sup> *L'Amour fou*, pp. 41–59. In 1936, in a review of the "Exposition d'objets surréalistes," Breton wrote, "Toute épave à portée de nos mains doit être considérée comme un précipité de notre désir." (Reprinted in Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], p. 283.)



130  
Picasso. *Personage*.  
1935. Wood, string, and  
metal, 44¼ x 24 x 14  
inches. Collection of  
the artist.

131  
Picasso. *Baboon and  
Young*. 1951. Bronze,  
21 inches. Museum  
of Modern Art, New  
York. Solomon Gug-  
genheim Fund.



132  
*Agricola VIII.* 1952.  
Steel and bronze,  
painted brown,  $31\frac{3}{4} \times$   
 $21\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Estate of the artist.

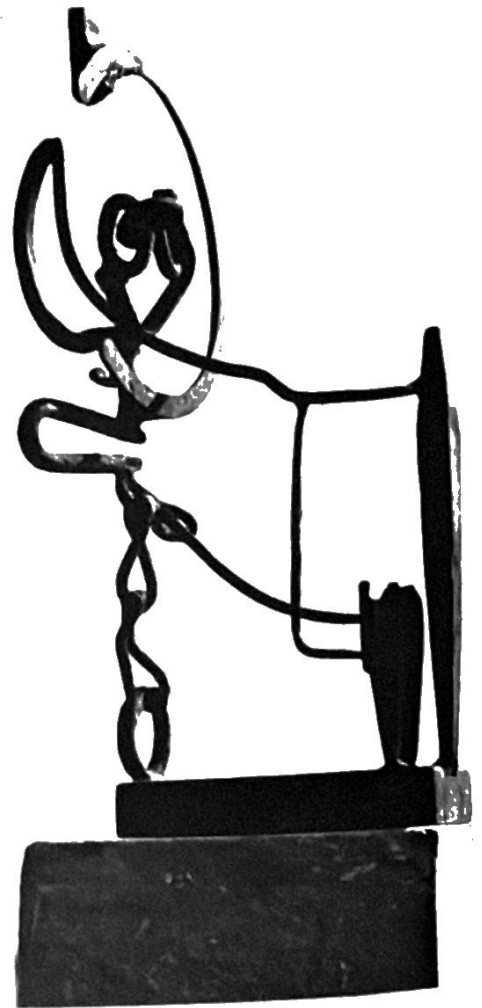


entire object becomes a visual pun on the shape of a human or animal body, or the object locates the pun in a section of the body: dinner forks serving as hands, household screws as claws, or a toy automobile as cranium. Whether the pun is to work upon the whole body or simply on its parts, the sculptor asks the viewer to take the resemblance for granted. Caught in the circular visual logic of found object as sculpture, the viewer often feels that he is witness to the very act of creation. Since the context is the structure of the body and its parts, the play with the found object is a play on the notion of representation. Its basic conventionality resides in the fact that it is simply an elaborately fanciful way of depicting a recognizable shape. (See Fig. 130.)

As long as the found object operates in the context of this game, it is unusable for Smith. The context is still another variation on the Hildebrand perspective. The game once more assumes that the viewer is omniscient, and the found object serves as the key to a transcendent reality which he is empowered to create as long as he continues to play the game.

In the early fifties, Smith was trying to maneuver within an extremely tight situation: he was caught between the pitfalls of drawing in space" and the natural allusiveness of the found object. As long as the intractably figurative quality of bent and extruded steel rods reads pictorially, it continues to point to a distinction between the inside and the outside of the object. On the other hand, almost any use of a found object tends to insist on a metaphorical relation to the structure of the human body, leaving nothing to the sculptor but the exploration of ever more imaginative depictions of it. In the grip of this representational mode, everything sculptural about the work becomes an ornamental overlay against the background of a conceptually familiar form.

Smith's response came in the series of nine *Agrícolas*, which absorbed the major part of his energy in 1951 and 1952. Like his solution to the problem of transparency, Smith resolved the question of drawing through a programmatic arbitrariness. He began to use shapes—a combination of machine parts, dismantled tools, and forged steel rod—that bore no analogy to parts of the human anatomy. There were two major devices that he employed to deprive these shapes of the power to function as meta-

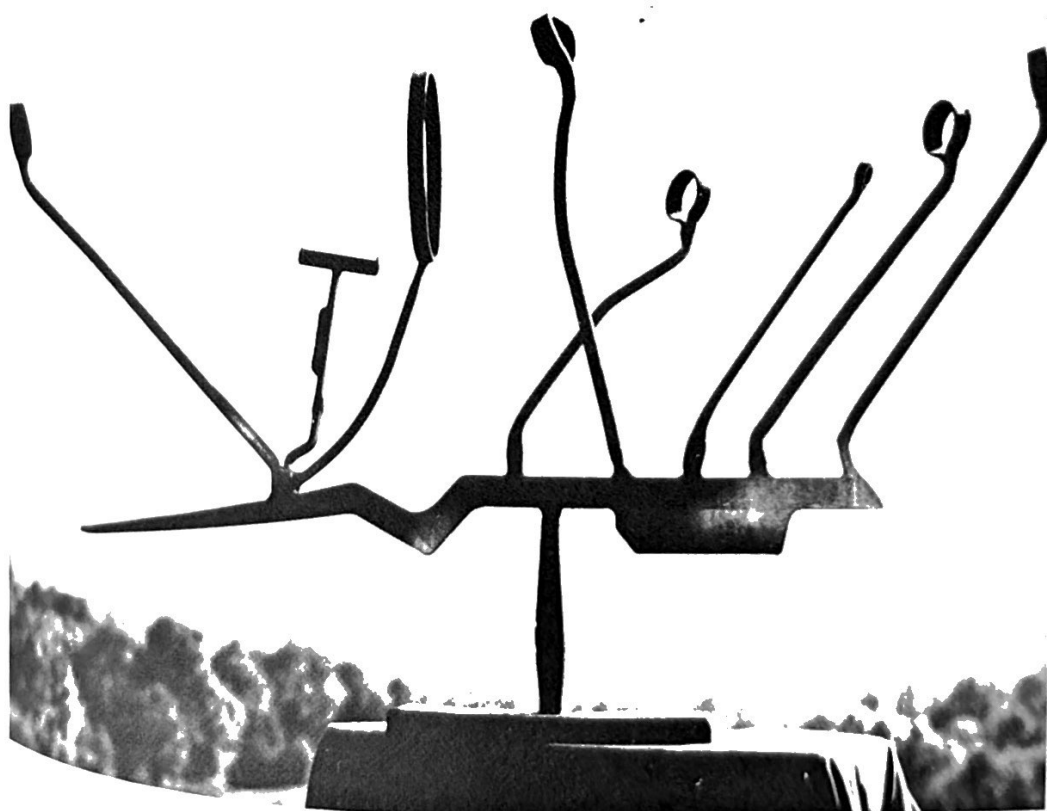


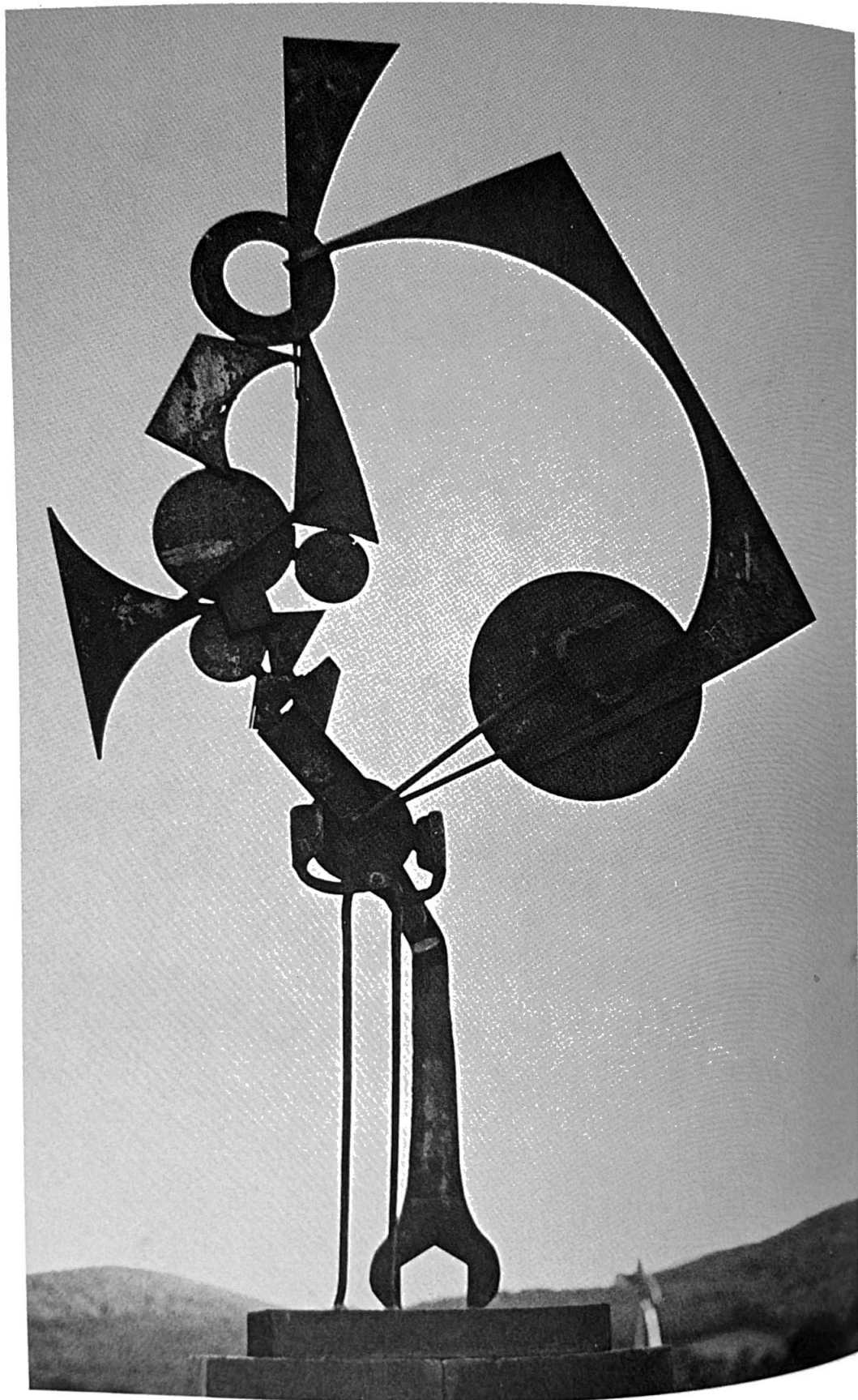
phors for a preconceived idea of the body. The first was to concentrate them at the outside edge of the sculpture, so that, as in the case of *Australia*, they could not be read as either forming a skeleton or issuing from a structural core. The second was to dismantle the tools so that the viewer could not interpret them as references to organic motion. This he did either by so fragmenting the machine elements or tools that their original function as tongs or calipers or wrenches was no longer legible, or by connecting them in such a way as to render their moving parts nonfunctional. Once dismantled, the tools unequivocally stated themselves as pure line, but only as a special form of line. Too segmented and disparate to function as a coherent, enclosing contour, the profiles of Smith's objects register only as the constituents of pictorial representation—as the emblems rather than the substance of depiction. The double edge formed by the two curved rods at the right side of *Agricola VIII* (Fig. 132) seems more like the parallel, hatched lines of calligraphic shading than the definitive contour of an object. The repetition of ellipses along the top of *Agricola IX* (Fig. 134) reads like modeling for a volume that is otherwise absent. In *Agricola VII* (Fig. 133), the bunched and incoherent links of chain that comprise one side of the sculpture seem like patches of illusionistic shading rather than the firm outline of a depicted shape. Similarly, the ratchets of seven machine elements form the major visual event of *Tanktotem II* (Fig. 135) by surrounding the central disc of the boiler head with a sputtering corona of crosshatching. In the *Agricolas*, we see Smith continually stripping line of its power to designate a whole form and making it act instead as the disembodied device of pictorial illusionism.

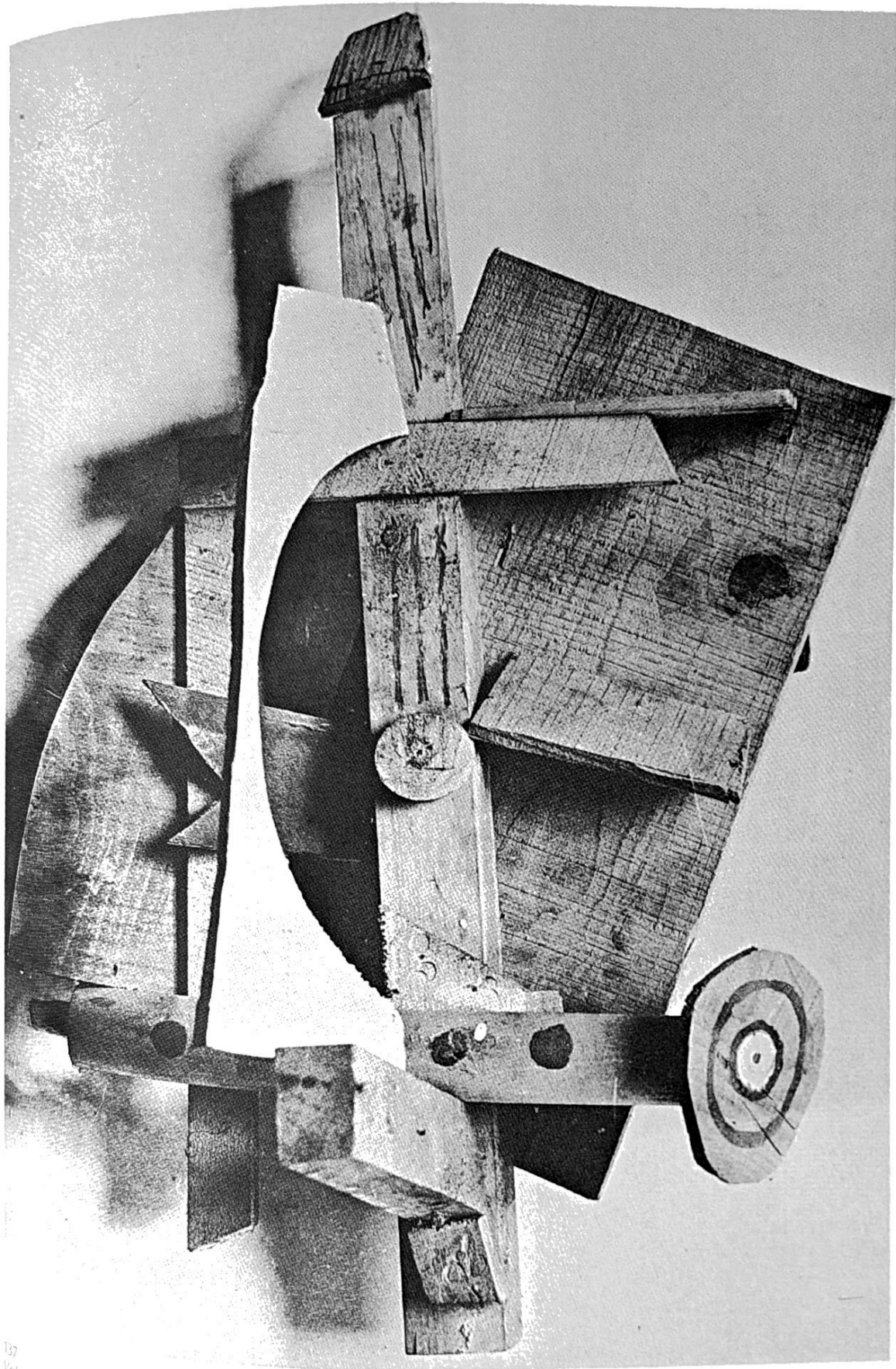
At the end of his life, Smith's use of the found object had not changed. Throughout the *Voltri-Bolton Landing* series he continued to stress its functional arbitrariness and to use it as a means toward depiction. In *Volton XVIII* (Fig. 137), for example, the heaviness of the metal sheet arching across its upper quadrant seems dissolved by the pictorial role it plays in the sculpture. As we look at the work, we see it not as a substantial contour but as a shadow cast by the phantom circle that paradoxically

133  
*Agricola VII*. 1952.  
Steel and cast iron,  
painted red, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$  x  
13 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
Collection Dr. and  
Mrs. Richard Kaplan,  
Philadelphia.

134  
*Agricola IX*. 1952.  
Steel, 36 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 55 $\frac{1}{4}$  x  
18 inches. Estate of  
the artist.

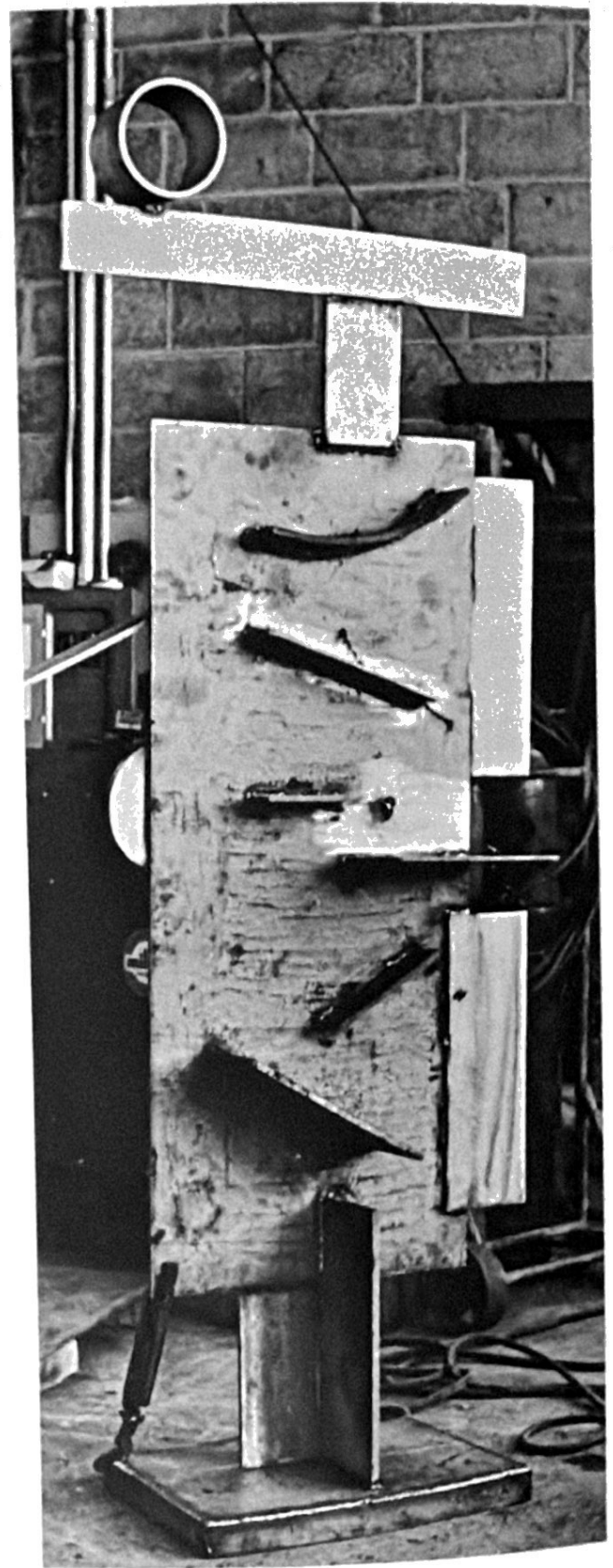
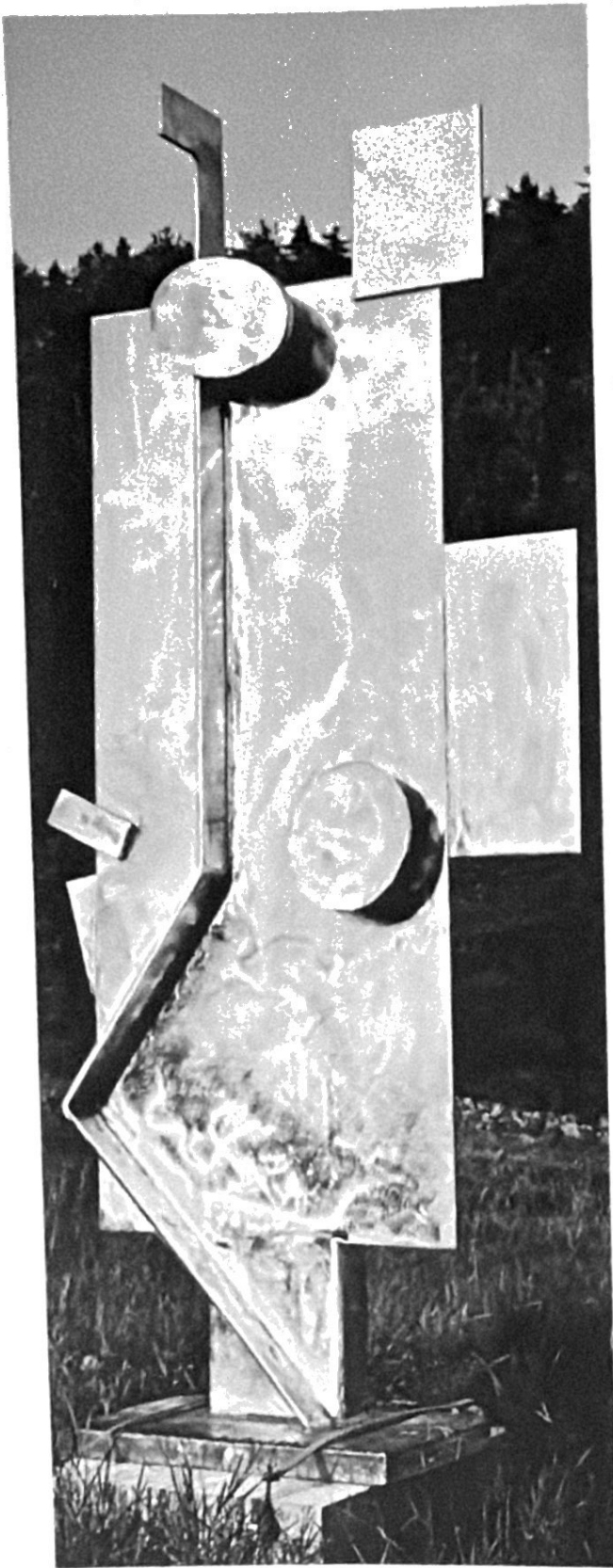






137  
Voltron XVIII. 1963.  
Steel, 110% x 67% x  
15% inches. Anony-  
mous collection.

138  
Picasso. Musical  
Instrument. 1914.  
Painted wood, 24 x  
14% inches. Collection  
of the artist.



139

*March Sentinel*. 1961. Stainless steel, 101¾ x 44 x 19¾ inches. Collection Dr. and Mrs. Paul T. Makler, Philadelphia.

140

*Two Circle Sentinel*. 1961. Stainless steel, 86¼ x 53 x 27½ inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Iseman, New York. (In this photograph the work is not yet finished.)

seems to occupy the sculpture's center. Thus, even while confronting the observer with a newfound weight and massiveness in the over-life-size sculpture of this series, Smith continued to absorb the found object into the pictorial language of illusion.

This transmutation of cast shadow has been seen before. In the constructions of 1914, Picasso had wrenched cast shadow from the role it had played in earlier nineteenth-century relief sculpture. Under his tutelage, shadows no longer gestured toward the unknowable aspects of objects. Instead Picasso materialized them, treating them as a kind of primary datum that was altogether known since it coincided completely with the splayed surface of the construction. One of these objectified shadows—from *Musical Instrument* (Fig. 138), a construction of 1914—strikingly resembles the “shadow” in *Volton XVIII*, for it, too, is a rectangular sheet from which a circular fragment has been cut. In the Picasso, as in the Smith, this absent half-disc becomes the major visual element of the work.

Picasso's absent shape reads as the ghost of a stringed instrument, perhaps a mandolin; Smith's is completely abstract. This is not because Smith refers to a purely geometrical shape rather than an object of sense experience. It is because Smith has moved his point of reference back to the very conventions that make perception—and with it meaning—possible: the convention of a ground against which meanings appear as in relief. What becomes manifest for the first time in Smith's work is the perception that this ground is something that all objects carry with them on their faces, not as an “essence” buried at their hearts. In this piece the seamless coexistence of object and meaning is visible and moving. The convention of relief—relief in its deepest sense—finds its most abstract expression as it stands on its own without need of or recourse to the backdrop of the actual ground plane that Picasso had still to employ in 1914.

In his later work, when Smith occasionally reverts to a ground to set drawn elements against, the sculptures seem both less radical and less successful. This happens in *March Sentinel* (Fig. 139) and *Two Circle Sentinel* (Fig. 140) from 1961. In both

cases the ground appears once again as a core from which the affixed figuration seems to grow. But if *March Sentinel* looks like conventional relief, it is only because of standards set by Smith himself elsewhere in his sculpture.

The two kinds of drawing that Smith explored in his mature work, drawing silhouetted against the support of a ground and the self-sustained drawing with found objects, unexpectedly coalesce in the last and, for many, the greatest phase of Smith's career. Huge stainless steel cubes, discs, cylinders, and bars come together to form the sculptures Smith called *Cubis*. Insofar as Smith regarded these tectonic elements as "found objects," they issue from his thinking in the *Agricolas* and the *Voltri-Bolton Landing* sculptures. Each face of each element supports a luminous calligraphy applied by Smith to the stainless surfaces with a carborundum disc. Although Smith was willing to concede that the color he applied to the surfaces of his earlier work was largely arbitrary and almost never really successful,<sup>24</sup> he was pleased with the burnishing on the *Cubis*. It is the one place in Smith's art where surface texture and what I have been calling surfaceness seem to coincide.

The *Cubis* not only culminate Smith's experience with drawing but also summarize and expand his thinking about the structural limitation of viewpoint between sculpture and observer. In that sense they feel like the grand *summa* of Smith's career—although clearly they were not meant by him to be its conclusion.

<sup>24</sup> In the Hess interview, Smith confessed, "I've only made two sculptures in tune properly between color and shape." This is the way the typescript now in the Smith Archive reads (IV/302); when the interview was published, the "only" was omitted. (See Bibliography, no. 58.)