

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXHIBITION SURVEYS CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

A survey of some of the major developments in sculpture during the past fifteen years provides the focus for a 50th Anniversary Year exhibition opening May 18 at The Museum of Modern Art. CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, on view in the Museum's first-floor d'Harnoncourt Galleries and in its Sculpture Garden through August 7, will examine the wide-ranging innovations in--and sometimes the very redefinitions of--the art of sculpture which have occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting these developments, the exhibition underlines the Museum's ongoing efforts to acquire for its Collection important works by contemporary artists. The exhibition features over 100 works by 52 artists representing 6 countries. The broad scope of CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART reflects the generosity of those who have donated works to the Museum and those who have contributed to the Museum's purchase funds.

As Kynaston McShine, Curator of Painting and Sculpture and director of the exhibition, writes in the brochure accompanying the exhibition: "The period of some fifteen years covered by CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART has been one of extraordinary vitality and innovation in the art of sculpture. It reflects, both here and abroad, a large number of methods, from traditional modeling and casting to the modes of assemblage, "soft" sculpture, minimalism,

conceptualism, earthworks, and, more recently, making visible the process of the making.... A number of artists, in their involvement with the environment and the place, have created works that are outside the museum or the collecting situation. Simultaneously, other artists have produced indoor works, of impressive quality and impact, that simply demand spaces larger than any the Museum could possibly provide. Despite the absence of such works, this exhibition still is able to demonstrate the radical and often eccentric sensibility that has been an intrinsic part of recent time."

During the 1960s and 1970s artists have been probing the limits and the possibilities inherent in sculpture's inescapable three-dimensional physicality. They have been asking questions about sculpture's "language," about its modes of expression and depiction, about its range of powers, and their use in the making of three-dimensional objects. As new formal strategies and an expanded range of references have become available to sculpture, critical discussion has centered on the question of what we still might mean when we speak of "sculpture." For some sculptors the boundaries between sculpture, painting, architecture, theater, and even film and video have blurred, while for others the aim has been to reinvigorate and extend the more traditional yet still valid approaches and concerns.

John Chamberlain's Tomahawk Nolan (1965) is an assemblage of welded and painted metal automobile parts, a jagged, angular work with an evident relationship to Abstract Expressionist painting. Claes Oldenburg's Giant Soft Fan (1966-67) is representative of a rather different sensibility, the Pop Art that was so ubiquitous and influential throughout the mid-1960s. In Oldenburg's drooping vinyl and foam rubber work, an everyday object has been transformed into a formal configuration, a cluster of shapes,

pulled by gravity. Also expressive of Pop's use of realistic imagery is George Segal's Portrait of Sidney Janis with Mondrian Painting (1967) in which a plaster figure of the noted art dealer looks at Mondrian's 1933 Composition mounted on an easel.

Carl Andre's Squaw Rock (1964), Timber Spindle Exercise and Lead Piece (144 Lead Plates 12" x 12" x 3/8") (1969) are on view in the exhibition. Along with Donald Judd, represented by his untitled works of 1968, 1969, and 1973-75, and Sol Le Witt, Andre is usually associated with the so-called--the term is useful if imprecise--Minimal sculpture of the late 1960s. At bottom, its formal elements notwithstanding, Minimalism effected an important shift of aesthetic priority away from the object perceived and back toward the viewer. This was to have major consequences for the sculpture and, indeed, all the art of the latter 1960s through the 1970s; advanced sculpture had ceased to be objects for arm's-length contemplation and instead became occasions for active physical, behavioral, environmental encounters of subject and object. Andre's Squaw Rock is composed of six stacked bricks and his Lead Piece consists of 144 flat lead plates. Another important aspect of such work is its emphasis upon serial forms, the systematic arrangement of similar units in quantitatively rigorous structures. The use of serial forms in the work of Andre, Judd, and Sol LeWitt may be understood as an attempt to neutralize connotative meaning in works of sculpture--an attempt which would create its own opposition only a few years later. In Sol LeWitt's Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD) (1966) individual units remain distinct even as the whole has been constructed out of these units. While the formal strategy may appear simple to the point of being reductive, in fact the demands made upon us as viewers are quite complex.

The new school of British sculptors that flourished in the 1960s is represented in the exhibition by works by Anthony Caro, David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Tim Scott, and William Tucker. In Caro's work, of which Source (1967) and Frogna1 (1964) are examples, the conventional pedestal was eliminated, and the painted steel sculptures were spread out laterally, making the space of the work coextensive with that of the viewer and incorporating the ground (or floor) in the sculptural experience. Caro was the first to effect a shift from a vertical to a horizontal orientation on a large scale.

Richard Serra, whose work came to public attention in the late 1960s and early '70s, shares the Minimalist emphasis on the "presence" of the work of art. His lead Corner Prop Piece (1970) is on view. Serra has suggested that the instability of this work, like that of other of his pieces, provokes an apprehension of "procedural time"--filmic time rather than literary time--so that the viewer "experiences the time and place of subject and object simultaneously." Also on view is Serra's Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure (1969). The late Eva Hesse, one of the major artists of the period, is represented in the exhibition by her haunting works Repetition 19, III (1968), nineteen tubular fiberglass units, and her Vinculum II (1969), twenty-three rubberized wire-mesh plaques that have been stapled to shielded wire from which knotted rubber wires hang. Hesse, who died in 1970 at age 34, created an oeuvre which, by its forceful handling of both formal, material issues and often difficult psychological, emotional ones, was to substantially influence many of the artists who came to maturity in the early and mid-1970s. As Hesse wrote in 1970: "First, when I work, it's only the abstract qualities I'm working with, which is the material, the form

it's going to take, the size, the scale, the positioning, where it comes from--the ceiling or the floor. However, I don't value the totality of the image on these abstract or esthetic points. For me it's a total image that has to do with me and life."

The movement toward a more personal and referential conception of sculpture, yet one that has not lost sight of the important formal advances of its immediate predecessors, may be seen in the work of such younger sculptors in the exhibition as Joel Shapiro, Charles Simonds, Alice Aycock, and Richard Long. Shapiro's untitled piece of 1974 is on view. With suggestions of the symbolic and poetic, Shapiro's work may be understood as having been the deliberate choice of smallness within a sculptural context that still emphasizes large scale as a criterion of value. People who live in a circle. They excavate their past and rebuild it into their present. Their dwelling functions as a personal and cosmological clock. Seasonal, harmonic, obsessive. (1972) is one of Charles Simonds's diminutive structures of clay, sand, and sticks for the complicated and diverse "living archaeology" of his imaginary civilization of "Little People" which has been evolving since 1970. Similarly, Alice Aycock's work--she speaks of "psychophysical spaces"--suggests multiple associations, involving her own experiences as well as references to past and present architectural structures. Her Project Entitled "Studies for a Town" (1972) is an elliptical wooden structure that has been cut on a skew to provide a bird's-eye view of the whole and to reveal its interior components: steps, walls, doorways, windows, ladders, roofs, shafts, and alleys, some of which may be reached by the spectator, while others, only seen, remain inaccessible. The young British artist Richard Long, whose Cornish Stone Circle (1978) is also on view, may best be thought

of in relation to the English tradition of Romantic landscape, with its sublime unity of man and nature. The 52 scattered stone slabs that comprise the work have a naturalistic beauty even as they suggest the mystery of druidic ritual, somewhat in the manner of a post-modern Stonehenge.

A major aspiration of much contemporary sculpture has been toward a public presence. A number of the works in the exhibition will be on view in the Museum's Sculpture Garden: Ronald Bladen's untitled work of 1966-67; Robert Breer's Osaka I (1970), a self-propelled moving sculpture with a fiberglass shell; Bryan Hunt's Big Twist (1978); and Ellsworth Kelly's painted aluminum Green-Blue (1968).

Leading sculptors of the 1960s and '70s whose work will also be on view in CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART include Richard Artschwager, Larry Bell, Lynda Benglis, Joseph Beuys, Christo, Walter De Maria, Guy Dill, Jean Dubuffet, John Duff, Charles Fahlen, Barry Flanagan, Dan Flavin, Joe Goode, Robert Graham, Edward Kienholz, Alain Kirili, John McCracken, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Eduardo Paolozzi, Kenneth Price, David Rabinowitch, Jean Pierre Raynaud, Carlos Rojas, Alan Saret, Robert Smithson, George Sugarman, H.C. Westermann, and Christopher Wilmarth.

More than 30 drawings, prints and multiples by many of these sculptors will also be featured. On Mondays and Tuesdays at noon during the length of the exhibition, the Museum will screen a selection of films whose concerns parallel those of the works on view or are reports on sculptural activities in generally inaccessible locales. Included will be films by Hollis Frampton, Joseph Beuys, Robert Smithson, Michael Snow, Les Levine, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, and Nancy Holt, among others. Videotapes which will be shown

from May 18 through June 6 in the first-floor galleries include works by Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, John Sturgeon, and Bill Viola.

In conjunction with the exhibition, on Tuesday, May 22 at 6:30 p.m., the Museum's Junior Council will sponsor ARTISTS' FORUM: SCULPTURE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE, a symposium of sculptors moderated by Ira Licht, formerly Director of the Art in Public Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and currently Director of The Lowe Art Museum at The University of Miami. Participants will include Mary Miss, George Sugarman, Charles Simonds, and Christo. In addition, there will be scheduled gallery talks.

Reflecting on the prominent place of this exhibition in the Museum's program of 50th Anniversary Year exhibitions, Mr. McShine observes: "Recently the Museum has had occasion to celebrate other aspects of its collections, for example, the holdings of specific historical artists and of specific historical movements. The collecting of the present, however, is a particular challenge.... This exhibition allows us to evaluate the current collection, and to reflect on how it should grow. But most important, it allows us to perceive and value the excitement and creativity of our own time and place."

CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART is made possible by a grant from the Interpace Corporation.

May 1979

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