

Minimalism and Memory

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How does contemporary art get remembered? How are current events transformed into history? These days, is Clement Greenberg standing at the side of St. Peter, signaling thumbs up or thumbs down when a Basquiat or a Diebenkorn comes to call at the Pearly Gates?

To know who to trust is tricky. How do you evaluate primary sources? A few years ago, shortly before she died, I interviewed the oldest daughter of Grete Tugendhat. Grete Tugendhat was the twenty-five year old woman who gave Mies van der Rohe 1.2 million dollars in 1929 to build a home for her family in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Between the ages of three and thirteen, her oldest daughter lived in the beautiful house the architect designed for her parents and their children. She was filled with information. For example, she told me how she would often slip off the Brno chairs which had been designed for the Tugendhats because her feet simply could not reach the floor. She described how, after school, with younger brother in tow, she would run down the hill the house overlooked, past the garden and the fruit trees, to her grandmother's house. And she mentioned the joy she felt whenever her mother played the piano. If you know the house, you know Mies created a special place for music to be played near the library.

Had Grete Tugendhat's oldest daughter not mentioned that her nanny was still alive and well in London, I might not have delved further into the history of the house's occupants. I looked up the octogenarian Irene Kalkofen the next time I was in England. Her memories, I discovered, were of a different sort. Although she was not a servant, she was not a member of the family either. To her, the mother had always been Frau Tugendhat. Irene Kalkofen had been twenty-something when she was employed by these Czech Jews who had to flee their homeland when Hitler marched into it. The former nanny turned out to be more of a store mine of information than the oldest daughter who, after all, had only been a child during the 1930s. The former nanny can practically repeat whole conversations she had during the 1920s when inflation was rampant in Berlin, where she was raised. When the Tugendhats were away from home, she was in charge. And it was she who would show the house to young architects from all over the world who were flocking to see it. In the back of her mind, she feared Mies might show up unexpectedly. You see, although there was a wonderful grand piano in the public rooms downstairs, an upright piano, which Mies would not have liked was stashed in the upstairs family quarters in her room. As for the music making which the oldest daughter recalled so lovingly, the former nanny recalled having to coax Frau Tugendhat to sit down and play. It was not something the mother did often. So, here is dilemma one: do you trust the memory of someone who was a little girl until you find her nanny?

When I wrote my Masters Thesis on Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and the Spanish Loyalist Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair of 1937, I included a chapter on the Almaden Mercury Fountain that Alexander Calder designed for the space in front of the black and white mural. Soon after the exposition closed, the American artist published accounts of his project in two rather obscure places - the alumni magazine of the Stevens Institute of Technology and the letters column of an MIT publication. Many years later he again talked about the fountain, his first major public project. But in his autobiography, he trivialized what he had fabricated. Since 1937 he had so many other achievements under his belt, he could have cared less about this one. Dilemma number two: how do you evaluate the recollections of someone who has lived a full and rich life?

When I was in my early and mid-twenties I published in *Artforum*, *Art News* and *Art in America* a number of interviews with Carl Andre, Robert Ryman, John Chamberlain, Anthony Caro, George Segal, Andy Warhol, Roy Liechtenstein, Larry Poons, and some others. I am still sitting on unpublished transcripts with Dan Flavin, Michael Heizer and Philip Glass. Every interview was an adventure. Imagine what it was like to be twenty-four years old on a scorching summer afternoon sitting across from Chamberlain who was shirtless and covered with tattoos. With few exceptions, I hardly knew any of these painters and sculptors before I turned on my tape recorder. Their careers were fresh and on the rise. I was young and curious.

When we read interviews in newspapers and magazines, we tend to forget about the role of the interlocutor. What he or she ate for breakfast also matters. Two people participate in a "Q and A". My manuscripts generally took at least four months to complete, sometimes much longer. They look seamless. I worked very hard on them. I treated them as if they were research projects. I tried to read everything published on the artist. Can you still do that these days? Back then it was possible. I was not necessarily looking for biographical facts or territory that had already been covered. I wanted to find stuff that had annoyed my subjects enough for them to have wanted to write a letter of complaint to an editor. Sometimes I would pose a question with history in mind. I truly cared what was said. After I had transcribed my tapes, I would write new questions based on the material I had just

collected. Then I would re-interview the artist. Once I had edited all of the materiel together, I would send each painter and sculptor a copy of the transcript. Everyone reacted differently. Anthony Caro's manuscript crossed the Atlantic several times. "Henry Moore" became "his teacher" and then "a teacher" and finally "someone I once knew". Larry Poons insisted his text be returned to the state in which he had spoken it - no changes, unaltered, as direct as possible. Years later I realized I had been steamrolled by Carl Andre - I was impressionable and he was trying to make an impression. Together we made a fiction - and a literary document as much as an explication d'art. Then there was the time one of the Ryman tapes came out garbled and had to be reconstructed from memory. My recorder actually conked out in Herbert Ferber's living room, and we had to start all over again. Consequently I arrived late for the first session of the seminar I was taking on Picasso and Gert Schiff greeted me by saying, "You get the last topic left: *Guernica*". Dilemma number three: whose karma is it anyway? After all, it was my life, too. I was curious about what made these guys tick; and I was not afraid to sound stupid. I willingly rewrote questions so that I would be the "fall guy" - those answers became more dramatic. Because I edited the material tightly, it is really focused. A lot of people think you turn on your tape recorder and have a cocktail party-like chat. Then you ask, they assume, your secretary to transcribe it. Hardly. The good ones, the ones that survive are part art, part literary.

On at least two occasions I have gone back and re-interviewed artists: I talked to Anthony Caro again ten years later; and to Robert Ryman twenty years later. What a difference - in them as well as me. By then, both were quite famous. I was now competing with myself - the earlier pieces had been reprinted and quoted in magazine articles, catalogue essays, and scores of footnotes. By then I was writing my own texts; and I had different needs. The later interviews are more about experience and what it means to get older. I prefer them more. But they do not get the attention the earlier ones have had. Dilemma four: why do later generations care more about what a younger, less experienced artist has to say at the beginning of his or her career?

My experience with Tony Smith raises the issues of common sense and plain looking, i.e. experience, first hand experience. Isn't that what art is supposed to be about? Smith may have talked like a Minimalist, but his mind was Joycean, James Joycean. A good litmus test to gauge someone's understanding of Minimalism is to find out their views on Smith, Tony Smith. If you come across an article in which T. Smith is singled out or grouped as a Minimalist, be wary of that critic's overview. It has the markings of being over-intellectualized. Michael Fried discussing Tony Smith, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris in 1967 and Anna Chave considering Smith, Stella, and Serra in 1990, almost twenty-five years later, are both amiss.

Tony Smith was a late bloomer like his friend and colleague Barnett Newman. Since no one seems to have trouble identifying Newman as a member of the Ab Ex generation, why is Smith misperceived so often? To be sure, when he first began to exhibit he seemed to share a lot in common with Andre, Flavin, Judd, LeWitt, and Morris. His work was geometric, hard edge, monochromatic, and fabricated in metal shops. Like the younger men, he never referred to what he did in three dimensions as sculpture. Still, while they preferred to term their efforts structures or objects, he opted for presences. *Die* and *Black Box* may have given his career a boost - and landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine - but they were atypical of his oeuvre.

About *Die*, a 6-foot black cube, there is a famous exchange: "Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer? A: I was not making a monument. Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer would see over the top? A: I was not making an object."

Exactly. Tony Smith wanted his art to be experienced. He was not a theoretician. He wanted you to look at his stuff. The mood and spirit of his work belongs to an earlier time in the art world. In almost all particulars, he is the ultimate abstract expressionist form maker. It is no accident that his two closest colleagues were Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. Forget Frank Stella and Donald Judd. Think Pollock and Newman. Consider size, placement, volume. Smith was comfortable making art large as well as small; sitting it indoors or outside; fashioning a solid, not a unit meant to be counted. Dilemma number five: when is an apple a pear?

The canonization of Robert Smithson began shortly after his funeral in July 1973. An unremarkable career suddenly, in retrospect, metamorphosed into one. Smithson did not necessarily become better known than the Minimalists Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris in whose orbit he had developed his work and who he counted as friends. His art, however, became more widely praised than theirs has ever been. And a more varied range of books and catalogues devoted to his earthworks, objects, drawings, photographs, and texts has continued to be published. Smithson was a dreamer. Nevertheless he worked within the realm of the realizable. His stuff gets compared to Piranesi as well as Ledoux and Boullé; but he was not in their league. They had fantasies about grand edifices and eccentric geometric structures. Smithson did not.

There was something adolescent in Smithson's interests and pursuits. A lot of his early work which has resurfaced since the mid-eighties and which has been prominently featured in drawing and photography shows during the nineties is amateurish. It is more indebted to comic books and biker

magazines than to anything that could be considered high art, or even related to middle brow taste. There is a total lack of sophistication.

In the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, Smithson deconstructed Passaic, a town nine miles from where I live today and which I know well, having been born and raised there. Countless novelists and movie directors have mentioned my hometown in their creations. As Smithson passed by the Passaic High School Football Stadium during his autumnal stroll, future Oakland Raider Jack Tatum was playing on the team. A number of other local kids grew up to become famous actors in television series such as *Mash*, *Welcome Home*, *Kotter*, and *LA Law*. The girl group Shirelles were discovered in a high school talent show. If any of these people read the *Monuments of Passaic*, I do not believe they would recognize the place where they grew up. I know I don't.

Yet Smithson's admirers do not grasp the roots of his musings. They accept his writings as mature, well thought out insights rather than acknowledging their youthful, exuberant bravado. His notions are tentative, raw, not very well developed - like his art. Consider curator Robert Sobieszek's faulty characterization of Passaic as "in part a site given over to the underwater dredging of the Passaic River, an unseen excavation project". Even photography columnist Vicki Goldberg referred in the *New York Times* to "that city's identity as a lonely, crumbling congeries of steel pipes, pontoons, sandboxes, and unlovely industrial encroachments".

The discrepancies that abound between reality and artistic license and the intellectualizations of critics are tellingly illuminated by a photograph of a parking mall that Smithson took with an Instamatic camera. (This snapshot belongs to a series of twenty-four from which much more elegant gelatin-silver prints have been made. Six of them were reproduced in the original article; the rest were released a few years ago for an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

Charles Hagan's description of works such as these is far off the mark. Hagan wrote, "[...] Smithson treated industrial scenes not as futuristic dystopias but as the decaying ruins of a lost civilization". I don't think so. This parking mall is an example of urban renewal, not urban decay. When I was a child, Passaic was one of only three towns in the United States that was literally divided down its center by railroad tracks. By the mid-sixties, just slightly before Smithson took his walk, the tracks were removed and paved over so that automobiles could park where locomotives had once roared past. The parking lot Smithson documented does not have an ordinary history. Certainly he knew that. If critics would read his *Artforum* text more closely, they would realize this. He alludes to it. And then they would also notice the artist's wonderful narrative has the feel of a script for an art film. At the very least it calls to mind the sets for a B-movie rather than a *National Geographic* feature. Dilemma number six: why study a text when you can use your own imagination?