

**Whitney Museum of America Art, 200 Years of American Sculpture. Boston, David R. Godine, 1976. 332 pp., over 500 illus., \$35.00**

**Ken Carpenter**

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continuity, are not the sort of material which can be read through from cover to cover with ease. They seem best dipped into in a desultory fashion.

For the layman, Baur's text poses a further problem. His essay condenses much historical material and represents a succinct analysis of the basic achievements in the development of American art. But however well it may be done, it is the sort of routine writing, like that of encyclopaedia articles, produced to fulfil a commissioned need. It is comprehensive and includes the necessary information, but is not really instructive nor useful to the lay reader because it assumes knowledge rather than giving access to it. The handle it offers is too illusory because it is too abstracted and too distant from the heart of the subject matter.

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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART. *200 Years of American Sculpture*. Boston, David R. Godine, 1976. 332 pp., over 500 illus., \$35.00.

The Whitney Museum's Bicentennial project was a massive exhibition of two centuries of American sculpture. This book, the catalogue of that exhibition, is an appropriately ambitious undertaking. It has 64 colour and almost 500 black-and-white plates, essays by seven authors, a useful general bibliography, and biographies of 140 artists, complete with bibliographies for each. It is almost an encyclopaedia of American sculpture.

An especially desirable feature is the inclusion of sections on aboriginal art and folk art written respectively by Norman Feder and Tom Armstrong, Director of the Museum. However, while the art itself adds a great deal to the aesthetic calibre of the book, Feder's article is inadequate. He has little sense of history as reconstruction and so presents almost pure chronology unilluminated by controversy; for example, his blithe categorization of the potlatch as a validation of inherited prerogatives ignores a lengthy debate going back to Boas.<sup>1</sup> This example is only symptomatic of his general neglect of the cultural base of aboriginal art. Feder concludes with the observation that little American aboriginal sculpture is now being produced, but he does not undertake to explain why the revival of aboriginal art so conspicuous in Canada has not also occurred with equal breadth in the United States.

Armstrong's argument is that "folk art may yet be recognized as the outstanding achievement in American art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." The advantage of the folk artist was his ignorance of the hierarchies prevailing within the official "high" art. Its vitality influenced Laurent, Nadelman, Calder, and others, and survives in contemporary "grass-roots" art. Such an

<sup>1</sup> For a collection of differing opinions, see Tom McFeat, *Indians of the North Pacific Coast* (Greenwich, Conn., 1961).

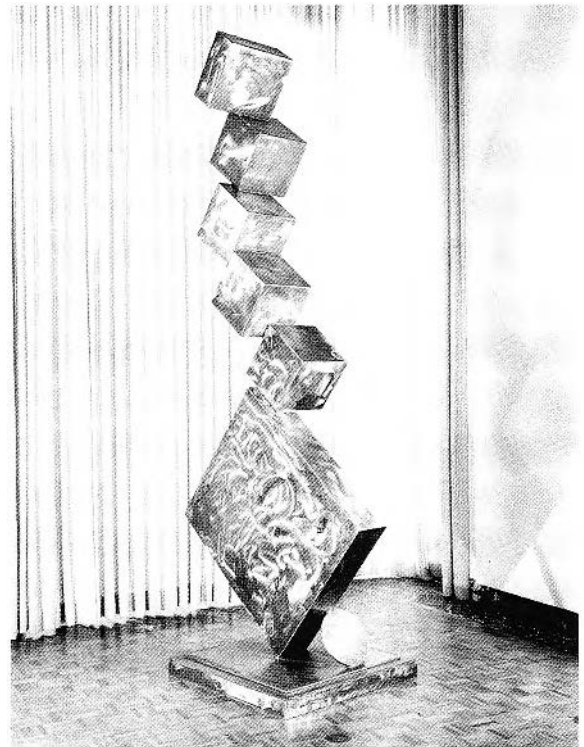


FIGURE 1. David Smith, *Cubi I*. From *200 Years of American Sculpture*.

important genre might have had earlier and greater attention from historians had they not been deterred by the particular historical problems it imposes.

Wayne Craven and Daniel Robbins have contributed sound studies of the evolving rôle of art in society during the periods from 1776 to 1900 and from the 1890s to the 1930s. Sculpture as high art was scarcely known in Revolutionary America. The first sculptors were usually former craftsmen working in a literary, indeed academic, mode. For sculpture to grow more accomplished, autonomous, and truly indigenous required important changes in American society and art patronage. Paradoxically, one of these changes was the abandonment of claims to having developed an American style. Even as late as the 1930s, "modern sculpture was still being denied the independence and isolation of the modern easel picture."

Essays by Rosalind Krauss and Whitney Museum curators Barbara Haskell and Marcia Tucker discuss the more independent and diverse sculpture of recent decades. All three essays are fundamentally unsatisfactory.

Krauss's essay is based on the questionable assumption that "technical invention does function as an early-warning system to alert us to the probability that a new kind of content is . . . suggesting new processes by which to express it." Smith (Fig. 1), Calder, and Cornell, with their welded steel, motorized movement, and assemblage of found objects have, she believes, shared concerns which "derive from a recognition of the Unconscious." "Smith's response to the Unconscious was to turn the forces of consciousness against it — to create a formal language of prohibition that would acknowledge the fact of unconscious desire, while at the same time aborting it." Calder's "wish

[was] that consciousness be projected outward." And Cornell's "ambition [was] to make out of [his] banal materials a model of the Unconscious and its processes."

Unfortunately, Krauss's analysis is scarcely convincing. One cannot examine either the processes or the content of the unconscious mind without the use of powerful theoretical tools which Krauss does not take up. Furthermore, when she implicitly assumes that the Unconscious is primarily a storehouse for memory or states that the significance of rhythmic regularity in Nevelson and elsewhere is its ability to create the sensation of real time, she makes two fundamental errors. One is to forget that the Unconscious is indeed unconscious, and the other is to indulge in crude speculation.

Krauss's speculations are both factual and theoretical; she offers no documentation of the three artists' supposedly conscious intentions, and thus deprives the reader of any distinction between them and her own reconstructions. This is irritating enough, but she is also ignoring a substantial literature on the unconscious rôle of rhythm in art.

More substantial hypotheses than that of Krauss go back as far as 1915 when Freud argued that beauty in art was basically "sexual" at root.<sup>2</sup> In the 1930s, Ella Sharpe improved on Freud's analysis by detaching the idea of beauty from the aesthetic and by also relating rhythm, as a subset of the beautiful, to earlier prototypes, especially the experience of goodness by the suckling infant.<sup>3</sup> The classic development of this train of thought was by the follower of Melanie Klein, Hanna Segal, who clarified the argument that the aesthetic has both a "beautiful" and an "ugly" component and that the creation and the enjoyment of a work of art are unconscious processes analogous to important unconscious processes of the developing infant.<sup>4</sup>

It is this concern with process that Krauss promises but does not deliver. Some of the missing argument can be found in her book, *Terminal Iron Works* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), without which her essay is scarcely comprehensible. There she has presented a basically Freudian analysis with a certain skill. Even there, however, it is doubtful whether her conception of the works of Smith as both totem in the Freudian sense (Krauss argues that the unpredictable relations between back and front views and the void of the interior in many of the pieces defy dual possession) and also as sublimation of unconscious desires can be consistent.

The concluding essays by Haskell and Tucker are almost models of the low calibre surveys too often turned out by weary curators. The incompetence of Haskell's account is comprehensive: she knows too little of the critical literature, and hence misrepresents the limited John Chamberlain as "major";<sup>5</sup> she is given to clichéd, unidimensional descrip-

tions of both works of art and stylistic movements, as in "raw energy and power": she is so confused about what she calls "formal art" that she imagines it to mean the use of simple geometric forms; and she so misconstrues Clement Greenberg that she imagines he is prescribing rather than observing the movement towards autonomy of the various art forms in the century or so since Manet. For Haskell, the fundamental ambivalence of art reduces it to a mere perceptual puzzle, as can best be seen in her account of Larry Bell's glass boxes.

Haskell and Tucker share an important error that is almost an occupational hazard of curators of contemporary art: they too often validate an artist's accomplishment on the basis of its congruence with his stated intentions. They quote a large number of artists on their intentions, but at no point seriously question them.

Whereas Haskell and Tucker find certain tendencies in recent sculpture towards increased literalness, in earthworks, for example, or towards "ephemeral . . . sculptural situations" in Oldenburg and certain more "conceptual" artists, further analysis might suggest more complex interpretations. The earth artists might suggest a revival, although not necessarily a successful one, of the eighteenth-century idea of the picturesque.<sup>6</sup> The tendency to the ephemeral might suggest newness for its own sake, a phenomenal newness without authentic artistic newness. One can only regret that the two weakest essays in the Whitney Museum's book are by its own creators.

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ANN FALKNER. *Without Our Past?* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977. 242 pp., 69 illus., \$15.00 (cloth), \$5.00 (paper).

Not long ago, proponents of architectural conservation pleaded their case solely on the grounds that to remain a cultured society we must retain our architectural heritage. They may have been right, but this "soft" argument gained them little respect in the hard-nosed world of business. Now, however, as resources become more precious and the conservator society draws nearer, preservation becomes doubly important: we simply cannot afford the wanton demolition of serviceable old buildings. Proponents of conservation have consequently gained a new mantle of respectability, and their arguments are heeded ever more carefully than before.

Ann Falkner has attempted to encourage the conservation movement towards maturity by writing *Without Our Past?*, a book which she aptly subtitled "A handbook for the preservation of Canada's architectural heritage." Falkner has intended that the book not only "heighten awareness" in the values of conservation, but that it also "provide some

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Tillim, "Earthworks and the New Picturesque," *Artforum*, VII:4 (Dec. 1968), 42-45.

<sup>2</sup> In a footnote added in 1915 to his *Three Essays in Sexuality* (1905).

<sup>3</sup> "Certain Aspects of Sublimation and Delusion," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XI (1930), 12-23; "Similar and Divergent Determinants Underlying the Sublimation of Pure Art and Pure Science," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, VI (1935), 186-202.

<sup>4</sup> "A Psycho-Analytic Approach to Aesthetics," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XXXIII (1952), 196-207.

<sup>5</sup> The majority opinion is represented by W. Darby Bannard's critique in "Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, David Smith," *Artforum*, VI (April, 1968), 22-32.