

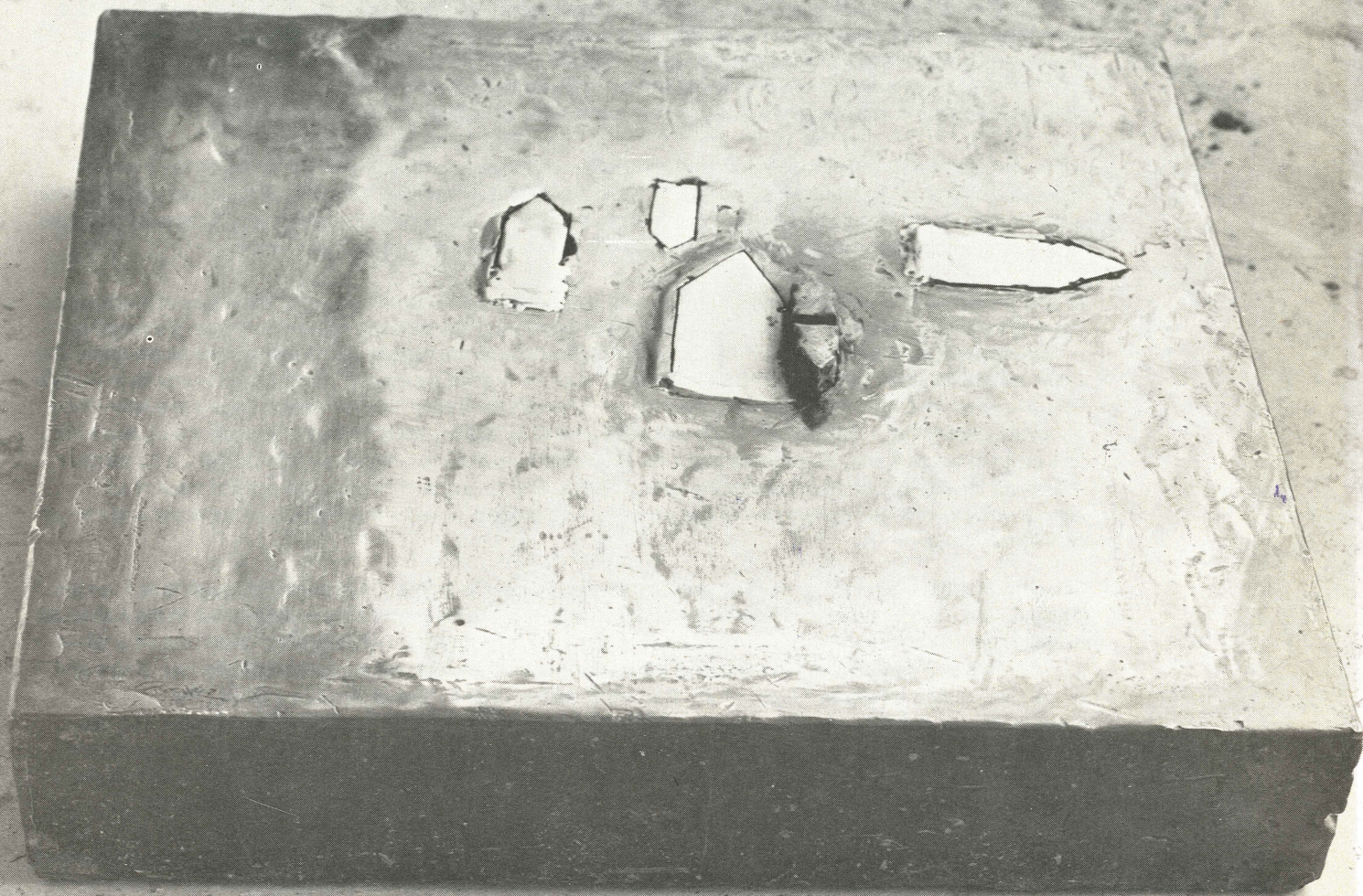
ED ZELENAK

Recent Wallworks and Sculptures

Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon

19 March - 26 April 1981

Untitled No: 2



Ed Zelenak: Recent Wallworks and Sculptures

Ed Zelenak's early fiberglass sculptures displayed the public optimism of the 60s. Their monumental scale, their use of new man-made materials, the simple figures, and their openness to the space of the viewer are exactly the features we would associate with an offshoot of Minimal art. With their objective forms, technologically realized concepts, and no context but the surrounding space, they were the assured new sculpture of urban society.

When we turn to the two steel sculptures in this exhibition, we question the apparent subjective and material retreat and return to the gallery. These works seem to have more to do with the subjectivity of the sculpture of Rodin, for example, than with the objectivity of the art passed through — a private rather than public art. The more traditional material of metal, the small scale, the intimate diaristic quality of their internal drawing promote this reading. Yet, as with Rodin, the surface markings do not project an internal meaning (as subject matter, for instance) as much as register an external act by the artist. Initially, we are concerned with the means of incision, not their meaning: we understand the material and our relationship to it. The oppositions — public-private, objective-subjective — are not absolute for the notational acts of the sculptor leave traces that can be interpreted in their substance and context. As ways of organization, these oppositions become confused in the work of this exhibition where we find on the floor: drawing into sculpture; on the wall: sculptural drawing. We should not think this as mere reversal of expectations.

The two locales of wall and floor, however, introduce other orders of experience than simply the objects presented. Together they determine the reading of each event within their spaces, and each subtle disturbance therein. The cultural orders of painting and sculpture, painting on the wall and sculpture on the floor, unavoidably direct reading and inflect meaning in the work on exhibit, for the acts of each inhabit the locale of the other. Thought together, the cross-axes of painting-sculpture set up certain paradigms: vertical — horizontal; eye — body; optical — tactile; virtual — actual. For instance, a painting is an experience primarily directed to the eye; it engages the eye either on the two dimensions of its surface or in its virtual or implied perspectival depth. A sculpture, on the other hand, brings the body of the viewer into play in the actual space of the sculpture, in its extension and depth. Of course, each includes the other; eye and body cannot be separated: the body moves back and forth in front of a painting and around a sculpture; and sculptural extension and depth are read tactilely by the eye. But a sculpture has a different claim on our experience: it has a presence as a body, on the floor, in our space. A wallwork, especially a drawing, occupies a more conceptual space. Location, then, affects meaning. Moving from wall to floor and back again are events that draw forth the complex co-ordination of a whole response. And we should remember in this exhibition that we are looking at the "drawings" of an artist whose primary experience is as a sculptor.

In 1976, before the creation of either of the works in this current display, Zelenak exhibited a series of lead plates, about twenty inches square by one and one-half inches thick, hung on the wall. As wall reliefs, they occupied a half world between sculpture and drawing. The sculptural operations of incising and cutting were clearly visible, but as an ensemble these marks soon were transported to the "hieroglyphic" realm of drawing. As a "language" the marks were decipherable only as incised half-circles, triangles, and embedded directional arrows, all contributing to an overworked and ambiguous surface.

If these wall pieces register an act caught in the delay of lead, released in the moment of viewing, the floor sculptures first confront us as masses, occupying our space and a parallel time. Although having passed from marking to mass in the floor sculptures, the same interior drawing, incising and embedding are there, but they are fewer in number and the surfaces are simpler. Steel is a more recalcitrant material than lead, so its working is difficult. On the floor, it definitely is a mass, and any form cut within that mass must assert itself as a force. Cut from this mass, the forms remain embedded, all the more asserted as forms in the constraint of their context. But they are free from the two dimensions of the wall; and with their north, south, east, west orientations, they circulate the viewer around their directional biases. They direct, but we walk around them; their vertical cuts through the depth of the horizontal mass confirm our bodies in motion.

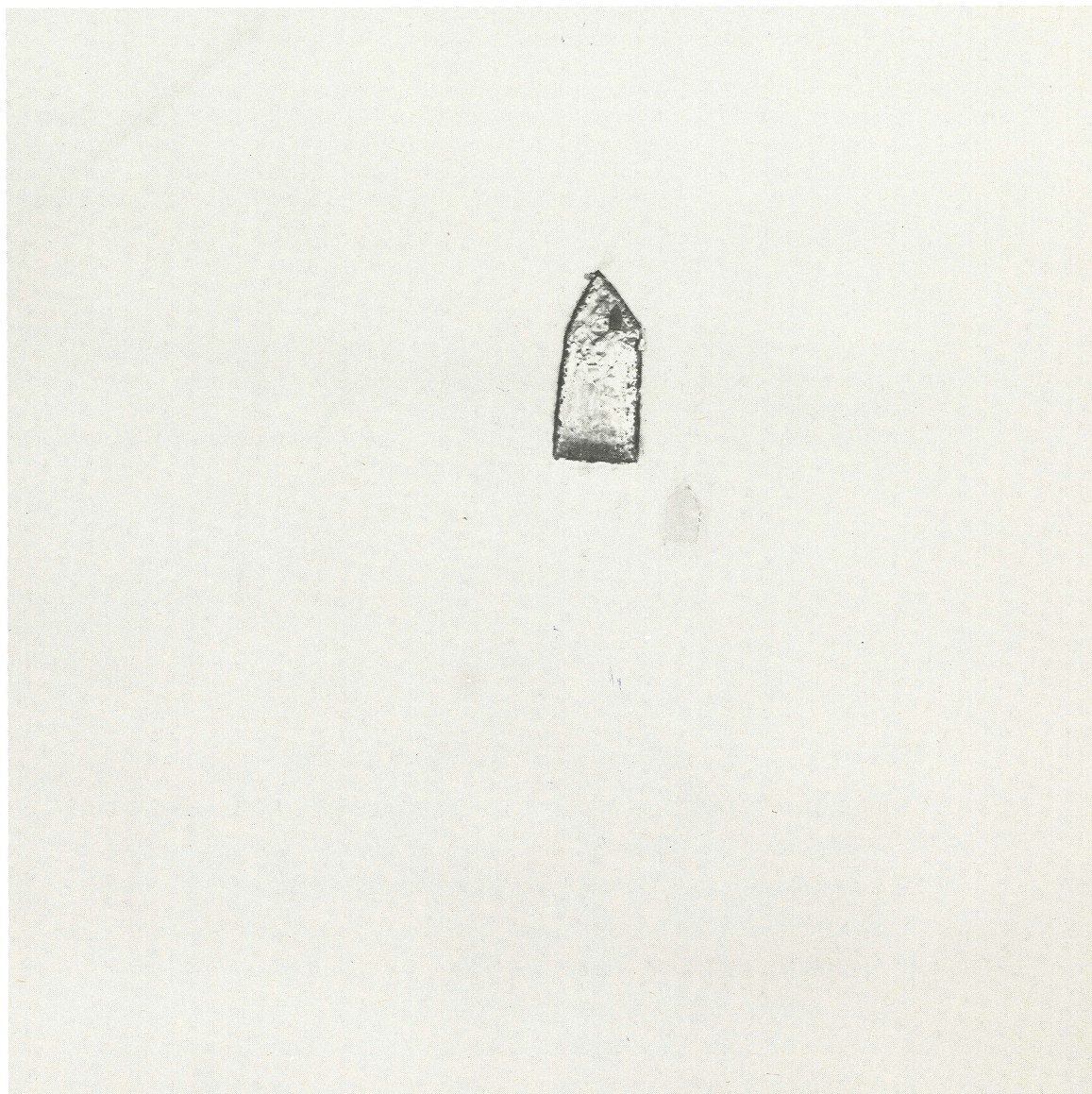
When our attention is directed to the interior articulation of this mass, above all we are struck by the sense of labor, of working in this material. Any decision is hard won; and all tentative attempts, all planning, remain on the surface as a record of the process. By turning within the bounds of the mass, by articulating its exterior surfaces and cutting within, the sculptor engages in an act that tries to signify more than the material.

In both his notion of drawing into sculpture, on and in its surface (instead of thinking of the edges of the mass as drawing cuts) and his sense of process as a record of this work, Zelenak's sculpture differs from the material constructions of such sculptors as Carl Andre and Richard Serra. He neither uses the rectangle as the basic unit within an overall structure of like units as in Andre's "rugs," nor does he use it to construct a volume as in Serra's "card-houses" or to direct sight beyond the form as in Serra's solid steel blocks. Neither does a predetermined process establish the eventual form of the work and time of its manufacture. The artist accepts the square form as a ground, not as a unit; the process and time are indeterminate. Given the square mass, there is no formal reason for the number or placement of the interior forms. The cutting and incising, the act and trace of an attempted or questioned act are part of one process. This ground — surface and depth — is the site and source of an uncovering.

The early fiberglass sculptures gave no sense of time or process: a concept was carried through to its form and the sculpture was constructed. There was no ground except in the sculpture's literal placement. In the wallworks exhibited here, a form familiar to the metal sculptures occupies a spacious white ground unarticulated until we step close. When we examine the surface of the paper around the metal, we recognize calculations of size and placement, essays similar to the sculpture, that record all the stages of the work's completion. The heterogeneous materials of paper, wood and metal bring the work closer to drawing than wall relief; but, like sculpture, this work literally matches the scale of the body. The paper is large enough to respond to or record the body's actions; for the sculptor, it is more responsive than metal. With its diverse material, this work is not collage: it is that piece of metal again — like an icon — that attracts our attention and that of the artist.

This form is dominant — in material and central (or just off-center) placement; the rest supports it as ground and record of its coming into existence. It is one form of drawing within that space as a shape, and as a mass that has been cut and pegged into the fragile paper surface. To assert its sculptural character, it replicates its form and contrasts its condition in the steel arrow sunk into its mass. Its own mass, raked by light, rises above the paper's

Six x Six No: 3



surface and is given dimension by the perpendicular steel pegs that seem to hold it in place. Stable as a mass, the form is fluid in its painterly surface and directional in its shape.

Different information is put into play by the diverse materials and functions of single elements. For instance, the drawing conceptualizes, the form actualizes. (But do we know what traces have been erased or concealed in the passage between the two?) Drawing documents a past time; the form embodies its presence and brings time forth for the viewer. The form is a sign and a signal: a sign of itself and a signal of temporal activity. It directs the eye, but puts the body into motion, in time. Corresponding to our bodies, it occupies its space in the paper as we stand in our place.

Philip Monk, February 1981

The author, Philip Monk, received his M.A. in Art History from the University of Toronto.

He is a contributing editor to *Impulse* magazine and contributes frequently to *Parachute*, *Macleans*, *Art Express* and *Canadian Forum*.

His essays have appeared in various anthologies. In 1982 Mr. Monk will be curating an exhibition at A Space in Toronto on the theme of language and representation.

Catalogue

1. Untitled No: 2, 1977, Steel, Tin, Lead, Copper, 22 x 22 x 3 in., Collection of the Artist
2. Untitled No: 4, 1977, Steel, Tin, Lead, Copper, 36 x 36 x 3 in., Collection of the Artist
3. Six x Six No: 1, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, Wood, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the Artist
4. Six x Six No: 2, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the Artist
5. Six x Six No: 3, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, Wood, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the Artist
6. Six x Six No: 4, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, Wood, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the Artist
7. Six x Six No: 5, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, Wood, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the Artist
8. Six x Six No: 6, 1979, Tin, Paper, Lead, Wood, 72 x 72 in., Collection of the University of Western Ontario