

EDITORIAL: SCULPTURE IN TORONTO

The anomaly is all this sculpture in Toronto, a city where painting -- and formalist or modernist painting at that -- and not sculpture has always been considered to be the art. We should ask ourselves what this manifestation of sculpture means. And certainly we should not be quick to point chauvinistically to this as an example of Toronto's coming-of-age [as the art reporter of the *Globe and Mail* enthusiastically finds further evidence.] We should guard against uncritical adulation since a high degree of the sculpture on exhibit is neither of quality nor seriousness. This sculpture will have an international audience because of the sculpture conference; therefore, we should show that not only is good sculpture being made in Toronto and Canada but that it is being critically evaluated too. Toronto, as a mark of its provincialness, has always uncritically promoted the second-rate, the purveyors and distorters of imported ideas; in effect, we have been academic provincials. We do not want to be party to such "look at us" statements as:

"When the sculpture conference is over, 1,500 artist-delegates from all over the world are expected to carry the news of the Toronto art awakening to art communities in cities everywhere. One happy result for Toronto should be an acceleration of international interest in the phenomenal progress towards cultural maturity." *

Do we still need to make such statements that manifest colonial insecurity? The honest and important work will and has achieved recognition without the need of this glorifying promotion and self-congratulation.

* James Purdie, *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 1978. The article, as usual, is full of historical and critical distortions. In his synthetic recreation of Canadian art history (and modernism in general) he unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, promotes a certain vision of cultural development. Why is Carmen Lamanna and his artists, whose works make up the best part of the Ontario College of Art show and part of the Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition, studiously ignored? And what help are critical glosses like this one: "such labels [the 'obscene and disgusting objects' labelling of Mark Prent's sculptures] have proved to be the biggest obstacle to the development of post-Freudian art of this century." What is the post-Freudian art of this century but one of Purdie's fictions?

Harbourfront's "Performance" (after the "Rehearsal" and "Performance" hopefully there will be a "Post-Mortem") is the focus of much of what is wrong in sculpture and its promotion. It is billed as a "Happening"; therefore, no critical evaluation can be made, or at least it would be out of spirit. During the 1960s, Donald Judd and Robert Morris in their writings could say that the best recent work had been sculpture. And this was true, and perhaps still is, however little it was and is appreciated in Toronto. With all the advances in sculpture since then, along with the theoretical dimensions added by Conceptual and a politically oriented art, it is disappointing to see so much sculpture that relies on "literary" and "theatrical" ideas. In the case of Harbourfront, it perhaps marks the degree of immaturity of a number of young sculptors but also the provincialness of others who have adopted an idea and then constructed the sculpture to that idea

rather than letting the medium and its interaction with the spectator's perception and judgement determine the sculpture. Much of this art operates on the basis of received ideas or images and thus is a type of academic art.

The Harbourfront exhibition is too vast an enterprise (a fault in itself) to review, and there are good pieces. Besides the lack of consistent quality of the pieces selected, there is a lack of consistency and sensibility in the siting of them. Some are swamped by too much space, and others are too crowded for observation, as in the Art Bank collection, which in itself, is of disparate and doubtful quality when seen besides the Murray, David Rabinowitch and Snow pieces.

There are many examples of the theatricality and academicism often found in sculpture.

Michael Fried wrote of the theatricality of Minimal art, which he named Literalist art, but the best Minimal and Post-Minimal art has been able to defeat that designation. Kosso Eloul's *Free Arch*, however, cannot. His art is a heavy-handed combination of Minimal form -- namely, hollow volumetric boxes and the optics of David Smith's *Cubis*. If David Smith's *Cubis* were able optically to obviate gravity, Eloul's work plays with the idea of gravity achieved optically. Eloul uses the same devices of welded forms, in his case, to threaten us with a falling mass while suspending it optically (and physically through the weld). The work has the virtues of neither Minimal art nor that of David Smith and his followers. Minimalist and Modernist cannot be synthesized.

Rex Lingwood's work attempts the same theatricality although achieved with a bit more whimsy, for whatever place that sensibility has in sculpture. His *Graceful Collapse No. 5* is an illustration of its title. It is a type of representational art couched in abstract form in that it tries to represent symbolically a condition that is not inherent in the sculptural medium itself (see note 24 in "Notes on Richard Serra's *3 = elevations*" by Philip Monk following).

Haydn Davies' *Space Composition for Rebecca* seems to show the influence of Mark di Suvero. Yet it reveals what happens when another sculptor's work is (mis)understood and used academically. Davies' piece has none of the tension, energy or attained balance of di Suvero's sculpture. Each of the beams of the Davies are made of encased and enamelled aluminum which makes each beam a volume rather than a weighted arm. Each element seems to slide in place and rest due to composition rather than to any structural reason. The work remains elegant and mannered but empty of content.

The sculptors in the show have attempted much more than the references to the sculptural styles of modernism and Minimalism indicate, but this work cannot be discussed at this time. The good work, hopefully, will be discussed in a future *Artists Review*.

If the Harbourfront exhibition shows the various directions of sculpture, the Art Gallery of Ontario's "Structures for Behaviour" reveals which directions are important and the quality and importance of the work manifesting these directions. The work in the exhibition was chosen to display the interactive relation between the sculptural work and the spectator in structure and perception. This is the meaning of the use of "behaviour" in the title. The work is understood through phenomenology, and if it is not seen to create a cohesive group, it at least shares certain tendencies. What the exhibition makes clear -- perhaps not to all the participants and organizers -- is

a basic contradiction between the work of Robert Morris and George Trakas, on one hand, and Richard Serra and David Rabinowitch, on the other, and therefore a more basic contradiction in the direction of recent sculpture than realized. The new spatial art of a subjective, romantic and baroque sensibility, as promoted by Morris and including Trakas, is contradicted by Serra's work (which does indeed share certain tendencies with this spatial art) and Rabinowitch's sculpture. The two latter seem more concerned with understanding judgements in perception by showing that knowledge is not given directly in experience and that the constructed sculpture and world exist, nonetheless, external to our perceptions. Morris' and Trakas' spatial art at no time allow these types of judgements to be made. This question will be dealt with more thoroughly in the analysis of the exhibition in the forthcoming Fall issue of Parachute. The exhibition, no matter what contradictions are revealed, is important and of as high a quality as we are likely to see in Toronto. The Art Gallery of Ontario, and especially Roald Nasgaard, who conceived and organized the show, are to be commended for their courage in creating this exhibition in Toronto.

Other sculpture shows in Toronto deserving attention included the Ontario College of Art's "Aspects of Sculpture". Much of this work has been seen before, many of the better pieces at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. David Rabinowitch, Royden Rabinowitch, Robin Collyer, Ed Zelenak have good work on display and there is a remarkable early Snow (as there is at the Isaacs Gallery along with a 1970 piece). John Massey's work deserves attention also (as did his "The 2 Rooms" exhibition).

Good quality work of international standards exists in Toronto, but it is submerged under the self-glorifying hype of the second-rate.

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NOTES ON RICHARD SERRA'S 3 = elevations,
IN THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO'S "STRUCTURES FOR
BEHAVIOUR"

1. Each piece of steel is a discrete mass (with definite length, breadth and depth) oriented to each other and in a space.
2. Each mass is a different height but all horizontal planes (top and bottom) are equal in elevation due to their topographic setting.
3. The three masses roughly triangulate an area.
4. There is a judged centre point of the directional lines of the three masses.
5. The a priori conception of triangulation is abandoned through the observations that arise in situating oneself in the approximate centre. The outcome of physical movement and visual and concomitant spatial adaptation obviates the original conception.
6. Each mass is in its own right a separate mass and part of a space of three masses.
7. Relations can exist between two of the three masses at a time.
8. The terrain causes the spectator to vary an ideated and expected geometrically projected path.
9. The constituent elements of the masses are constructions in relation to one's movement and perception.
10. Moving directionally from one mass perpendicular to its face, one intersects the face of another mass.
11. Each face presents a construction.

12. A meaning is made obvious at that point through comparison with the other masses.

13. One's line of vision aligns or coincides with the longitudinal line projected from the mass under observation.

14. But a line from the third mass does not coincide with the other two linear projections.

15. The tension between the actual line and the expected line separates the actual line from a triangular pattern.

16. The lines exist as separate entities, as separate lines, as constituent elements of each mass.

17. The lines begin to separate as distinct orientations.

18. The directional line from the original mass under observation that is aligned with the spectator's line of vision is separate from that line of vision. It exists in its own right.

19. The two lines (line of vision and projected line) are not the same.

20. The directional line exists apart from the spectator's vision. It asserts that something exists EXTERNAL to one's vision. It confirms the externality of the world. (Carl Andre: "The sense of one's being in the world confirmed by the existence of things and others in the world.")

21. Other seeming constructions (see note 4) show that knowledge is not given directly in perception (see note 5).

22. Serra: "What I am interested in is revealing the structure and content and character of a space and a place by defining a physical structure through the elements that I use."

23. Only through the space of the site is the site known.

24. The sculpture does not abandon the possibility of an abstract sculpture whose meaning is posited in the medium itself and its constituent elements in conjunction with the perception of the whole and its parts through observation in spatial duration.

25. Fulfills Robert Smithson's criterion: "Art's development should be dialectical and not metaphysical," in opposition to a suspect metaphysical art of a subjective, romantic and baroque sensibility.

Philip Monk.

A SUNNY AFTERNOON IN CHINATOWN

It was a sunny afternoon in Chinatown when I went looking for Serra's piece. Chickens clacked furiously from the back of a truck. Small activities went on: cleaning up yards, skipping, buying and selling. Each one driven by a particular purpose. At Huron and Phoebe is a vacant lot, a path cuts more-or-less diagonally across it, through the grass and trash. Three steel "bricks" sat quietly and anonymously in the grass, ignored by children. The sun shone down on all, regardless of sex or race, animal or mineral.

You might not know it was art. The rusting steel is no more important than the empty milk carton. Unless you had the importance already in mind, were bringing it with you before you got there. No sign adds importance to the steel, no placard announces art. Kids cut through art. Home from school or the park. They see steel, junk that is rusting.

I see art sometimes, sometimes steel. Because I brought the idea of art with me, it's not clear at times what I am seeing.

I think I am seeing a gesture someone made so small that no one would dispute it.