

# 'And I know damned-well what he wanted!': deliberate alteration and interpretations of intent in several late sculptures by David Smith

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**ABSTRACT** Some years after the death of David Smith (1906–1965), Clement Greenberg, then executor of his estate, made a decision to have the white painted surface stripped from five sculptures and present them as authentic works by the artist. In removing what he considered to be a temporary primer coating that had already begun to deteriorate, Greenberg believed that he was restoring unfinished works to a state that would more accurately reflect Smith's artistic intention, something over which he felt he could claim to have authority. Although supported in his actions by several prominent critics at the time, Greenberg was tarnished by the scandal and resigned from the estate in 1979. Raising questions about authenticity, the value of the original, the availability of the artist's intent and who speaks for the artist after his death, a discussion on the reasons behind the original alteration and subsequent restoration of these works by the present David Smith Estate is provided. The idea that a single authentic state for Smith's stripped sculptures can be identified is questioned, and the possibility of authenticity being linked to multiple biographies of the work is suggested.

## Introduction

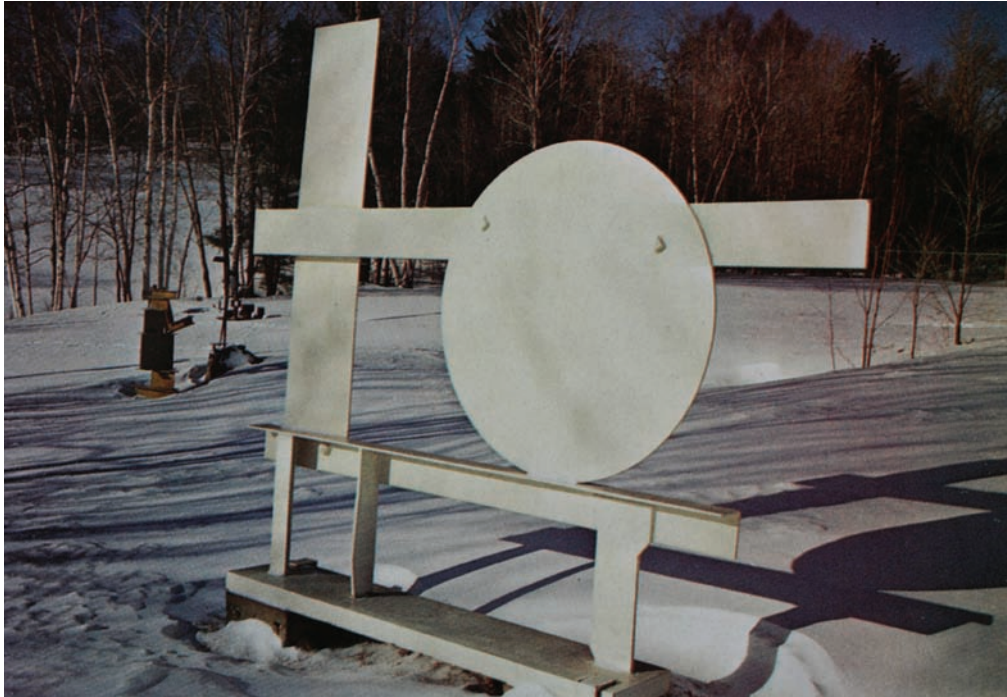
In 1974 Clement Greenberg, then executor of the estate of David Smith, was publicly accused by Rosalind Krauss of deliberately altering the surfaces of a number of Smith's later sculptures (Krauss 1974). The accusation, which was published in the September/October 1974 edition of *Art in America*, concerned the fact that some time after Smith's death, Greenberg ordered the removal of the white painted coating from the surface of a number of Smith's later sculptures and presented them as authentic works by the artist (Figs 1 and 2).

In removing what he considered to be a temporary white primer coat that had already deteriorated badly only six years after the

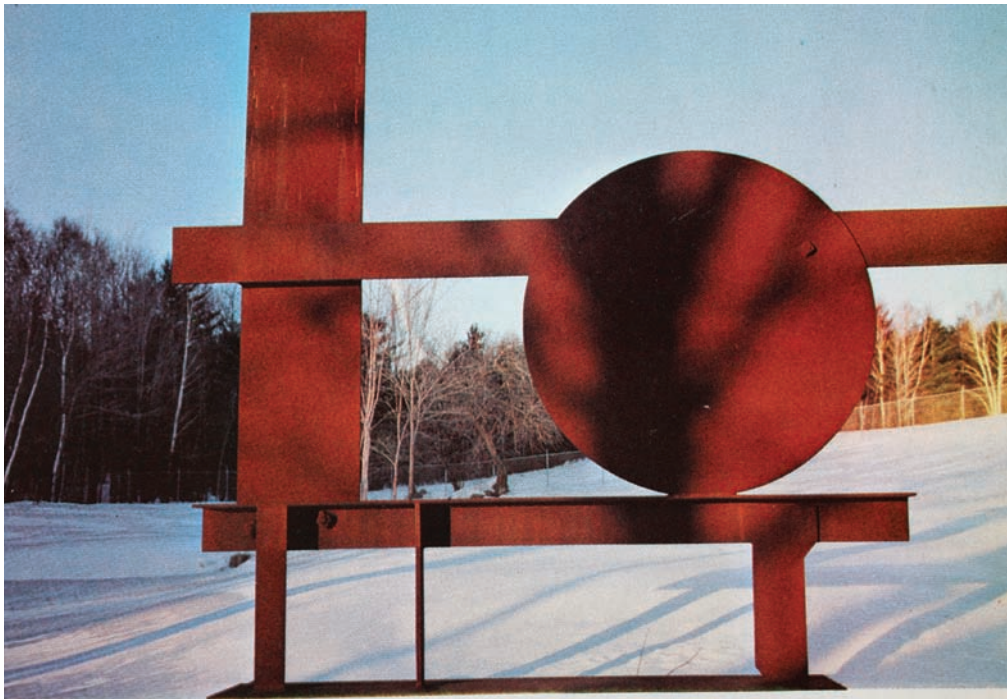
artist's death, Greenberg believed that he was restoring unfinished works to a state that would more accurately reflect Smith's artistic intentions; something over which he could, with some justification, claim to have authority. For his critics, he had removed all trace of the original artist's hand and imposed a subjective aesthetic judgement on the sculptures, irreversibly destroying their authenticity as true works by Smith.

## David Smith

David Smith almost singlehandedly changed the nature of sculpture in America. He



**Figure 1** David Smith, *Primo Piano III*, 1962, steel. Photographed in February 1970, with white paint applied by the artist. Reproduced with permission. (© Estate of David Smith/DACS, London/VAGA, New York, 2013. Photo: Dan Budnik.)



**Figure 2** David Smith, *Primo Piano III*, 1962, steel. Photographed in January 1973, stripped of its paint and rusted. Reproduced with permission. (© Estate of David Smith/DACS, London/VAGA, New York, 2013. Photo: Dan Budnik.)

brought a new formal language to it, building on earlier achievements in welded steel by Pablo Picasso and Julio González, but ultimately carrying them further towards a uniquely American form of expression. Smith was the first to create welded steel sculpture in America, employing the methods, materials and ideology of industry, and producing works in steel that could be as free as drawing, bringing lyricism to industrial metal and removing sculpture from its monumental, monolithic heritage.

Trained as a painter in the late 1920s at the Art Students League, painting was integral to Smith's approach to sculpture. Turning to welded steel in the 1930s, he believed there was little conceptual difference between painting and sculpture. This approach gave him the means to both create works that were perceived as 'drawings in space', and to embellish his steel surfaces with colour, which he did from the beginning, providing physical protection and visual unity for his works. A meticulous industrial craftsman with a profound knowledge of painting materials, he believed that surpassing the standards of industry would mean his works would prevail long after his death. He wrote of his process in 1965:

First the iron is ground down so that it is raw, and it is primed with about 15 coats of epoxy primer; and then a few coats of zinc, and then a few coats of white, and then the color is put on after that; so it runs about twenty-five or thirty coats, and that's about three times the paint coat on a Mercedes or about thirty times the paint coat on a Ford or Chevrolet. And if it doesn't get scratched or hammered, I think the paint coat will last longer than I do (Smith 1965).

Although his critical dominance was diminishing by the mid-1960s, Clement Greenberg remained a significant presence in the art world. Certainly, many artists of Smith's generation owed him their reputation, at least in part, and he was the most influential and consistent promoter of Smith's work. His tendency

to direct, dictate and edit artists' creative processes aside, Greenberg was a logical choice for ensuring the protection of Smith's artistic interests.

### Greenberg's alterations to Smith's sculpture

Between 1961 and 1963, Smith made eight large-scale welded steel sculptures that were painted white and placed outdoors in the fields around his studio in Bolton Landing, New York. Smith died in 1965, and according to Greenberg, by the early 1970s, the harsh winters had taken their toll on the white alkyd paint coating on these works, and it had begun to deteriorate. Arguing that the sculptures were never intended to be seen in this unfinished state, Greenberg asked Smith's assistant Leon Pratt to strip the paint, allow them to rust for a season, and then varnish them, using a process that Smith had used for other sculptures created around the same time, and which was documented in his notes (Smith 1962).

In doing this, Greenberg stated that he had simply taken several unfinished and badly deteriorating works to a stage of completion that more accurately reflected Smith's ultimate intention for them. Greenberg had been a close friend and adviser to Smith for more than 20 years and maintained that he alone had the authority to speak for Smith's intentions, stating in 1978, 'Smith would hate to know that those seven sculptures stayed covered with alkyd white' (Greenberg 1978b).<sup>1</sup>

The article naturally prompted outrage. Many critics supported Krauss in her assertion that although unfinished, the surfaces of the sculptures were indicative of Smith's intention to add colour (or other embellishment) at a later stage, ultimately never realised. However, Greenberg received a surprising degree of support from his peers. William Rubin, director of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the time, defended the alterations, stating that Smith had told him that he had a strong dislike for all-over white

painted work. He claimed that Smith felt that white paint made the work appear weightless, working against the natural properties of steel, and that it had negative associations with plaster; a reference to a sculptural tradition from which Smith had intentionally distanced himself. The sculptor Stanley Marcus, whose book *David Smith: The Sculptor and his Work* (1983) remains a significant authority on Smith's working technique, stated that since the paint had deteriorated so badly and since Greenberg was the most influential figure in Smith's life at the time of his death, there were only two options available: to remove the paint or to destroy the sculptures to protect Smith's interests (Marcus 1978). Marcus further reasoned that there were many examples of Smith leaving sculpture in its natural rusted state but none in white primer, therefore leaving Greenberg to take the only ethical decision available.<sup>2</sup>

Although frequent repainting of contemporary outdoor steel sculpture was common practice at the time (Kramer 1974), Greenberg felt that any attempt to restore or replace the flat white paint would have been a greater infringement on Smith's intentions for the work. Despite this, Greenberg and his supporters appeared to be of the opinion that refinishing the sculptures in an entirely different aesthetic was somehow more reflective of Smith's intentions than simply replacing the white paint.

The anecdotal claims of Rubin and Marcus of course do not particularly advance the argument for capturing Smith's intent or the authenticity of the restored sculptures, and there is little in their accounts to suggest that Smith had any general or specific intention for these or any other works. Indeed the claim that Smith disliked the effect of white paint is refuted by the critic Irving Sandler, who recalls a visit to Smith's studio in the 1960s where Smith stated: 'I put seventeen coats of white paint on that sculpture before I was happy with it.'<sup>3</sup>

The argument for or against removing the paint seems to have hinged on whether or not it was to be considered a temporary protective primer or an integral part of a final work, albeit unfinished. Smith certainly used a primer in his painted steel work, but it is unlikely that

this was what Greenberg stripped from the sculptures.<sup>4</sup> It seems more reasonable to suggest that the white paint was to be used as a ground layer in preparation for the future application of paint. In fact this is made clear by Smith in a 1963 letter to the painters Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, where he refers directly to his white painted works, and makes an obvious distinction between primer and ground, stating: '[I am] painting white coats on all the primed sculpture – before I paint the color' (Smith 1963).<sup>5</sup>

Considering this statement, Smith's intentions at first glance might appear obvious. At the same time it implies that the paint was applied by Smith himself (and not by his assistant, who Greenberg had claimed typically applied the white 'primer' to Smith's sculptures). It suggests that the authentic state of these works is therefore in their original, unfinished state. Although not completed works, the sculptures retain material (ostensibly) applied by the hand of the artist and because of this we assign more value to them in that state. From this point of view, there is another important consideration: Greenberg removed all traces of the fact that the works were unfinished. It is clear that this was of importance to Smith's contemporaries. As the sculptor Beverly Pepper observed in a letter to *Art in America*, 'should we not value phases of an artist's research as much as the conclusions he came to?' (Pepper 1975).

### Questioning Greenberg's motives

That Greenberg acted on his own volition is clear. He shared his role with two other executors: the painter Robert Motherwell and Smith's lawyer, Ira Lowe. Both denied being consulted in the decision. Motherwell was in poor health at the time and had distanced himself from estate matters, and Lowe stated that he deferred to Greenberg on 'all technical art matters' (Kramer 1974: 28). Greenberg's belief that he was the only person qualified to speak for Smith's intentions was clear: 'David said these works were unfinished', he stated in 1974, 'and

I know damned-well what he wanted' (Fuller 1974).

Brooks Adams has observed that by 1970, after the significant deaths of both Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, the effort to establish 'a seminal pantheonic generation of American artists' whose work was abstract and purist led to the selective exhibition of works that fitted the criteria of those whose critical interest was in promoting those ideals (Adams 2001: 7). This led to the suppression of much of the work of painters that did not fit into the canon of those critics who promoted these ideals in favour of works that did. Similarly in Smith's case, the painted, animated surface of many of his sculptures were experienced by Clement Greenberg and others as what Kirili describes as 'blemishes on the ideology of Formalist purity' (Kirili 2004: 24).

The critic Hilton Kramer stated in 1974 that 'it is well-known in art circles for some time that Mr. Greenberg felt the application of paint to the Smith sculptures was an artistic mistake' (Kramer 1974: 28). Indeed, Greenberg himself had written as much as early as 1956, stating that Smith had a tendency 'to over-elaborate a work beyond the point to which the momentum of inspiration has carried it' (Greenberg 1956–7: 32). As Sarah Hamill has pointed out, his judgements were not limited to the critical sphere. In 1951 Greenberg wrote to Smith requesting permission to apply black paint over the original polychromed surface of a sculpture given to him by the artist (Hamill 2011: 92).

It is clear that the issue of colour remained an aesthetic problem for Greenberg until Smith's death and long afterwards. He wrote in 1964 that 'the question of color in Smith's art (as in all recent sculpture along the same lines) remains a vexed one. I don't think that he has ever used applied color with real success, and the "Voltri-Bolton Landing" pieces benefit by his having abstained from it' (Greenberg 1993: 192). Indeed, Greenberg's treatment of the surfaces of the five sculptures in question was clearly intended to recreate the appearance of the *Voltri* sculptures that he favoured. Although the editorial to Krauss's article raised questions concerning the fact that Greenberg

had repainted the work in brown ('Issues and Commentary' 1974), this appears not to have been the case. Conservator Alan Farancz, who treated the sculptures and ultimately restored the white paint for the estate in 1997, was able to confirm Greenberg's earlier claim that he had adhered to a process that Smith was known to have used in both the *Voltri* and *Voltri-Bolton* series.<sup>6</sup> Although it can be said that Greenberg closely followed Smith's original process and arguably adhered to his understanding of making the works more authentic, he ultimately created sculptures that were a pastiche of entirely separate and unconnected works from Smith's oeuvre. That this was carried out according to Smith's original intent, and that Greenberg's actions did not represent a personal agenda, is highly questionable.

### The re-restoration of Smith's sculptures

Tarnished by the scandal and removed from his custodianship of the collection, Greenberg resigned from the estate in 1979, and the collection was returned to the care of Smith's two daughters who, for the first time, could act as stakeholders in decisions made on behalf of their father's work. The estate decided that rather than leave the five sculptures in their stripped state, Greenberg's alterations should be completely removed and the white paint replaced. The decision on this occasion was not an attempt to recapture Smith's original intent, but rather to return the works to a state that reflected their unfinished appearance at the point of Smith's death.

The painted surface was intentionally recreated using a modern white oil-based paint, whose formulation and colour were based on results of the analysis of residues of original alkyd paint from both the stripped sculptures and by looking at other works in the collection whose white paint had survived. The paint is a modern variant on what Smith was known to have used, but its composition was considered carefully. Modern industrial paints intended for steel surfaces are designed to be

smooth and flawless. Smith's paint, from observation of painted works from the same period, shows brushstrokes and other textural characteristics. In using a modern version of Smith's original paint, the estate felt strongly that these aspects should be maintained as much as possible, keeping close to Smith's original coating without suggesting that the paint was original.

Whether or not the estate had any other option in addressing the earlier alterations to the sculptures, or indeed whether their appearance now conforms to a general sense of authenticity, is difficult to reconcile. Arguably, however, they exist in a state that reflects their origins in a way that cannot be claimed for other outdoor painted sculptures by Smith, who intended his large-scale sculptures to be seen outside. Their presence in this context was part of his artistic identity, and the fields around his home at Bolton Landing were filled with works that were in constant flux: works were often painted and repainted some years after creation, and occasionally after they had been exhibited, as Smith's concept for them developed over time. Today (as is the case for many modern painted steel sculptures) the majority of these are displayed indoors for conservation reasons. In modern conservation practice, an original painted coating is considered an integral part of the original work (even if deteriorated, and even if applied by an assistant). Even where a deteriorated coating could be repainted to match the original, the original painted surfaces of modern steel sculpture are generally preserved rather than repainted. Exhibiting outdoor sculpture indoors has the intention of preserving all possible evidence of the artist's hand for future generations, yet arguably it compromises the artist's original preference for the display of that work. This of course can be problematic for the viewer's interpretation, in Smith's case in particular, as it arguably eliminates much of the authentic experience of perceiving the works in the context the artist intended.

However, the David Smith Estate permit Smith's restored white sculptures to be exhibited outdoors for extended periods. Since the artist's original paint does not exist, the

sculptures can be repainted as the painted surface deteriorates. In this way, their appearance is closer to how they might have looked at the time of Smith's death. At the same time, the paint will not alter over time as it will, for example, with sculptures that survived with original white paint intact, and therefore lack the patina associated with natural ageing.

Clearly, the status of these works is complex and problematic. Can they be regarded as authentic works by Smith without Smith's original coating of white paint? Are they more authentic in a possibly unfinished state, painted in a modern white paint, rather than in the state in which Greenberg found them? Indeed should his original 'restoration' have been retained and considered part of the history of the works? Even as restored works that are visually identical to the 'originals', we still somehow perceive them as having a lesser value than works that still retain paint originally applied by the artist. There appears to be a number of reasons for this.

### Artist's intent and authenticity

Identifying Smith's intention from his remaining statements and writing is difficult. His personal attitude to restoration was complex and his statements were often contradictory. In a letter to the editor of *Art News* in 1960, for example, he denounced the stripping of original paint from an earlier sculpture *17Hs* (1950) by a private collector as an 'act of vandalism'. He publicly disowned the work, declared it valueless, and demanded the owner return it (Smith 1960a). Yet in the same year, he gave another collector instructions to repaint his sculpture *Fish* (1950–51), originally displayed outdoors and now in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums, when the initial paint coat deteriorated (Smith 1960b).

The authenticity of a work by any artist often appears to reside in the extent to which it conforms to the artist's intent. However, both concepts may be fluid and ultimately unattainable. As early as 1946, Wimsatt and

Beardsley suggested that authorial intent was neither available nor desirable as a standard for interpretation (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946). Authenticity is naturally a complex and relative term in the identification of the status of any work of art. In this case, Denis Dutton's definition of 'nominal authenticity' is applicable. Dutton's nominal authenticity resides in the correct identification of the origins, authorship or provenance of an object, and how this informs our perception of it. As he observes, much of what we take to be authentic in art is implicit in our understanding of the specific origin of the work as it comes from the hand of the artist (Dutton 2003: 259).

The will to establish nominal authenticity emanates from a general desire to understand a work of art in relation to the processes that gave rise to its existence (Dutton 2003: 260). Obviously this is considerably more difficult where works are unfinished, or where they are wholly or partially created by artists' assistants. When we examine the psychological mechanisms of why original material is so implicit in our assigning of value to art objects there may be two dimensions that are critical: the assessment of the object as the end point in a unique creative act (performance) and the degree of physical contact with the original artist (contagion) (Newman and Bloom 2012: 558).

The assessment of both contagion and performance has been examined in the field of experimental psychology in terms of the discrepancy in perceived value between original artworks and perfect duplicates. Newman and Bloom found that the act of intentionally duplicating an existing painting both lowered the perceived value of the duplicate and raised the value of the original, even when the duplicate was visually identical (Newman and Bloom 2012: 563). This may point to our difficulties in ascribing value to Smith's restored sculptures. Even though our experience of the works is no different from other works by Smith with their original paint intact, in general we still feel that they cannot be truly authentic in any state other than that in which Smith left them. Indeed, Peter Stevens has noted that because Greenberg's actions were widely publicised at

the time, there is a persistent belief among the public that the estate arbitrarily repainted many works, and that the surfaces of late sculptures by Smith are not original (Stevens 2005: 224).

Ultimately the identification of both intent and authenticity is difficult to articulate and may be entirely contextual. Muñoz Viñas has stated that logically it is fictive to suggest that there is a single authentic condition for any work of art. We may decide to dislike an object in a given state and desire to experience it in a preferable or more meaningful state, but we cannot make it more or less authentic by our intervention (Muñoz Viñas 2009: 36). Van de Vall *et al.* have offered an alternative viewpoint for assessing the authentic state of contemporary works of art. Using a biographical approach, the object's 'trajectory' – the many divergent histories that encompass its lifetime – is viewed as a series of biographies. Thus, rather than assigning value (and authenticity) to a single physical state that existed at one point during an object's history, all of its various trajectories are considered (Van de Vall *et al.* 2011: 6). Although this relates specifically to the changeable, transient nature of much contemporary art, it may have relevance for an approach to the restored Smith sculptures. Their authenticity may lie not in one fixed point in time, but in the many physical states in which they have existed in their history.

Identification of the artist's intent in any circumstances is entirely dependent on the ideology of the time, seems to be in constant flux and may ultimately be unattainable (Lowenthal 1998). However, the object touched by the hand of the artist still possesses a talismanic quality that nothing else can match. Muñoz Viñas has noted that when we point to any past state of a work of art, it can only either be a case of hypothesis or memory (Muñoz Viñas 2009: 37). Therefore an artist's intent, or for that matter an object's authenticity, can only ever be a relative value (McBride 1997: 93).

Smith's stripped sculptures might well be seen in this light. Instead of deciding on one authentic state, it can be suggested that Greenberg's actions changed our perception of those particular sculptures in one way, where

the estate's restoration altered it in another. Their trajectories take several divergent paths, all of which may be authentic, and all of which may represent Smith as an artist from a different point of view. Ultimately, however, we might bear in mind Stephen Dykstra's observation that time, dirt, deterioration and mishap can all contribute to the alteration or destruction of the character of the original work, but artists' purposes, aims and objectives 'exist in a psychological arena where they do not compose or deteriorate' (Dykstra 1996: 200).

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### Notes

1. In Krauss's article and the subsequent correspondence in the press, which carried on until 1978, there was some confusion over the exact number of sculptures that were painted white on Smith's death, and the number that were stripped of their white paint. Krauss initially identified five sculptures that were stripped, but according to Henderson, the number was six (Henderson 1975: 136). According to the estate, eight sculptures from the early 1960s (not seven as Greenberg mentions in his 1978 letter to *Art in America*) were left painted white by Smith. These were *Lunar Arc* (1961), *Primo Piano I, II and III* (all 1962), *Circle and Box* (1963), *Oval Node* (1963), *Untitled* (1963) and *Two Circles Two Crows* (1963). Of these, *Primo Piano I* and *Two Circles Two Crows* were both previously sold by the estate with their white paint still intact. Of the remaining six, five were stripped of their paint as discussed in the text.
2. The white painted surfaces however, did not prevent Greenberg lending *Primo Piano I* to

an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1969, with its white paint still intact. As noted above, *Primo Piano I* and *Two Circles Two Crows* were also sold in their original unfinished state. However, as Greenberg notes, the buyers were informed that the coating was a primer and it was left to their discretion as to whether or not to remove it (Greenberg 1978a: 5).

3. Irving Sandler, pers. comm., 2007.
4. Dan Budnik's 1963 photograph of *Primo Piano III* clearly shows a yellow-coloured primer coat (Krauss 1974: 31). Cross-sections taken in 1993 from paint from the sculptures *Zig III* (1961) and *Zig V* (1961), and analysed by Py-GC-MS at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC in 1991, confirm that Smith used a yellow/green (poly)vinyl-based etch primer for those works (Marshall 1995: 95) and this was confirmed in 2010 (Mulholland 2010: 102). As noted above, Alan Farancz's cross-sections of the later painted works revealed that Smith also used a red lead primer for at least one white painted sculpture (Alan Farancz, pers. comm., 19 November 2012), but to date a white coloured steel primer has not been discovered in the trade literature of the time or in any analysis of works by Smith.
5. Smith also confirmed this in a discussion on the *Primo Piano* series in a lecture to students in 1962: 'this has been primed and painted white, and I put it out three years ago, and I should have painted it with colors before this, but I have been doing other things, and I hope to finish it this summer' (Baro 1965: 49).
6. Alan Farancz, pers. comm., 19 November 2012. Farancz found that the stripped sculptures were coated with valve oil followed by several coats of epoxy resin. According to Smith he used this technique in 1962 for the 27 *Voltri* sculptures that he made at a disused Italsider factory for the *Festival of the Two Worlds*, Spoleto, 1962. The technique was used for all 27 sculptures except *Voltri X*, which was painted with red lead paint (McCoy 1973: 163).

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