

Hardcastle (1962): Memory, Catastrophe, Minimalism

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"Are there wounds that never heal? Yes. When accurately pricked, they bleed as freshly, but not as long, as when first pierced."¹ Anne Truitt, an American sculptor most often associated with minimalism, wrote this in the first of her three published artist journals in 1982. Her book proceeds to meditate on her past, layering childhood imagery with reflections upon her adult life. The interlacing of memories is characteristic of Truitt's writing: emotive, metaphorical, and nearly ecclesiastical in its tone. The past constitutes a source-text for the lived life, tuned to the pitch of an emotion, and foreboding: "Are there wounds that never heal?" And then the refrain, grim, steady: "Yes."

When the renowned mid-century art critic Clement Greenberg saw *Hardcastle* (Figure 1) for the first time in 1962, the artist remembers him backing away from it and muttering under his breath, "Scares the shit out of me."² Greenberg's "fear" or shock doesn't register a negative reaction, but instead indexes what he found to be the experiential quality of the work. In fact, Greenberg befriended Truitt and endorsed her work after seeing this and others of her early minimal sculptures.³

Greenberg's response to *Hardcastle* suggests that it does not merely occupy the gallery space, but rather lurks within it ominously: the sculpture's form and color work together with scale to create an environment of confrontation. *Hardcastle* is an eight-foot plywood plank arranged vertically on an oblong box base that is about four feet across, six inches high, and about a foot deep. Truitt constructed the

base with small risers underneath the platform to give the illusion that the sculpture hovers just perceptibly above the ground. The plank and the platform are coated with black acrylic paint. Taken together, *Hardcastle*, at almost nine feet high, curiously exaggerates the human scale. If the object were smaller, it would be perceived within a body's normal range. If it were larger, it would be dismissed out of human scale altogether.⁴ In everyday terms, the sculpture physically fills the approximate size and shape of a standard doorway, and in so filling that space, visually literalizes blockage and evokes a feeling of claustrophobia within its range.

On its reverse, two identical wedges buttress the vertical plank (Figure 2). Running parallel from the platform to just short of the top margin, these wedges, painted in high-keyed burnt vermillion, provoke a jarring optical interruption. In fact, the sculpture as a whole punctuates the course of its experience with a series of interruptions: the first as an obtrusive, hovering, black presence in the gallery space, and the second as two red slashes accent this presence and emphasize its looming verticality.

Greenberg's response to *Hardcastle* is revealing because it is a visceral reaction, precisely the type that a traditional understanding of minimalist artwork avoids. Truitt's painted wooden sculptures register differently from what might be anticipated with a sculpture like Tony Smith's *Die*, a six-foot steel cube originally fabricated (like *Hardcastle*) in 1962 (Figure 3). Hermetic and object-like in its appearance, Smith's mute sculpture is what the critic Michael Fried understood as

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¹ Anne Truitt, *Daybook: Journal of an Artist* (New York: Penguin, 1982) 123.

² Anne Truitt, interview with James Meyer, "Grand Allusion," *Artforum* 40.9 (2002): 159.

³ Truitt's work was the first "minimal" work Greenberg praised for true artistry: "Truitt's art did flirt with the look of non-art, and her 1963 show was the first occasion on which I noticed how this look could

confer an effect of *presence*." (Emphasis in original.) Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967) 24-26. See also Clement Greenberg, "Changer: Anne Truitt, American Artist whose Painted Structures Helped to Change the Course of American Sculpture," *Vogue* 151.9 (1968): 212-3, 284.

⁴ I am reminded, here, of Michael Fried's assertion in "Art and Objecthood" (1967) that the "disquieting" quality of some minimalist (he calls them "literalist") objects draws from the formal quality of size deployed into relationships of scale with the human body. Fried criticizes the latency of statuary in minimalist objects as a form of artistic disingenuousness. As I hope this essay reveals, the objectification of human scale in Truitt's work is positively linked to an aesthetic of memory and affect. See: Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 148-172.

“literalist” art: an art semi-purged of metaphor, expression, and transcendence.⁵

It is commonly suggested that Truitt’s painted sculptures are more like color-field paintings in three dimensions; Truitt herself admits that the forthright optical impact of Barnett Newman’s 1953 *Onement VI* (Figure 4) at the Guggenheim Museum’s exhibition in 1961 provoked her to work in what would become her signature minimalist style.⁶ Even in his criticism on post-painterly abstractionists such as Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, Clement Greenberg uses terms like “invention,” “inspiration,” or even “intuition,” but resists language indicative of any felt emotion.⁷ By contrast, waxing poetic in a 1967 essay on Truitt’s sculptures, Greenberg remarks: “Despite their being covered with rectilinear zones of color, I was stopped by their dead-pan ‘primariness,’ and I had to look again and again, and I had to return again, to discover the power of these ‘boxes’ to move and affect.”⁸

I wish to draw attention to Greenberg’s phrasing. Note the adverb “again” used here: Greenberg did not look at the sculpture only once—but “again and again, and I had to return again,” he writes—a threefold return to the experience of the sculpture to comprehend fully its emotional grip. The sculpture demands familiarity through revisiting and returning, but at the same time the lurking physical quality of the structure delivers a decidedly dark, even painful, experience. I think of Truitt’s own words written much later about memory as a wound that never heals: it bleeds as freshly as when “first pierced.”⁹

Yet what exactly is being conjured by *Hardcastle*? Certainly any proposed emotional experience with an object will read differently for different viewers. James Meyer has written of Truitt: “Her works are not *depictions* of images or events, but metonyms pointing to a complex of associations.”¹⁰ For him, the well of the artist’s inspiration seems sealed off, based in memories too personal to attempt significant interpretation. To that extent, Truitt’s sculptures do resist staging the psychological anxieties of the artist in quite the same way as analyses now accepted of abstract expressionists in the forties and fifties. At the same time, Meyer correctly differentiates Truitt from other minimalists,

whose programmatic approach to creating self-consciously hermetic objects removes the potential of representation or effect from the means of construction altogether.¹¹

However, one is drawn to Greenberg’s return to the experience of Truitt’s sculpture “again and again” as a suggestion at least to retrace partially the artist’s own metonymical substitutions in order to decipher the thematic preoccupations of the objects. This persistence of experience would provide a compelling reading of *Hardcastle* alongside Sigmund Freud’s theory of the traumatic event and its consequential mnemonic return: that the first exposure constitutes a shock, but that trauma occurs in how the mind and emotions reinterpret the event subsequent to the original encounter. However, this essay will not subject Truitt’s work to rote psychoanalytic readings that so often plague the historical interpretation of mid-century art objects. These early sculptures are themselves loci of memory: lurking, unsettling, and yet familiar and identifiable. Truitt’s early sculptures have the quality of remembering the texture of past places, especially evident in the very earliest of her minimal sculptures, abstractions modeled on picket fences (Figure 5), garden walls, trellises, and gravestones (Figure 6)—that is, objects ubiquitous in the American vernacular suburban and rural built environment. The representational similarity of her sculptures to common objects catalyzes and facilitates a reciprocal emotional dynamic with the object. By retracing the complex of associations in Truitt’s immediate context, we may, by turns, begin to understand the intricacy of her talent for transforming affect into form and color.

Hardcastle takes as its subject a memory of a car accident near Easton, Maryland, that the artist remembers from a summer spent in a country home on Maryland’s rural Eastern Shore. She recalls,

a man... was killed in ‘Lee Haven,’ a country place where I spent my fifth summer. He was drunk in his car. I guess he got nervous, and a train ran over him. You know, those side places in the country with one-line tracks? One night his car got stuck and he got killed. It was the most terrifying thing!¹²

⁵ Fried 155-157. Tony Smith’s *Die* (1962) is here used merely as an informative example of minimalist style. Upon closer examination, Smith’s work is similar to Truitt’s in many ways, both formally and in the artists’ choices of allusive titles. The longer version of this essay offers a discussion of the work of Smith and Truitt as artists deeply invested in vernacular architectural space.

⁶ Truitt (1982) 150-1. For an analysis of Truitt vis-à-vis Newman, see also James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001) 72-3.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” *Art International* 6.8 (1962): 24-32.

⁸ Greenberg (1967) 26. Emphasis added.

⁹ My fixation on the word “again” to signify a return to the object is firmly rooted in Truitt’s own writings and interviews. The artist repeatedly uses the word “turn” or “return” to address the vicissitudes of life. Her second published book is titled *Turn* (New York: Penguin, 1986). In an interview in 2002 for the Archives of American Art, the elderly artist habitually used the word “turn” to connote reliving an experience, e.g.: “Life is so interesting because it turns, as you know—you must already have noticed—it turns on itself.” (Anne Truitt, interview with Anne Louise Bayly, April–August 2002, Archives of American Art.)

¹⁰ Meyer 72. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Meyer 72.

¹² Truitt as quoted in Meyer 72.

Truitt elsewhere remembers her summer at Lee Haven to have been her seventh, not her fifth, that is, in 1928.¹³ The later date is compelling because the horror of Truitt's description of the accident squares with a report of an accident in the June 16, 1928, edition of the *Easton Star-Democrat*. Rather than a man named "Hardcastle," this accident involved a foreman named Howard Porter, who was struck by a train in the early morning as he rounded up pea pickers for work.¹⁴ The newspaper report headlined it: "Easton Man Killed at Railroad Crossing—Body Dragged 400 Feet and Mangled Almost Beyond Recognition."¹⁵ The locomotive, which was a small commuter trolley, exploded in the accident from a gasoline tank that loosened and fell onto the tracks as a result of the impact.¹⁶

Easton felt Porter's death as a tragic warning of the possible incommensurability between rational modernity and the local and specific culture of the Eastern Shore. Consistently throughout the latter part of that decade, articles concerning automobile accidents and changes to railroad junctions made front-page news in the *Star-Democrat*.¹⁷ At once embedded in the local commerce, transportation technology was acknowledged as a personally threatening force. Cut off from nearby Baltimore by the Chesapeake Bay, Easton relied on systems of modern transport to sustain its local, mostly agrarian economy. As the county seat, Easton served as the area's railroad hub as well as a transportation nexus for automobiles, necessitating the first traffic lights in the region, and the locus of a rapidly modernizing locomotive enterprise linking the Western and Eastern Shores.¹⁸

Given a narrative, *Hardcastle* seems to recreate the accident iconographically. The blank, foreboding field of black suggests Porter's blindness induced by darkness of the early morning dawn. The two red parallel wedges suggest the

man's blood, smeared heavily on the orthogonal lines of the railroad tracks as the trolley collided with him, dragging his fragmented body further than the length of a football field. Moreover, the attenuated sloping of these wedges along the flat surface of the plank resonates with the moments after impact as the trolley moved along its course impervious to the fatal disaster, gradually slowing and then stopping in flames. Yet, *Hardcastle* is obstinately *not* a mirror held up to a disaster, consistent as it is with a postwar abstract mode of sculpture.

Why did this particular recollection from Truitt's childhood resurface in the 1960s? To examine this question, one might turn from minimalism to an adjacent artistic practice: pop art. Truitt paints *Hardcastle* in 1962, at the same historical moment when another, very different artist, Andy Warhol, took the theme of disaster as a subject in his "Death in America" images, proposed to be displayed in Paris in 1964. Warhol depicted contemporary car and plane accidents (Figure 7), electric chairs, victims of untimely deaths, race riots, and post-JFK assassination photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy in his characteristic silkscreened, block repetitions.

A surface comparison here posits that both Warhol and Truitt register a change in the place of disaster—particularly in catastrophes resulting from technological failure—in the American consciousness during the early 1960s. Thomas Crow has suggested of Warhol's accident paintings that the artist critiques the image of a car as a powerful signifier of American affluence in the fifties by exposing it as an instrument of fatality.¹⁹ The symbolic significance of the automobile in postwar culture is historically congruous to the symbolic significance of the train in the earliest decades of the twentieth century, certainly true for Easton in the twenties: a

¹³ Truitt (1982) 29. Truitt remembers the summer at Lee Haven as her seventh (i.e., 1928) in *Daybook*: "Blackberry bushes grew close to the dirt road at Lee Haven, a house near Easton, Maryland, in which we spent a summer when I was about seven."

¹⁴ A search in area newspapers from the time and in Maryland state death records to find the proposed "Hardcastle" incident meets without success. From the period 1924–1933, there are only four registered deaths of persons surnamed "Hardcastle" in the state of Maryland. The death certificates reveal that these four were all elderly women who died of natural causes. Maryland State Archives, Vital Records Indexing Project. Online. <<<http://mdvitalrec.net>>> 31 January 2007.

¹⁵ "Easton Man Killed at Railroad Crossing," *The Easton Star-Democrat*. 16 June 1928: 11.

¹⁶ The article identifies the locomotive as a "Toonerville Trolley," a popular culture reference to a cartoon strip by Fontaine Fox, syndicated in newspapers from 1908 to 1955. The Toonerville Trolley was a dilapidated old trolley car that ferried commuters between larger suburban towns and smaller rural communities. The humor of the comic strip derives from the countrified behavior of the commuters and the apparently reckless driving habits of the conductor. I explain

the history of the trolley here at length to suggest that the anxieties regarding the interface of "city" and "country" enabled by mass transportation existed in a broader American cultural awareness (not just specifically in the mid-Atlantic).

¹⁷ Accident reports and railroad news are nearly ubiquitous in *The Easton Star-Democrat*, more often than not as front-page news. Some examples from the time coinciding with the misremembered *Hardcastle* incident include: "More Rumors of a Union Station at Railroad Junction," 22 May 1926: 1; "Bad Auto Accident on Dover Street," 10 July 1926: 1; "Pennsylvania R.R. Blocks Traffic at Cordova Crossing," 31 July 1926: 1. Moreover, Truitt remembered *Hardcastle* as "drunk in his car;" the offense of driving while intoxicated was itself also on the front page: "Got Thirty Days for Operating a Car Under the Influence of Liquor," 19 July 1926: 1.

¹⁸ Dorothy M. Brown, "Maryland Between the Wars," *Maryland: A History, 1632-1974*, ed. Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Historical Society, 1974) 672-769: 698.

¹⁹ Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol," *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 322.

promise of expanded economic prosperity belied by the potential for catastrophic incident.²⁰

Naturally it is a limited analogy, based on the differences between minimalism and pop. Truitt's sculpture is connotatively denser because of the lack of photographic representation (one doesn't "see" disaster). There is a compelling similarity in the way that both Truitt and Warhol cipher the traumatic incident through formal qualities of the works. Both artists deploy narratives of disaster to pose the issue of modernity as a loss of affective connection to authentic experience.²¹ Hal Foster, for example, reads "Death in America" as a type of grotesque *détournement*: Warhol's lurid repetition of the photographed deaths might suggest an apparent indifference to the victim of the disaster—but this is precisely the point. These "disasters" refocus the concern on society's passive consumption of grotesque, mass-mediated images and its subsequent detachment from authentic experience.²²

Truitt's sculpture, unlike Warhol's canvases, forges the interface between public and private perceptions of memory. Rather than *representation*, which is outwardly focused, *Hardcastle* depends on *recognition* by sculpturally exaggerating familiar architectural geometries and human scale. Truitt uses modern abstraction to mourn the passing of a form of human communication occurring at the level of personal interaction. For example, there is little doubt that the community of Easton felt all the pathos of Porter's death even though the story that ran in the local paper included no depiction. In fact, there is little doubt in a reader's mind that the catastrophe would have been well known and locally discussed without newspaper coverage altogether. The memory is both personal (Truitt's) and public (belonging to the community and to the archive via reportage). Truitt's recognition, rather than representation, of Porter's death conjures a nostalgic removal from highly personalized encounters.

The haunting quality of *Hardcastle*—as Greenberg perceived—resides in how Truitt brings awareness to uncomfortable emotions in a minimalist idiom that otherwise might convey the frustration or blockage of emotional release. *Hardcastle* is a paradox: it addresses an "accident" as its subject, yet represses the concept of "accident" in formal terms. Truitt preserves the handcrafted quality of painting her sculptures, but slips and streaks identifying a more painterly habit are all but erased. *Hardcastle* and others of the 1961 and 1962 sculptures are constructed by layering several coats of gesso followed by several more successive coats of commercially available acrylic paint. Later in the sixties and early seventies, Truitt elaborated upon this procedure to involve dozens of washes of paint, coat after coat, sanding between layers to achieve an even finish. The act of painting and repainting with tantamount precision, incipient in 1962, suggests the uncontrollable inclination to express emotion through color and yet contain it at the same time.

Greenberg asked: what is the "power of these boxes to 'move' and 'affect'"? *Hardcastle*'s place in discourse elaborates the definition of minimalism to suggest that apparently hermetic objects refer the beholder to tangible reminders of personal history literalized as wood and paint. Truitt deploys the formal composition of the sculpture to confront the viewer and suggest a persistent and pungent return to the object, conjuring particular and local memories. As a mnemonic device, the sensorial field implied by the structure calls up other objects in memory, other emotions therein contained, other names therein bespoken. Rather than relieving these emotions, *Hardcastle* dams them up, calling up the wound that bleeds as freshly again, and again, and again.

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²⁰ For more on the transition between the speeding train and the speeding automobile as cultural signifiers, see: Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)," *Modernism/Modernity* 6.1 (1999) 1-49: 37.

²¹ The idea of alienation with respect to late capitalist society was germinating in the early sixties, evidenced importantly by Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Marcuse writes: "What they [artists] recall and preserve in memory pertains to the future: images of a gratification that would dissolve the society which suppresses it." Artists like Truitt and Warhol (and, indeed, Jim Dine and John Cham-

berlain, among others), who call attention to automobile and railroad disasters, propose a destructive truth about modernity that is, itself, at the close risk of being recommodified. The closeness of Warhol's painting to commodity status in its means of production and in its sale is exemplary here. Truitt's *Hardcastle* strives for a condition of memory that resists commodification through its empathic identifications and emotional release. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) 60-1.

²² Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October* 75 (1996) 36-59.

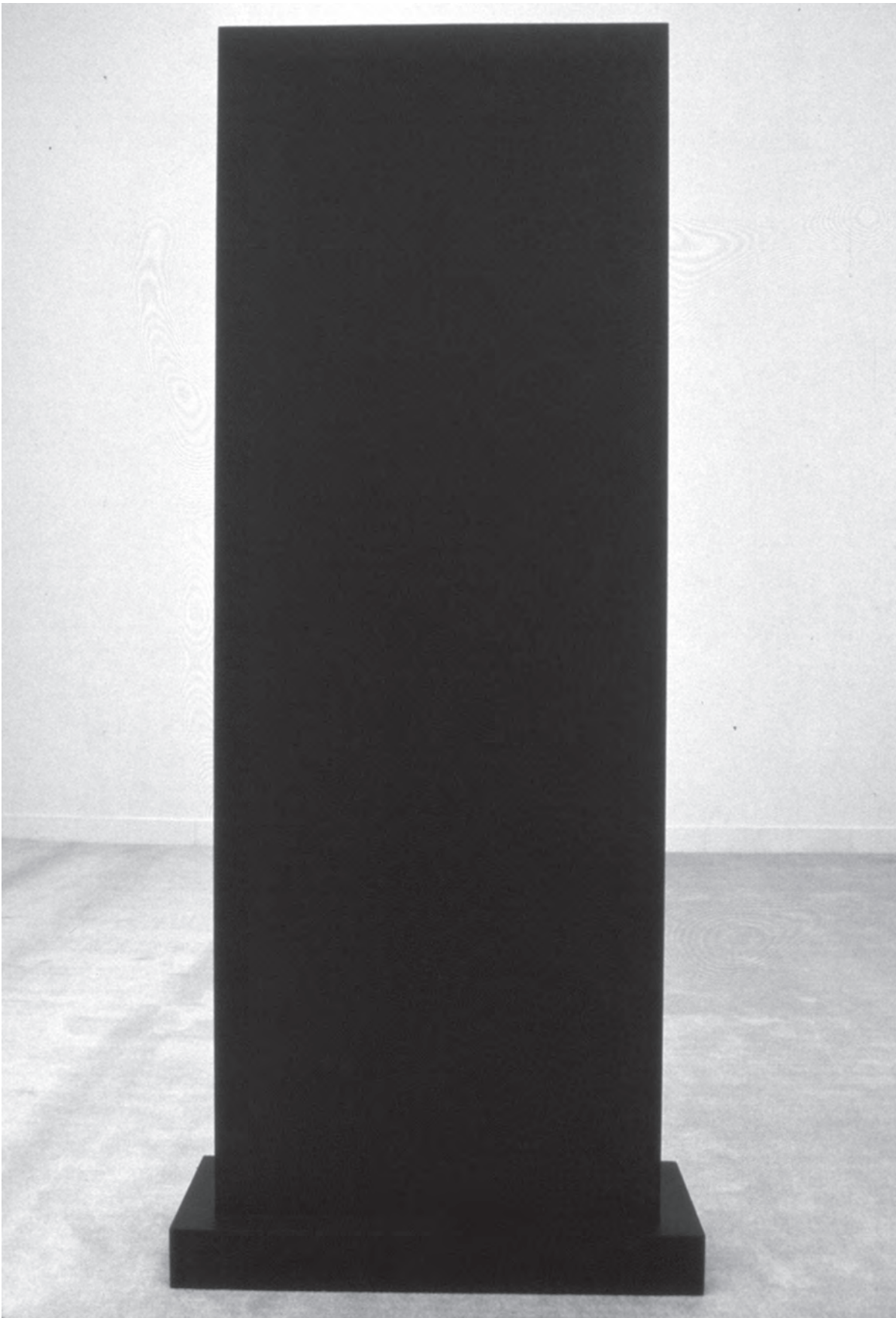


Figure 1. Anne Truitt, *Hardcastle* [front view], 1962, acrylic on wood, 99 x 42 x 16 inches. © Anne Truitt courtesy of: www.pictureresearching.com <<http://www.pictureresearching.com>>

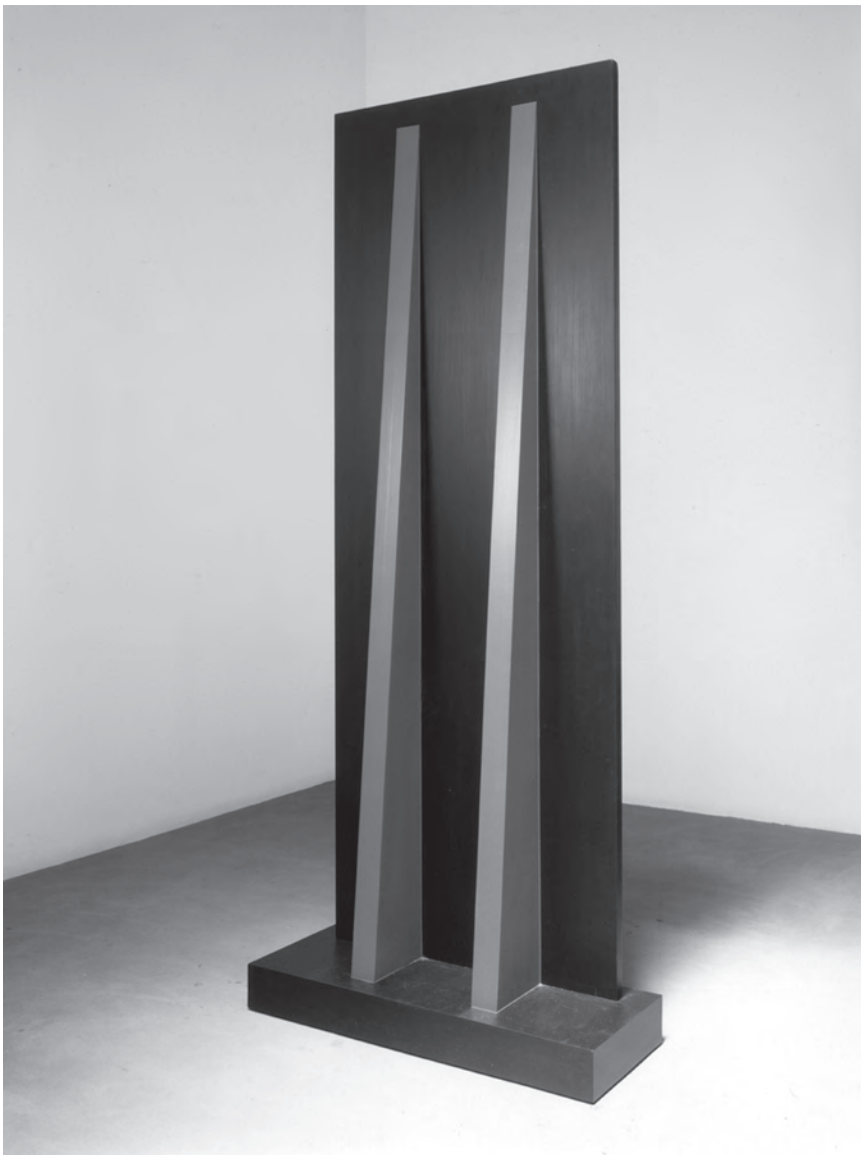


Figure 2. Anne Truitt, *Hardcastle* [rear view], 1962, acrylic on wood, 99 x 42 x 16 inches. © Anne Truitt courtesy of: www.pictureresearching.com <<http://www.pictureresearching.com>>



Figure 3. Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962 / 8, steel with oiled finish, 72 x 72 x 72 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Gift of the Collectors Committee, © Estate of Tony Smith / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

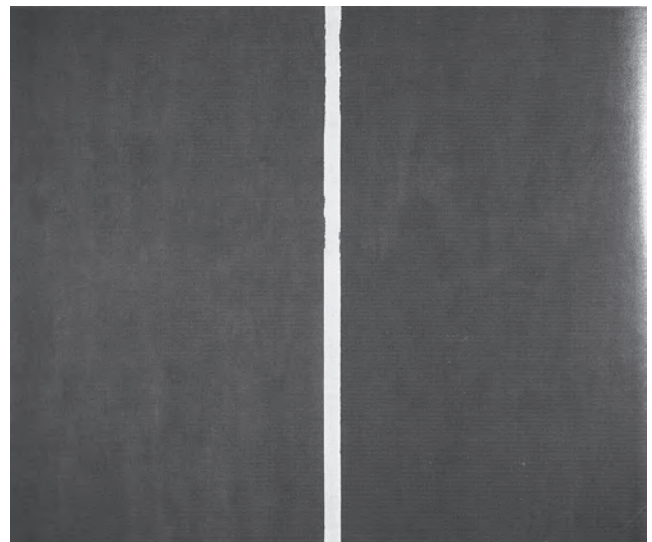
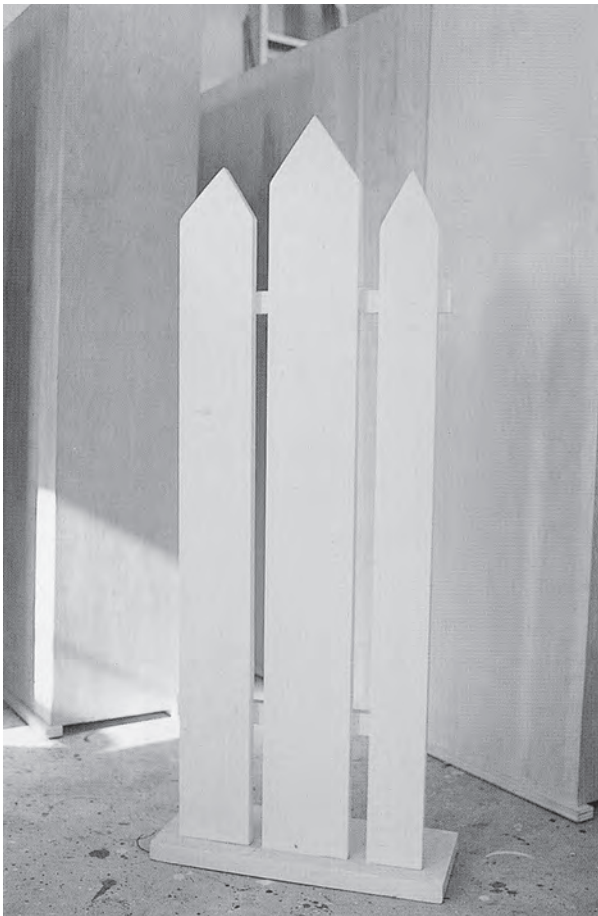


Figure 4. Barnett Newman, *Onement VI*, 1953, oil on canvas, 102 x 120 inches. Weisman Family Collection, © Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



[above left] Figure 5. Anne Truitt, *First*, 1961, latex semi-gloss enamel on wood, 44 x 17 x 7 inches. © Anne Truitt courtesy of: www.pictureresearching.com <<http://www.pictureresearching.com>>

[above right] Figure 6. Anne Truitt, *Southern Elegy*, 1962, acrylic on wood, 47 x 20 7/8 x 6 7/8. © Anne Truitt courtesy of: www.pictureresearching.com <<http://www.pictureresearching.com>>

[right] Figure 7. Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster*, 1963-1964, silkscreen on linen, 119 x 80 1/8 inches (302.3 x 203.5 cm). The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Founding Collection, Contribution Dia Center for the Arts, © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / ARS, NY.

