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Ronald Bladen's "Black Triangle"

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BLACK TRIANGLE—THE SOLE EXHIBIT in Ronald Bladen's one-man show at Fischbach—rests arrogantly on its point, toward the back of the room, so that one can keep one's distance if its precarious stance overwhelms. In fact, it is the piece itself rather than its resistance of gravity that overwhelms. (The safety factor is not conspicuous, though at the opening the crowd remained at the other end of the room rather than risking conversation under those overhanging, and awe-inspiring planes.) A solid inverted roof form 9' 4" high, 10' long and 12' across the top, it is specific in what it does more than in what it *is*, and the same can be said of the immense (8 x 8 x 16') topped white box (*Untitled*) at the Whitney Annual.

Weight means both everything and nothing to the effect of these two pieces. It is there to be denied. The not overly expert plywood construction, matter-of-fact paint jobs and visible, often open seams, work against mass and solidity, while the scale, size and suspension of bulk emphasize area and angle. Despite their gigantism, both sculptures are decidedly planar rather than volumetric, and it is as a construct of planes, or area, that they must be experienced. The uniqueness of Bladen's proposition is the particular manner in which the angles operate on the areas. The aggressive dynamism of many of his earlier works, especially the three-unit structure shown at the Jewish Museum last spring, is now qualified and strengthened. There was a tinge of the obvious or the theatrical in those three leaning columns which was largely overridden by the justice of interval and angle. That same quality persists in the idea *per se* of a triangular form balancing on its apex but the proportions again are just, and the ground line is long enough to dispel the illusion of imminent collapse. Precariousness is not Bladen's end, and as a means, it is increasingly well employed.

The concept of the white box at the Whitney is more impressive simply because it is more unexpected. Boxes—with all those flat planes to rest on—are supposed to sit squarely on the floor. The slight tilt which keeps the four edges of this one from one to six inches off the floor is just eccentric enough to unsettle the concept of box as visible form in space, and not eccentric enough to be a stunt. Literalism is, like weight, in suspension. (Not only does the white box achieve weightlessness for an awkward hulk, but it rearranges the known contour.) The tilt is not allowed to exaggerate; the sharp black shadow on the floor beneath the highest edge does not extend past the piece itself, but *underlines* the angle and area. Whereas the triangle is a neat, even graceful shape, and can be apprehended frontally as a two-dimensional form entirely devoid of mass, the white box is flat from no angle, and because of its size can never be taken in at a glance. Shown under opposite conditions from the triangle, it is in a huge room crammed with other sculptures of great variety (in color, shape, intent and quality).

It is the largest piece there, but by no means the most assertive, remaining aloof from its environment (and demanding a context rather different from most of the pieces surrounding it). For the record, it has no interior framework but is cantilevered off a relatively small false concrete base; the vertical panels (four on the long sides and two on the ends) are held up by diagonal bracing and are standard size building lengths (4 x 8'), so the justice of proportion was initially established by outside factors. I was more moved by this than by *Black Triangle*, but the source of the emotion is more difficult to pin down.

Like Tony Smith, in his recent work, Bladen rejects inertia. Probably, he never considered it; he has never made an absolutely symmetrical piece. What *Black Triangle* does to space is not a matter of definition but of emphasis. The great slanting planes with their implications of infinity neither draw upon nor enclose space, but slice it, alter it. This is felt by the viewer in an almost visceral manner. Standing in the shadow of the triangle it is difficult to remain detached from the thing that shares your space. When such structural works first appeared on the scene the word architectonic was most often used to describe them. But architecture is shelter and enclosure that can be experienced. Bladen's work has only scale in common with architecture. It is sculpture made of planes, non-sculptural in the sense that its formal simplicity and weightlessness are unfamiliar in the historical confines of sculpture concerned with volume or line, but sculptural in the sense that it is nothing else, and that, far more than the work of other structurists, it insists upon taking the initiative, no matter how understated the results of its actions may be.

Both the box and the triangle communicate a strong sense of their physical properties, their extension of area beyond the fact of simple surface. They remind me of Bladen's 1964 *Architectural Construction #2* (shown in *Artforum*, Oct. 1966, p. 34) which, though more complex and less clearly constructed, and not enclosing space, worked, and worked well, in the same suspension between static and dynamic, with a similar relationship to the ceiling and ground planes between which it was placed. *Architectural Construction #2* was shown twice, at the old Park Place and at NYU's Loeb Center, and it weathered the distinct change in environment, retaining its scale and particularity. I mention this because *Black Triangle* reaches from the floor to the cement beams of the Fischbach, thereby filling the space between floor and ceiling. This placement unavoidably affects the form itself, since its native buoyancy is somewhat minimized by the pressure of the beam. This turned out to be for reasons of safety, not esthetics, as is the lightly squared-off point on which it rests—an attempt to carry the illusion as far as it can be carried, but not, finally, to depend on illusion. (The perfectionism and “finish fetish” of much current work has gotten to us all, but I suspect that the whole of any sculpture is threatened in which working details of minor defects really irritate.) It is a measure of Bladen's success that the area between diagrammatic ideal and constructed fact, the heavy beamed ceiling cluttered with lights, the constructional irregularities, are unable to minimize the sculptural presence of *Black Triangle*. I would be curious to see it outdoors, or in a room with a much higher ceiling, because I think it would, of necessity, change. But the sense of tremendous expansion and pure breadth discovered from the various vantage points would probably not be altered.

—[Lucy Lippard](#)