

OUT OF THE WOODS.

1. This is an old address book of mine. In the time before mobile phones and personal organisers, an address book was an important part of one's professional equipment, containing hard-to-get telephone numbers and contacts. At some point in the mid 1980s, I was about to leave on a flight for New York City and was making last-minute calls from a pay phone in the departure lounge. As the flight was called, and in my haste to get on board, I left this address book, which I had been using, beside the phone. Of course, I realised the loss once I got to New York, but reckoned it was gone and set about retrieving the information it contained. A few months later, my father was rather surprised to receive a package containing this address book from an address in the United States. With the package was a note from the senders saying that they thought he would probably know to whom it belonged. This note was signed by Rebecca Smith and Peter Stevens who had, in fact, been sent the address book by Pan Am, the airline I had used. The reason that they had been sent the address book is that, written on the inside front cover it said:

DAVID SMITH STUDIO,
BOLTON LANDING,
LAKE GEORGE,
UPSTATE NY

Having looked at this mystery package, Becca and Peter worked out that it probably belonged to an artist, since several names were familiar, and found, under "Dad" my father's address. They then sent the book on to him, reasoning that he would know whose it was. I was amazed by this chain of events and sent a note of profuse thanks (plus a \$20 bill for postage). It's as nice a beginning to a friendship as any I've ever had.

2. It's another story as to why that particular address came to be in the front of my address book. I graduated from Saint Martin's School of Art in London in July 1972. The major part of the work that constituted my final submission had been done in the previous year. Most of my final year had been occupied with finishing these things off and with writing a long academic thesis. By the time I graduated, I didn't know how to go forward and had begun to question whether I was an artist at all. Six months later I was really depressed. A long-term relationship had finally broken up. My mother was desperately ill. The job I had jumped into was slowly changing from being interesting to becoming a six- and sometimes seven-days-a-week treadmill. My only activity as an artist was a regular weekly meeting with a group of ex-students and four tutors from Saint Martin's where we discussed – in nit-picking detail and minuted verbatim – the procedures for setting up an artists' co-operative. Sometime in early spring, on the way to work I passed a travel agent where I saw, in the window, a poster advertising return flights to the United States for £50. Knowing I had to do something about the situation I was in, I stopped, went in, and signed up for a three-month trip, from mid-June to mid-September 1973.

I very nearly cancelled. My mother was still terribly ill and my job was still awful, but I'd fallen in love, and the co-operative had rented a large and very cheap studio in the middle of London.

But I knew that I needed to leave and I knew that I needed to go to America. Throughout my time as a student, almost all of the art that I'd been interested in, with the exception of Art & Language and, to some extent, Joseph Beuys, had been American. If I wanted to be an artist, I needed to go to America, and if I didn't, I would discover that there. A friend of a friend offered me a room to rent in an apartment in Chicago – I liked the sound of that – and I bought a ticket giving

twenty-eight days unlimited travel on Greyhound buses. I made two plans: one was to visit Halifax, Nova Scotia. I vaguely knew someone who taught the postgraduate programme there and, at the time, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design – as evidenced by its publications – was pretty interesting to the kind of artist I thought I was. The second was to visit David Smith's studio in Bolton Landing. The documentary monograph on David Smith, edited by Garnett McCoy, had been published that same year and I had a copy. I'd been reading Smith's writings and letters with interest. There's a lot about the studio in the book and, at some point, I wrote the Bolton Landing address in the front of my address book. I put it there, since it wasn't really someone's address but a location to visit, however I wanted to have it recorded somewhere safe and, as I explained, address books were important. This is the reason that David Smith Studio, etc., came to be written in the front of the address book.

3. The studio visit was memorable. Setting out from Chicago sometime in early August, I'd worked out a route via Greyhound that permitted a stopover at Bolton Landing before continuing in a roundabout way to Halifax and then circling back to Chicago through New England, on down to Washington DC, and back through Pennsylvania. A lot of this was to be overnight since I didn't have money for accommodation. I arrived mid-afternoon. Bolton Landing seemed pretty small and it was hot and humid. With some effort and after walking up a few hills, I found myself outside the padlocked gates and chain-link fence surrounding the Smith property. I could see the studio and some sculptures sited towards a small lake. A notice above the padlock said that if a visitor had enquiries about David Smith or wanted to visit the studio, then they needed to consult XXX gallery in New York City (presumably Pace) and gave a Manhattan telephone number. This was well before mobile phones and there certainly weren't any phone boxes in the neighbourhood. I decided to walk all around the chain-link – maybe there'd be a hole somewhere. There wasn't. An

hour and a half later I was back where I had started: hot, sweaty, and a bit unhappy. I hadn't remembered seeing anywhere cheap to stay where the bus had dropped me and, in any case, I didn't want to walk back into the town. I suppose I hadn't wanted the visit to be meaningless and turning around straightaway seemed to make it so. The only way for me to mark my visit was by spending time. Therefore I decided to sleep in the woods. I hadn't seen anybody in the two hours or so I'd been scratching around, I didn't think it'd be a problem. Neither snakes nor bears occurred to me. I headed into the woods to one side and, finding a secluded spot, began constructing a shelter and a bed from branches and bracken fronds. I unrolled my sleeping bag and climbed in. It was hot, the mosquitoes were voracious, and the night was long. The next day, itching from the bites, feeling tired and dirty, I headed down into Bolton Landing, swam in the lake to clean up a bit, bought some juice and a bread roll, and waited for the bus to take me on.

4. You'd have to understand this whole trip to the United States as a kind of pilgrimage, with the Smith studio being one talismanic destination, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design another. Why Smith? That's hard to answer. At the time I had hardly seen any work and would probably have said that I didn't understand what I had seen. As I mentioned, I was at the time reading his collected letters and writings, which talk a lot about the studio, and that was interesting to me. This was the first time I had ever set out to see an artist's studio and it was psychologically important. The trip worked. It didn't solve my problems, but I learnt a lot about myself in the three months I was away and found out that I wanted to be an artist. And I did have a studio to go back to. The work I initially started making was based around performative acts and also manifested through performance. I was unhappy about being the performer though – it was if I got in the way of the work, and I adapted this performative behaviour to a studio practice that envisaged an object. The kind of thing I made was, intentionally, radically

different from wherever you looked at it, whilst at the same time being clearly one thing. You could describe it as wanting to separate appearance and objecthood. However, the problem of meaning remained, and for me, this seemed to revolve around ideas of subjectivity. It was on a second extended visit to the United States in 1978–79 that things became clearer. Through a series of drawings and through making ceramics, I became interested in the possibilities of working with a hollow form. At this point, we can look at Smith again.

5. Landscape is a pretty unusual, if not downright strange, subject for object-based sculpture. Of course, there are landscapes in relief and perhaps the experience of working in relief – in the *Medals for Dishonor* – prompted Smith to make landscape a subject in a group of sculptures from the late 1940s and early '50s. In these, particularly in *Australia* and in *Hudson River Landscape*, Smith does something very interesting with the peculiarities of the form. By putting the elements around the perimeter he resolves the problem of the edgelessness of landscape – imagine standing in a field and looking around you, where does it stop? (And in fact there was a drawing very like this in the Guggenheim exhibition, with a white space in the centre and the landscape pictured around the edge of the paper). Secondly, and as a consequence of that, he makes you, the viewer, the perceiving or experiencing subject. You (rather than he) are in the middle of things.

6. That analysis is based on hindsight, but these works were of great interest to me at the end of the 1970s. There is an overlap with the direction I was trying to move my work. As I said, first in drawing, then in ceramics, and then in sculpture, I was interested in hollowness. By keeping the work hollow, the viewer is moved to the inside, and their experience becomes the focus. The, for me urgent, problem is resolved within the viewer's own subjectivity. It wasn't about me anymore, but about you.

(There are a couple of ideas that I didn't explore too much in a ten-minute presentation, both of them to do with the idea of a cleared space. First, on my side, there is the obvious metaphor about being outside of the space of the artist. Second, and more interesting in relation to Smith, I wonder how the cleared space at Bolton Landing relates both to the hollow in the work and, given a Calvinist upbringing, what the significance of the cleared space is, particularly with the curious grid-like installation of the works there.)