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# Anthony Caro

## 1924–2013

### MICHAEL FRIED

**ALL OF US WHO WERE CLOSE TO ANTHONY CARO** (Tony to his friends, an international society of thousands) were certain that he would live to be at least one hundred, making significant sculpture all the way. My impression was that he thought so too, though the last few times I saw him he spoke confidingly about the experience of being really old (he was eighty-nine when his heart gave out on October 23, 2013) and how different that was from anything he had quite imagined. In fact, when I spent two days with him this past July in his Camden Town studio, his legs were hurting so much that he found it hard to walk—in retrospect an alarming sign. But as usual, nothing could diminish his resolve to go back into perhaps half a dozen sculptures that to a greater or lesser degree required further work, and he sat in a chair with wheels that could be pushed from one part of the studio to another as we—Tony, his infinitely resourceful chief assistant Pat Cunningham, various younger assistants organized by Pat, and I—shifted our collective attention from piece to piece.

For the most part, the works in process were large abstract sculptures in steel and sheets of colored Perspex; one of these, *Venetian*, 2012, deploying two shaped sheets of translucent red Perspex, was the latest piece included in the modestly sized but carefully chosen one-man exhibition at the Museo Correr in Venice this past summer and early fall. Word from his studio suggests that during his last weeks Tony had made all the essential decisions regarding the other unfinished pieces, and I hope that's true. In any case, the sculptures with Perspex, however many there will turn out to be, amount to his closing statement by virtue of chronology. But there is nothing final about them: They came about because several years ago, Tony began to wonder whether it might be possible to integrate glass with welded steel, and eventually concluded that sheets of glass (which became Perspex) were the solution; there isn't the least question that once this group of works was done, he would have moved on to something else equally unpredictable, to be pursued with equal passion.

**The artist's "Park Avenue" series is nothing less than one of the supreme triumphs of high-modernist sculpture, indeed one of the signal achievements of our time in any art.**

A better candidate for his valedictory achievement is the monumental "Park Avenue" series, twelve large, abstract, rusted-steel sculptures made over the past several years—all are dated 2012, when the sculptures were finished—and shown as a group in three large spaces at

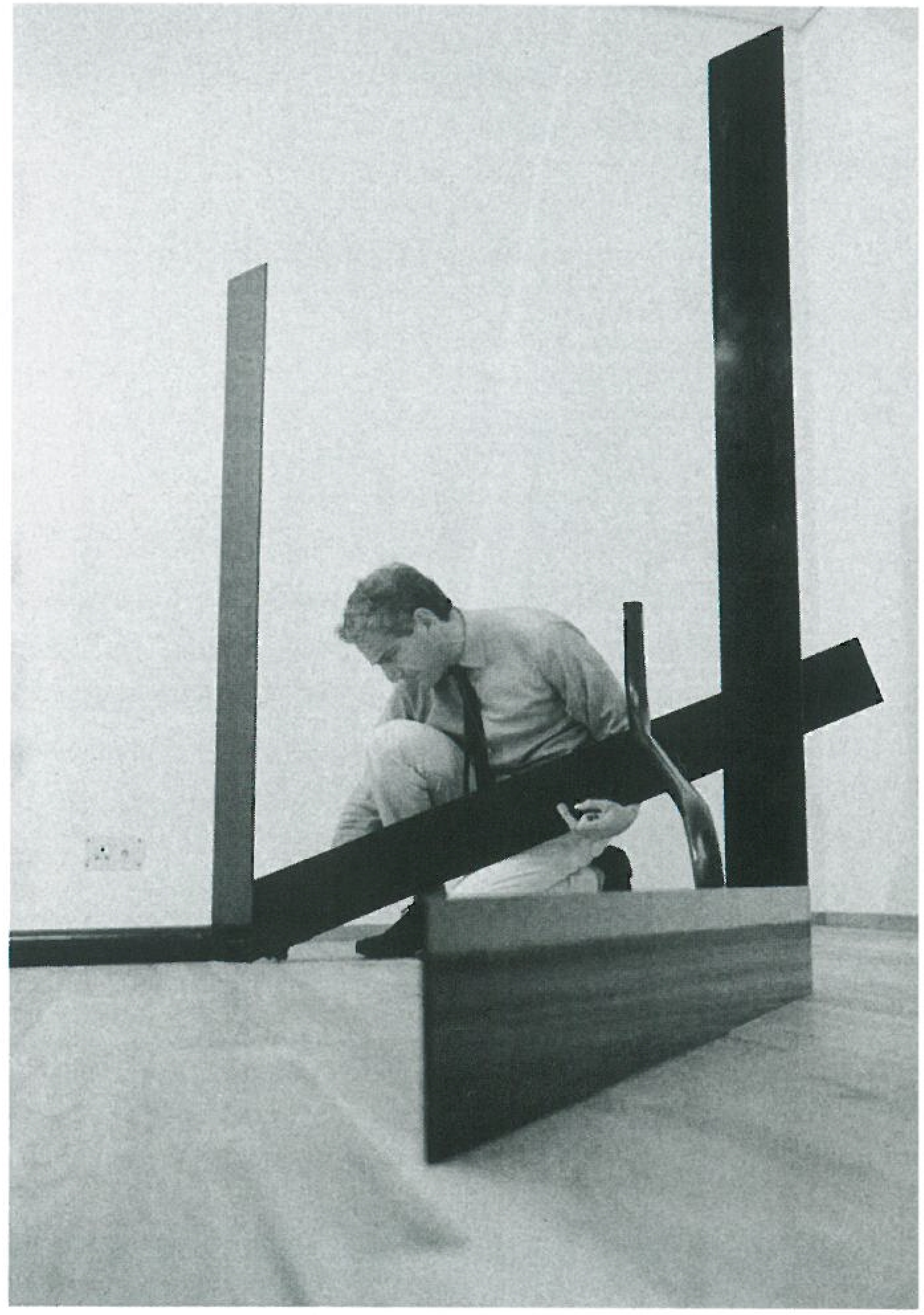
### CHARLES RAY

**SHORTLY AFTER ANTHONY CARO DIED LAST FALL,** I proposed a moratorium on the phrase "I really like his early work." In the context of Caro, this sentiment is generated from our taste rather than from a deeper understanding of his sculptures. The figuration from the '50s is not included in my moratorium, and to many this period of his oeuvre serves more as a footnote to his beginnings. Understanding the intent behind these potent bronze figures allows us to step forward with the artist, grasping the potentiality and originality of works like *Twenty Four Hours*, 1960, *Midday*, 1960, and *Early One Morning*, 1962. The great joy of looking at Caro comes from liberation.

Caro's moment of sculptural liberation is as profound as it is complex, both in relation to his cultural moment and to the sculptural vocabulary that was a given for a sculptor of the time. Envisioning new and necessary ways of orienting ourselves is difficult because what is familiar is useful. Caro's figuration connects to Henry Moore, but develops its own understanding and attitude toward the aliveness of the body. Musculature stands in relation to the gravitational field of space and time. We are not only born in this field but are inseparable from it. Caro's early figurative sculptures depict bodies bound to the world by gravity. *Man Taking Off His Shirt*, 1956, is all shoulders and arms struggling to get out from under the constraints of clothing. The artist's success in the '50s lay in transforming kinesthetic feltness into a material image of a body as it is lived in. His figurative work consisted of an aspect of the body, depicted as alive. At the end of the '50s, Caro, it would seem, awoke to the realization that his figuration could only *describe* the feltness of the body. The kinetic power of what we feel as a consequence of being made of bones, muscles, flesh, and will is a lived phenomena, and its description moves us a great distance from experience.

**Caro's willingness to abandon the familiarity of figuration and to begin working in a new genre with unfamiliar methods and materials produced work born alive in a time of change.**

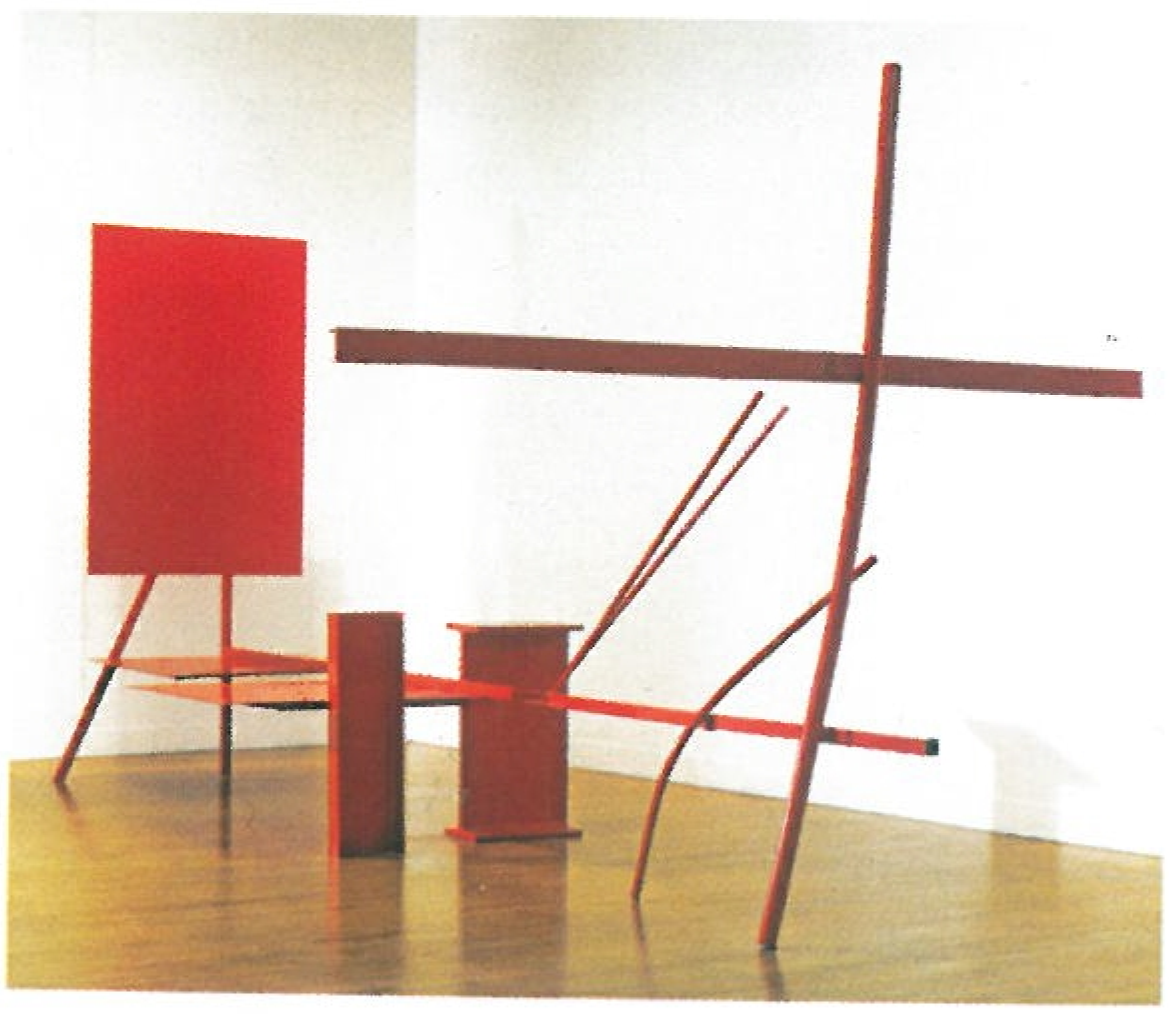
Caro's solution and the deeper development of his sculptural thought is a breakthrough occurring at the beginning of the '60s, and it can be associated with that turbulent, exuberant decade. As an artist, he was in tune with currents outside his own immediate concerns. His willingness to abandon the familiarity of figuration and to begin working in a new genre with unfamiliar methods and materials produced work born alive in a time of change, however illusory the cultural and political transformations of that era may now seem. Caro abandoned the particular figurative genre associated with his artistic concerns and success. He then extended the very nature of another genre—constructivism—by altering the visual trajectory from which sculptures were viewed. Caro moves sculptural elements out laterally, often below eye



**Anthony Caro, 1967.** Photo: Jorge Lewinski.

Gagosian Gallery in London this past summer (minus one, *River Song*, exhibited at the Museo Correr). The title of the series derives from an initial invitation from the Fund for Park Avenue and the Department of Parks and Recreation to make a very large sculpture (to call it that for the moment) that would temporarily occupy the central mall of Park Avenue in Manhattan. I've written about this series before (in a 2012 essay that appeared in the catalogue for the Gagosian show and, in slightly amended form, in the online journal nonsite.org), so I won't go on about it here, except to say that the construction that Tony planned for the site would have been three city blocks long, and that in my view it was a tremendous stroke of luck that in the end the funding needed to realize it was not forthcoming. Instead, Tony and his team took the quarter-scale model that he had built in his studio and divided it up so as to provide the basis for a dozen individual sculptures, all of which in various ways bore the marks of the original, strongly lateral conception. I had watched most of the pieces being wrestled into form, two or three at a time, over a few years. It was a daunting process of subjecting massive steel elements to an uncompromising and unflagging aesthetic will that no one who didn't have the privilege of witnessing it or similar operations in Tony's studio will ever be able to imagine fully. I was determined not to pass up what was likely to be a unique opportunity to view the series as a whole (save for *River Song*, as already mentioned). So I flew to London,

**View of "Anthony Caro: Park Avenue Series," 2013,** Gagosian Gallery, London. From left: *Torrents*, 2012; *Clouds*, 2012. Both from the series "Park Avenue," 2010–12. Photo: Mike Bruce.



Left: **Anthony Caro, *Man Taking Off His Shirt*, 1956,** bronze, 31 x 18¼ x 18½".

Above: **Anthony Caro, *Early One Morning*, 1962,** painted steel, aluminum, 12' x 20' 4" x 11'.

level. There is no reference to a body nor compositional verticality of a figure. Experience of relationships is held between the parts of a sculpture rather than in a shape, profile, or gestalt (common in American Minimalism). This innovative and beautiful move liberated kinetics from the body and created the abstract sculpture associated with high modernism. A work such as *Early One Morning* is a sculpture that totally disregards the orientation of the figure. The space that this sculpture occupies finds its own horizon, and the floor becomes a sculptural element rather than a gravitational ground. Disjunctive properties turn space into a fluid, expanding-and-contracting accordion that is outright hallucinogenic around the time when the Beatles were singing "I Want to Hold Your Hand!" *Early One Morning* dispenses with the necessity of gravity and the history of visual associations brought by sculpture's adherence to or divergence from figurative and imagistic structures, whether literal or poetic.

A great work is not timeless; it seems the opposite as it rides through time in complex and marvelous ways. *Midday*, owned by the Museum of Modern Art, keeps up with us and never falls behind. When it was installed on the roof of the Met a few years ago, a mistake was made by the artist, or perhaps his or the museum's conservation team. The orange-yellow color of the