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FLASH 500

CARO CLEM CON CAN

In 1980 Sir Anthony Caro, the well-respected and highly acclaimed British sculptor, was a frequent visitor to Syracuse University Sculpture Department in upstate New York. Here, he made use of the large and well-equipped specialist bronze foundry and its adoring student technical support. The building, situated in a run down industrial part of the city, was an old factory affectionately known as Con Can, due to its original life as the Continental Can Company. At this time another person who also paid regular visits to the university's Fine Art Department, was the New York based, renowned and highly influential American art critic Clement Greenberg. During one of Caro's flying visits, he had several bronze sculptures fabricated to his specification before returning to London. A few days after Caro had left, Greenberg arrived in Syracuse in order to visit the university, where he was due to give a lecture, lead seminar groups and make some art student studio visits. He also found the time to go to the foundry in the Con Can building, to look at the recently fabricated Caro sculptures. Armed with a piece of white chalk and a fortifying quarter bottle of bourbon, Greenberg and his Sancho Panza-like accomplice (a formalist abstract painter by the name of Walter Darby Bannard) set about physically critiquing the works. Greenberg utilised chalked arrows and lines, dashes and dots, verbal instructions like 'cut', 'remove', 'extend' and 'add', in order to construct three-dimensional spatial scores, constellations, literal diagrams of formalist critique. Once he had finished adding his chalked comments and corrections, the graffiti-laden objects were taken away so that Greenberg's visual and linguistic marks could be acted upon. In order to make the Caro's better. The next time Caro saw his critically enhanced and 'improved' sculptures was at the opening of his exhibition at the André Emmerich Gallery, New York. Greenberg went out of his way to deny that he was of any influence, for good or bad, on an artist's career. This episode possibly goes some way to dispute that assertion, for in this instance we have a very real manifestation of the witnessing, in the form of physically enhancing criticism. This Caro Greenberg relationship is a perfect model for how this extreme form of formalism works. It is about form and not content, about not seeing as much as seeing.

Another gag that Greenberg and Bannard often performed whilst roaming unchaperoned around the painting department studios, was a stunt they called 'round the clock'. This process entailed Greenberg sitting comfortably, throne-like, in front of an unsuspecting student's painting, whilst Bannard, standing unseen behind the work, proceeded to rotate the canvas slowly in a clockwise direction, until Greenberg's eye shouted, STOP! Once this perfect orientation of the painting had been established, they were on their satisfied way to the next studio. As comically banal as this procedure may seem, it was done in all seriousness and betrayed an insight into the brutal formalist doctrine. The process often ended in tears.