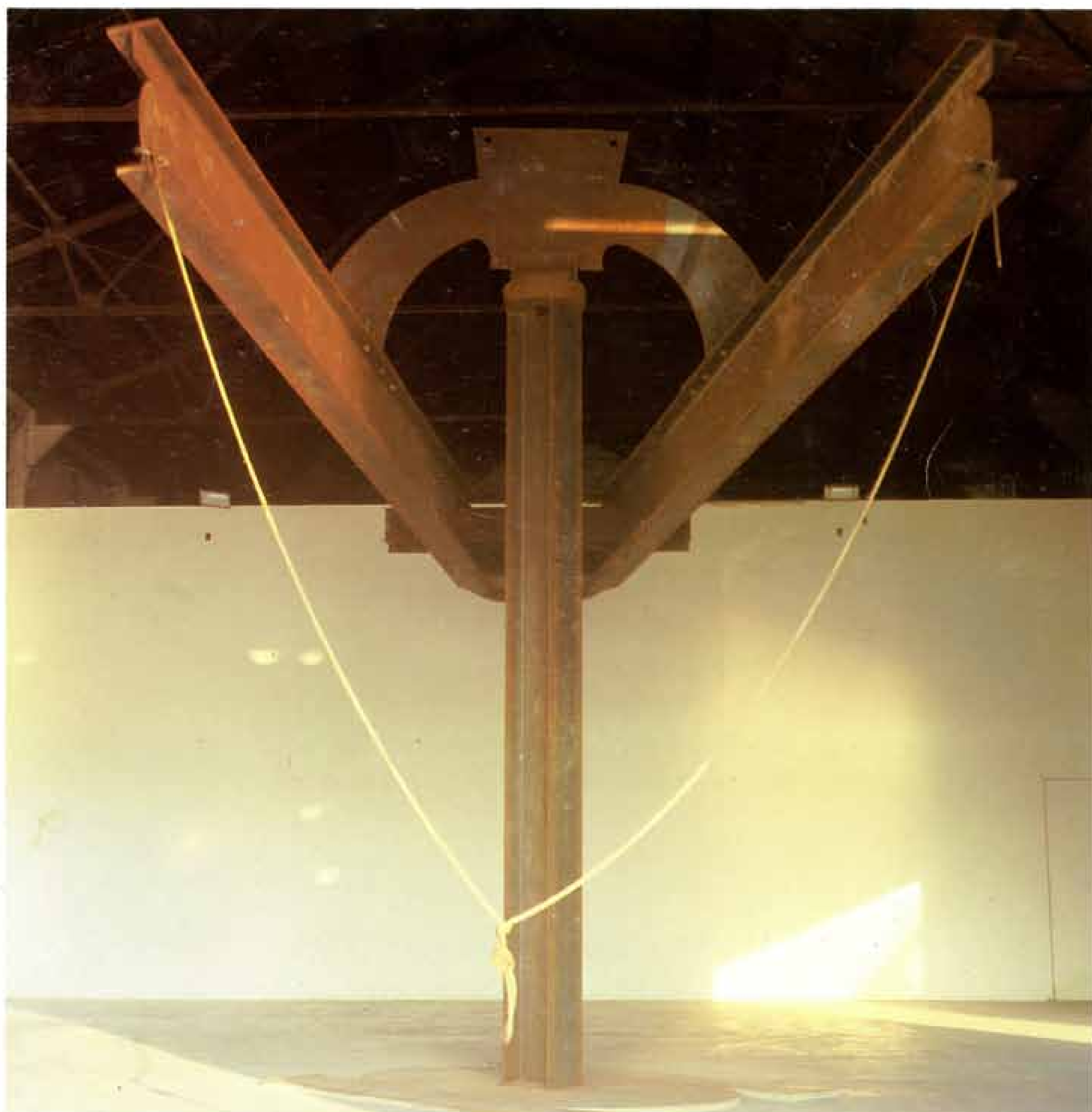
Art in America

DECEMBER 1983/$4.00

Cover: Mark di Suvero's "Mahatma," 1979
Sontag on "Available Light"/Larry Rivers/Fantin-Latour Retrospective
Di Suvero/Social Realism of the '30s/Arman/Cuban Artists Interviewed
"L'Informale" in Bologna/Books/Review of Exhibitions



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Cover: Mark di Suvero's *Mahatma,* 1978–79, steel and rope, 20 feet high by 30 feet in diameter; photo Steven Sloman, courtesy Oil & Steel Gallery, New York. (Above, *Mahatma* situated outdoors.) See article beginning on p. 128.

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Mark di Suvero: To Intuit, *1983, steel and stainless steel, 12 by 25¼ by 13¾ feet. Photo Steven Sloman.*

Risk & Balance: Mark di Suvero

Sensitive to sculptural as opposed to architectural scale, di Suvero's best new steel pieces combine visual sweep and detail, massive size and viewer participation.

BY WADE SAUNDERS

This spring a sizable group of Mark di Suvero's sculptures were seen in New York City for the first time since his Whitney Museum retrospective of 1975–76. Richard Bellamy had 16 small and two medium scale (by di Suvero's standards) sculptures at his Oil & Steel Gallery; three large works were set up at di Suvero's riverfront studio in Long Island City and one at SUNY Purchase. The shows again evidenced the disparity in importance and invention between di Suvero's large and small works, a disparity apparent at the Whitney in 1976. His best pieces are as good as ever. They set a tone for public sculpture, but they aren't influential or decisive, in the way his earlier works were, because their parameters are known and have been absorbed. His weaker sculptures, mainly among the smaller pieces, often lack urgency.

Di Suvero is at his best at his biggest. His work was physically and psychically outsize from the start. It heralded the end of the fussy '50s, a decade in which most sculptors failed to match the ambition and scale, the sweep and immediacy of Abstract-Expressionist painting. Di Suvero, with John Chamberlain and George Sugarman, helped free up sculpture and get it back on a par with painting. His scale increased when he switched from wood to steel in the '60s, and increased again in the '70s when he became comfortable with the steel, and had greater access to cranes, tonnage, and exhibition sites.

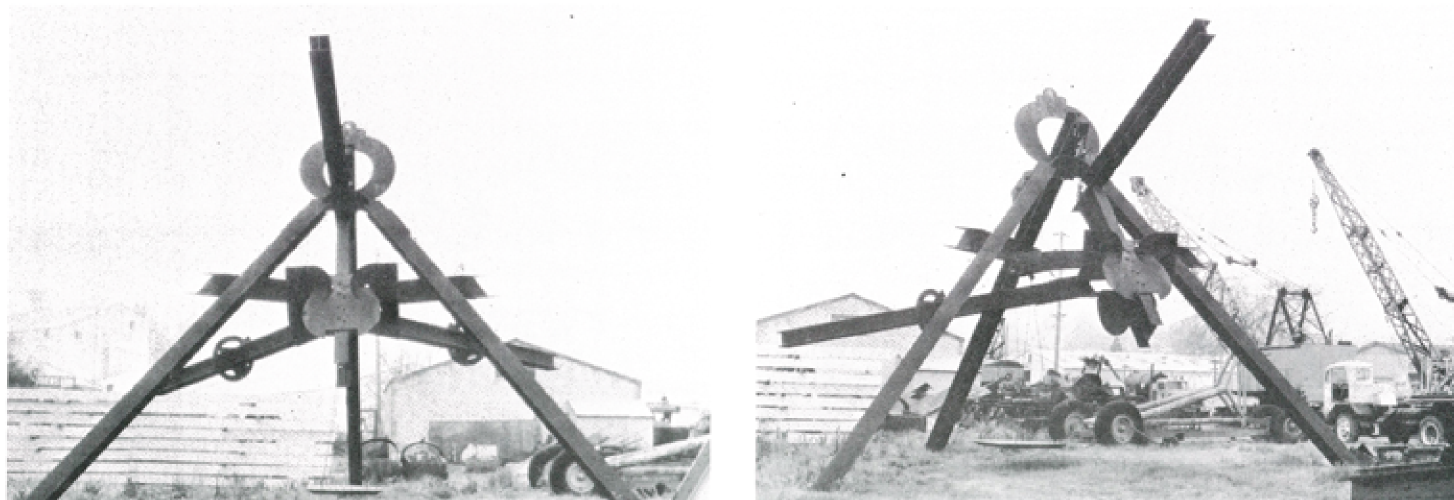
His sculptures, with those of Claes Oldenburg and Richard Serra, are among the best massively scaled objects being made. Di Suvero's large pieces are public in a true sense—accessible to body and mind. They invite our touch, often offering a seat or platform that we can board and ride. The motion deflates the immense scale; stationary, the works might seem overblown. Di Suvero's sculptures are not off-putting—cold, grandiose, corporate—as so much large work is.

A profound understanding of sculptural scale, as distinct from domestic, architectural or environmental scale, has been crucial to di Suvero's accomplishment. As Sidney Geist in his ever pertinent review of di Suvero's debut show in 1960, noted, "these pieces always remain in the indigestible condition known as sculpture, and are never assimilated by the idea of architecture or of place . . . . But while Di Suvero's sculpture is so large as to escape thingness, it never overwhelms us physically; one can feel the making man. And the great energy he has put into it comes out; it is not merely energetic, it is energizing."

The largest piece Geist was reviewing was nine feet high by 16 across. Di Suvero's singular genius lies in his preserving that particular immediacy between object and monument in pieces 30 or more feet tall. As the gap between individual and environment has widened, the scale of his sculpture, as the mediating term, has had to increase. A big sculpture in front of a bigger building doesn't necessarily help connect the building with its site. It can be alienating rather than integrating. Di Suvero always gives us a way in, into the sculpture and thus into the place.

The success of the large pieces rests in part on the happy congruence of di Suvero's visual style and personal temperament—both are expansive, direct, democratic. He is a sculptor of straight lines, grading up from the spatial zip of steel cable to the open thrust of wide-flange steel I beams. He uses the beams as they were intended, extending them across space with little trace of sagging. (Pipes rarely figure in the large pieces, possibly because they are so visually slick: our eyes seem to bounce off their convex surface.) Planes are more implied than actual, created by the intersections of lines, not by the inclusion of steel plate. When di Suvero wants mass, he'll often include some object found in a scrap heap. However large these things are in life—a backhoe shovel, a ship's propeller, a tank car—they become small in the context of his sculpture, especially since he opens them up to expose their hollowness. His works retain a consistent quality of transparency and lightness, no matter how much they tower over us nor how heavy they in fact are. A fine balance of sweep and incident keeps them from being oppressive.

Of necessity di Suvero has learned to work outdoors and in an independent and technologically simple manner. He is able to function anywhere he has material and a crane, be it a



Two views of Arichidea, *1981–82, steel, 22 by 35 feet. All photos courtesy Oil & Steel Gallery, New York.*

scrap yard in Greenpoint or a small city in France. For instance, any bends in the steel are done on site by cutting, rigging and pulling, rather than in a shop with hydraulic presses or motorized rollers. This making-do (nothing is subcontracted) permits him to improvise on a massive scale. No other sculptor of note works this large in such a direct and visually risky manner. Even his commissioned pieces change radically from proposed to completed form. His sculptures are seldom site specific; only when they are finished is a place found for them.

By 1962 di Suvero had incorporated moving and participatory elements in certain sculptures. But motion was also obvious material for di Suvero's omnivorous sensibility and ambitious reach. *Homage to Brancusi* (1962), *Laurie's Love Seat* (1964), and *Ride* (1967) are all pieces one can sit in and cause to move. Participation, be it riding, pushing or climbing, has become ever more crucial to di Suvero's work: it helps diminish what might otherwise become an alienating size. By putting us in a one-to-one relation with a part of the work, di Suvero reduces the scale of the whole. He draws us close to his pieces and leads us to regard them from different angles: people who won't lie on the ground to look up at a piece will lie on a suspended platform to do so. You become a part of, the equal of, the sculpture when you make it move.

But if we can climb on and move one sculpture, our presumption may be that we can climb on and test other pieces as well: most of the large pieces have one diagonal element that is more horizontal than vertical, probably to permit di Suvero to climb up the piece while he is putting it together. But we can follow his lead. This access and consequent risk obviously began to pose a dilemma, granted his extreme regard for safety. His solution has been twofold: he has pitched his slanting beams at an angle not easily ascendable, and he has reemphasized the rides—hanging elements which safely invite our participation.

Di Suvero's big pieces are roughly divisible into three types: those with large, horizontally suspended elements; those which come up three-legged to a hub—like a switchyard—through or from which beams continue or take off in varying manner; and those that sprawl. The lineaments of the groups extend back ten years or more. Works within each group are often structurally and visually similar. Sculptures with suspended elements—*One Oklock* (1969), *Ik Ook* (1972), *Mon Père, Mon Père* (1975), *Arichidea* (1981–82)—often have an axis of symmetry which simplifies their construction. Because one side mirrors the other, beam lengths are equal, loads are evenly distributed, and connecting systems need only be thought out once. The axis makes it easier to design and control the movement.

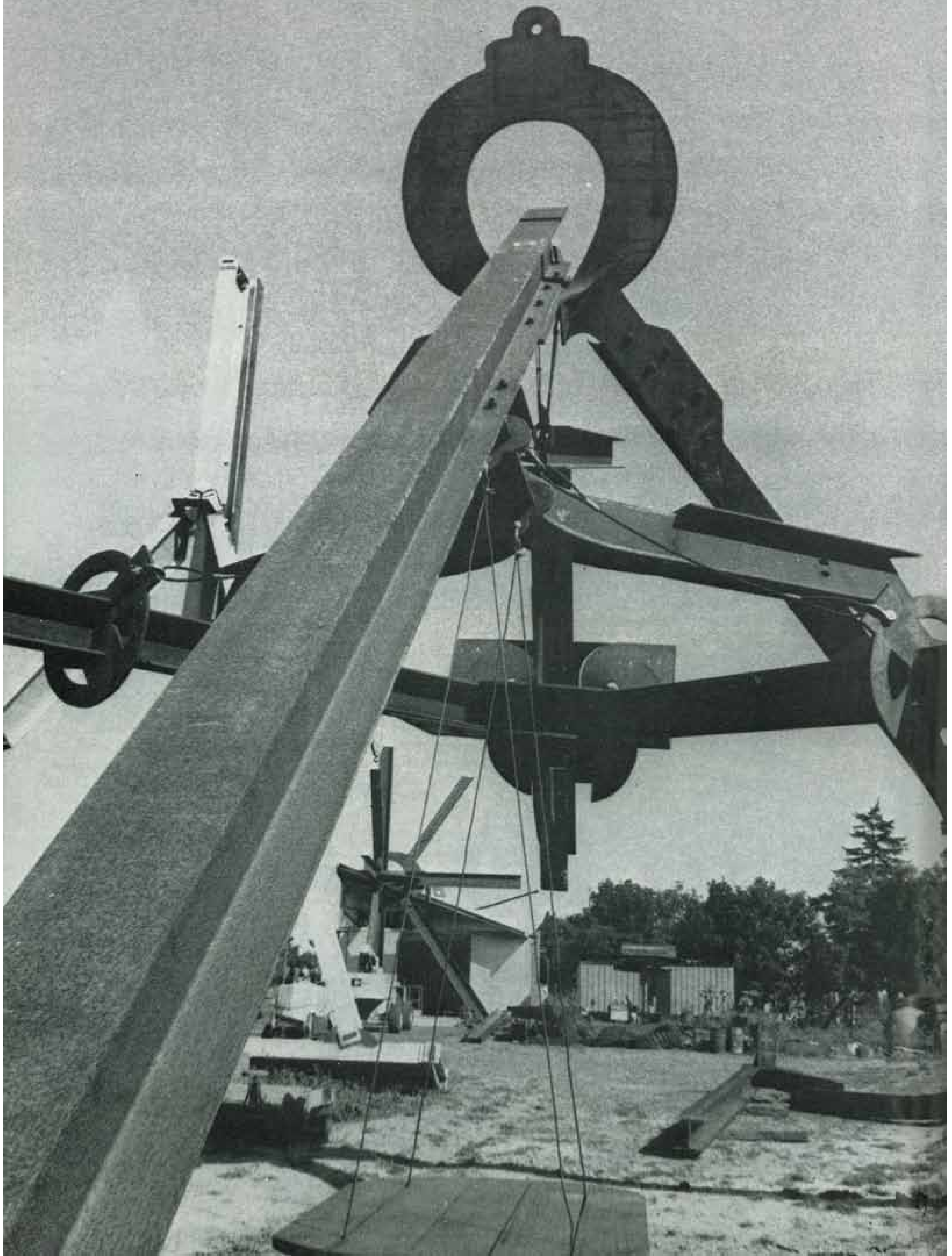
Works that come up to a hub or juncture—*K Piece* (1972), *Etoile Polaire* (1973), *Molecule* (1982)—are the most physically extensive or expansive of di Suvero's pieces, and in a way the most formally challenging since his means are the most restricted. Their gesture has to be perfect. The sprawling pieces—*Ladderpiece* (1962), *She* (1978), *Sunflowers for Vincent* (reworked 1978–'83)—almost always have one or more beams running along the ground, and include more obviously found material. They have a slightly episodic or picaresque quality, with a number of things occurring independently of one another.

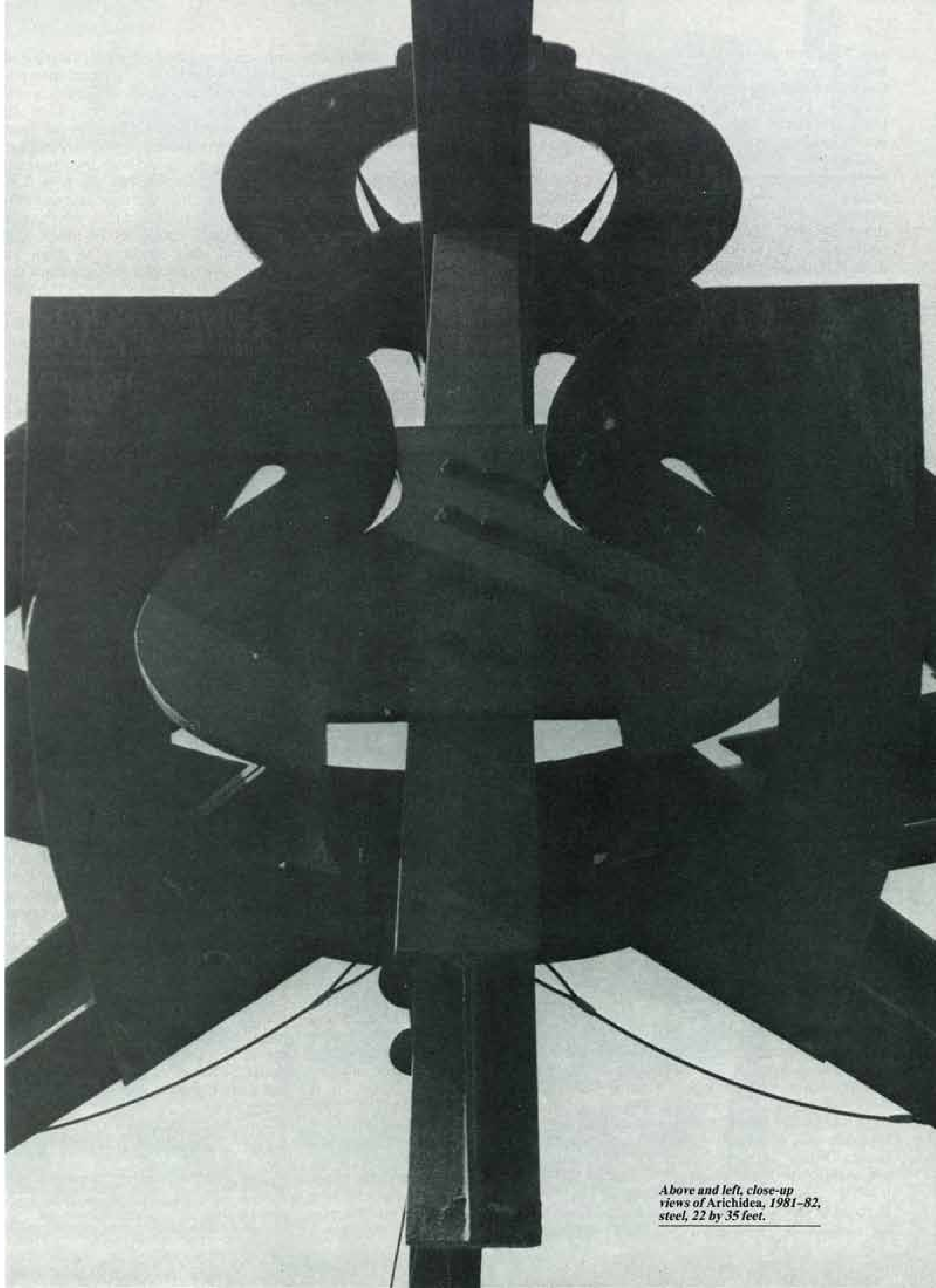
Mahatma (1979), as spare a piece as di Suvero has made, was set up in his huge waterfront studio in Long Island City. Di Suvero has introduced motion and participation into it without cluttering the form: an I beam bent like a wishbone can be moved. An arch shape, cut from steel plate, bridges the legs of the wishbone near their midpoint. The center of the arch, profiled like a keystone, balances in a steel trough resting atop a thrust bearing placed at the end of a vertical I beam. Supporting an arch from underneath its keystone demonstrates a weird structural humor. By cutting two eyelike holes in the keystone, di Suvero gives the arch shape a comic, living quality.

A rope loops down from the ends of the wishbone to within easy reach from the ground. By pulling it diagonally and hanging from it, we can both rotate the 12,000-pound wishbone and make its ends bob up and down, so we swing around with a wavelike motion. Since the sculpture lacks a distinct axis, our sense of it remains constant as we turn. But our image of the environment and the sculpture's placement changes radically as we are carried about. Though we supply the muscle to make the piece work, the feeling is that of a strange amusement park ride. The sensations of di Suvero's rides are surprisingly diverse; we can distinguish the pieces kinesthetically. As Max Kozloff noted 16 years

Above, Molecule, *1977, steel, 38 feet high, 58½ feet in diameter.*

Below, She, *1976–79, steel, 55 feet long. Collection Eugene M. Klein.*





Above and left, close-up views of Arichidea, 1981–82, steel, 22 by 35 feet.

ago, "No one has yet had the casual seeming nerve and wit, not even Calder, to include people in a mobile sculpture of such magnitude, nor to make mobility and structure such easy concomitants of each other."

Mahatma, Arichidea and *Spokenfur*—all large pieces with horizontal, suspended wishbones which move—are among di Suvero's best pieces since the early '70s. Some of their power comes from his ever-expanding technical skill, gained by 20 years of direct work with steel. He is without peer among sculptors both in forming shapes by bending and in taking steel towards its physical limits. Early on he figured out how to assemble his beams with the minimum of fuss. He often cut their flanges so they touched web to web and then bolted them together. Later, instead of connecting two shorter beams at an angle, he found ways to bend beams and so maintain or redirect their motion through the vertex. Now he has started joining his beams with wonderfully complex, almost knotted plates so motion can continue in a three-dimensional rather than planar fashion. The plates seem to store and then radiate the energy expended in their making.

For a sculptor so often described as a constructivist, di Suvero's work is becoming increasingly baroque. The works are still predominantly composed of straight beams, but curvilinear connecting elements have assumed new importance. Some early steel pieces look like line drawings folded into three dimensions. As sculpture they sometimes lack visual density and compositional flow. Our eyes move point to point, rather than sweeping through them. They appear to have been made with whatever steel was to hand. Di Suvero is now better able to pick and choose his stock, so the steel is exactly suited to its use. The new sculptures have an ever greater visual density, spatial complexity, and control of detail.

The sculptures strongly hold their space and our attention. Part of that holding is due to di Suvero's edging toward erotic content. His hanging wishbones, which resemble bodies from the waist down, often straddle and ride back and forth over thrusting beams. When we move the piece we are so close in that we cannot see it as a whole. The experience intimates the perceptual disjunctures of sex—the abrupt shifts in scale, the unpredictable linkages of motion and sensation, the simultaneous blur and absolute particularity of experience.

Compared with the other large pieces, *Sunflowers for Vincent, To Intuit* (1983), and a number of the small works exhibited at Oil & Steel were weak. Though apparently convinced that he can make art out of anything, di Suvero lacks Picasso's, David Smith's, or Stankiewicz's ability with found objects. He is attracted by things whose identity can't be subverted—a giant propeller, for example. When he inserts it along with a couple of railroad wheels in *Sunflowers,* it isn't absorbed, and the sculpture ends up inchoate. I'd rather talk to the designer or the maker of the propeller than to the sculptor. When di Suvero misses, he misses by a lot. That's refreshing. But in a number of the smaller pieces he keeps missing in the same way. That isn't.

To Intuit, a large new work, was the centerpiece of the Oil & Steel show. Shoehorned into the gallery, it had as much presence as some of the "made to the space" sculpture (Judd, Grosvenor, Bladen) of the '60s and '70s. The canted beams pressed outward against the walls; their massiveness, which we would take for granted outdoors, was unsettling inside. The piece suggested a giant hunk of digging machinery. The shovel constituting a major segment of the work is sensationally real, down to the intricate pattern of hardfacing weld that di Suvero found and left on its surface. It is never quite absorbed into the piece. From the other end (not visible in the photograph) we are confronted by a shiny vertical of stainless steel and by those I beams that are cut and pulled open.

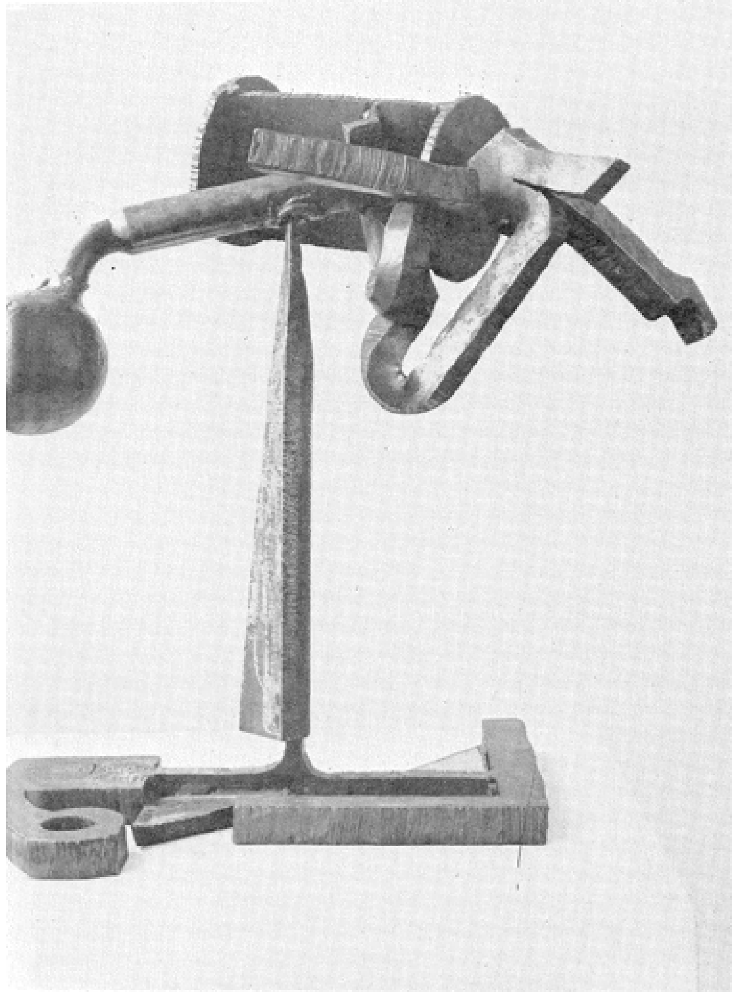
This aspect of the work is simultaneously formal and eccentric. The familiarity of the composition is subverted by the strangeness of the elements. From the side we see a post-and-lintel gate; the shovel at one end balances in intensity the sprung I beams at the other. What's interesting about the piece is that nothing comes together—the four views don't coalesce, can't be connected.

There are nice touches in some of the small pieces that were seen at Oil & Steel. When the main mass in *Zar* (1983) is set in motion, a coil of stainless tubing on the stationary part sways in sympathy. In *Timber Tongs* (1977) and *Ambivalence* (1983) the massive pincers—originally used for lifting and moving—are locked in a half-open position, but then given motion of a different sort within the sculpture. In many of the pieces a plate is cut open and the positive shape and the negative space remaining are both incorporated into the work. We can see how they once fit together, but their original unity is never restored. Di Suvero sometimes bends his plates so much that they lose their identity as steel; an almost living form is wrought from the flat material, a feat too rare in contemporary welded sculpture.

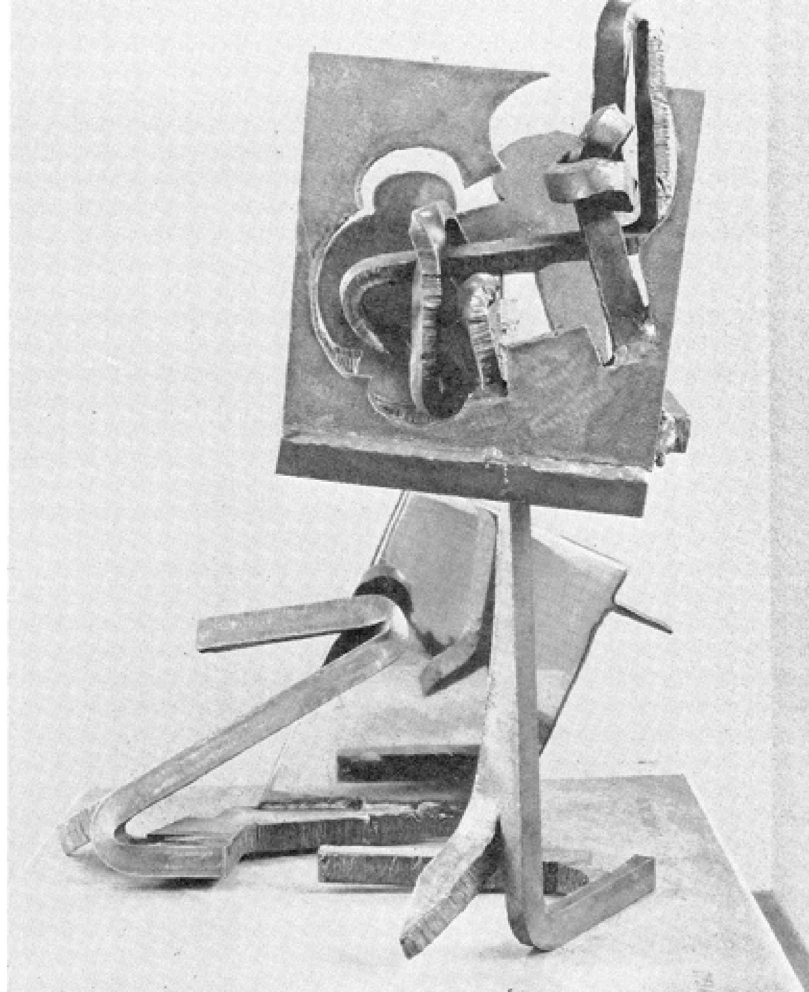
The central problem with di Suvero's small pieces is that they lack specificity, and sometimes seem mannered. One is much like the next in structure, attack, marking, motion and surface. Many of the small pieces are organized in the same fashion—horizontal plate on the ground, a vertical stalk ending in a point, a complex, spreading form of bent and welded steel balanced on the point. Di Suvero's large pieces are partially propelled by his on-the-spot solutions to technical problems; the absence of structural challenges induces a slackness in the small sculptures. They look stuck together casually, without a clear form in mind or sight. The irregular edges of torch-cut steel (no one is better with a cutting torch than di Suvero) don't function meaningfully as marking, as modeling, brushwork or handwriting can. These effects can't carry a sculpture as di Suvero apparently hopes they will in many of his small works.

Parts of the small sculptures do move, but the fact of motion is not sufficiently compelling to make them good. Instead of suggesting that all positions are interesting, the motion says that no position works. At this scale—ranging from 18 inches to four or five feet in height—the motion does not affect us kinesthetically. The matte surface of the rusted steel makes it harder, not easier, to read the form. Adding stainless steel in *Untitled* (1981) or *Zar,* or a magnifying glass in *Cum Glass* (1983), doesn't so much solve the problem as point it up. Perhaps my dissatisfaction with the small pieces is finally traceable to the standards di Suvero has established with his earlier pieces and with his large sculptures. □

Author: ***Wade Saunders is a sculptor and critic. He will show new work in February at the Lawrence Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia.***

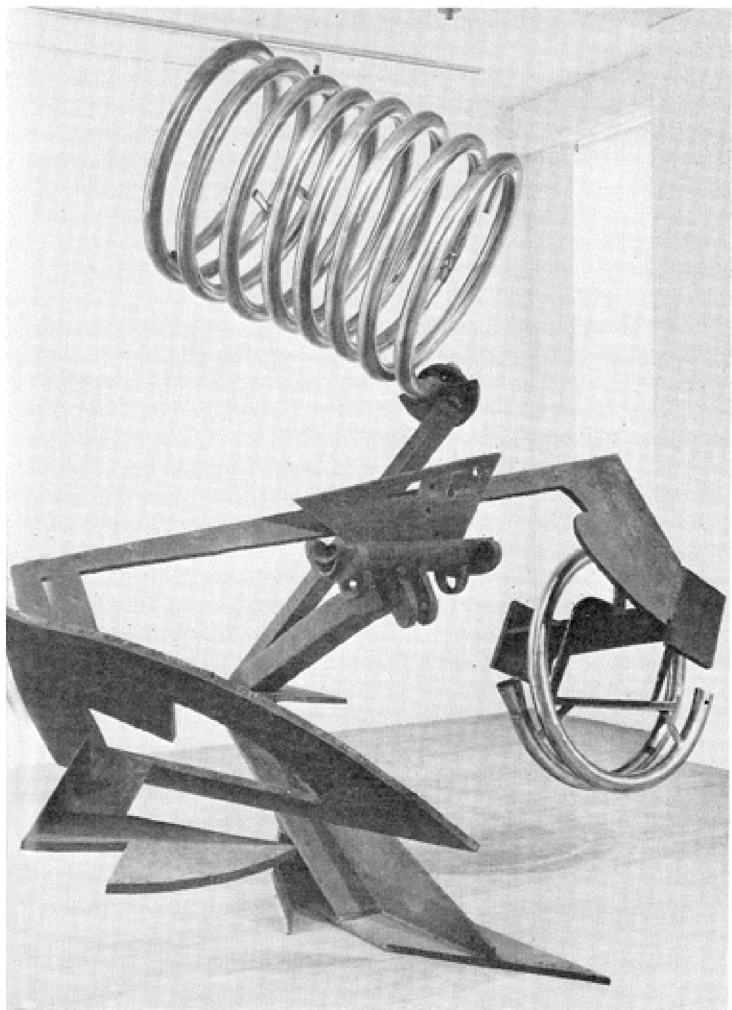


Oneball, *1981, 22 by 21 by 21 inches.*
All photos this page, Steven Sloman.



Untitled, 1981, steel,
30 by 25¼ by 25 inches.

Zar, *1983, steel, 110 by 103 by 89½ inches.*
Collection The Edward R. Broida Trust.



Landscape, *1981–82, steel,*
24 by 24 by 20 inches.