

Sculpture Journal

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Alistair's Book Review

Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth (eds), *British Sculpture Abroad, 1945-2000*
British Art Studies, Issue 3 (Summer 2016), <http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-3>

Sculpture and sculpted artefacts have always been produced in the British Isles, but at certain points in time it became popular to classify this activity through the lens of nationalism. Type the keywords 'British sculpture' into the search engine of any major art-library catalogue, and you find that most of the volumes the database retrieves – the edited anthologies, the art-history monographs, the exhibition catalogues, occasional pamphlets and so on – are published after 1960. In other words, the idea that there was a British school of sculpture became particularly appealing during the post-war years.

To explore why this was the case, we might want to consider a few factors. Was sculpture the only art that was singled out for this treatment at that time, or were other creative activities in Britain, such as painting or music, understood similarly? How does this spike in nationalist interpretations of British culture reflect contemporary trends in UK politics? The nation's cultural identity crisis precipitated by its loss of empire, which occurred around this moment, comes to mind. But we might also consider whether the same can be said for countries other than Britain. Were there, for instance, equivalent levels of interest in promoting 'American sculpture' or 'Japanese sculpture' during this period, or is the phenomenon exclusive to art made in Britain? And given that nationalist art criticism is generally steeped in judgements about a community's inferiority and superiority in relation to others, a systematic, historical analysis of the appeal of 'British sculpture' as a category would need to establish what it was being compared with.

To investigate all these topics would be an enormous undertaking, but a recent special issue of the online journal *British Art Studies*, guest edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth, ambitiously attempts to address some of them. Importantly, the study is clear about the parameters of its remit. The timeframe is limited to the second half of the twentieth century, and the publication is restricted to discussions of how the classification 'British sculpture' was used to make sense of contemporary work being made by artists in the UK. Most importantly of all, they focus on how this category was handled internationally, when 'British sculpture' was packaged up and sent 'abroad'. The rationale they give for this approach is that it was not just the British who promoted a nationalist reading of contemporary UK sculpture, but that this outlook was endorsed and adopted by critics and curators in North America, Australasia and continental Europe. In fact, the designation has acquired its currency, the editors suggest, thanks to a process of international ratification that occurred between the end of the Second World War and until around the mid 1990s.

The publication has been many years in the making. It began life in 2004, with a symposium that Curtis and Droth organised at Tate Britain called 'British Sculpture Abroad: 1945 to Now'. Two further conferences followed, and this special issue is the culmination of their enquiries. It is a compilation of no less than twenty-eight essays by almost as many authors. Each contributor was invited to explore a single episode or theme in the reception of British sculpture outside the UK, principally through the examination of individual exhibitions.

There are, for instance, accounts of Henry Moore's mid-career retrospective in Belgrade in 1955, Barbara Hepworth's in São Paulo in 1959, the Boyle Family's exhibition in The Hague in 1970, or Richard Deacon's show in Krefeld in 1991. Other authors address landmark group exhibitions of contemporary British sculpture, such as *Arte Inglese Oggi* in Milan in 1976, *Un Certain Art Anglais* in Paris in 1979, *The British Show* that toured Australasia during 1985-6, or *Brilliant! New Art from London*, which opened in Minneapolis in 1995. Punctuating these accounts are broader surveys, each covering about a decade, which roughly equate to the different 'generations' of British sculptors: Moore and Hepworth, Caro and the New Generation sculptors of the 1960s, the artists who passed through Central Saint Martins in the late 1960s, the New British Sculpture of the 1980s, and the Young British Artists (or YBAs) of the 1990s. Supplementing this are also a few shorter contributions by contemporary art practitioners who discuss how their work has actively engaged with the reception of UK sculpture within an international arena.

This richly-illustrated and well-researched volume allows readers to draw a few general conclusions. From the contributors' articles, it can be inferred that British sculpture enjoyed its greatest levels of influence in continental Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, largely thanks to the considerable international appeal of Henry Moore, and a conviction that his work was a sculptural correlative of social democratic ideals – principles to which many European countries, ravaged by fascism and fearful of communism, were predisposed. Henry Meyric Hughes' essay makes this argument particularly persuasively. But five decades later the idea of 'contemporary British sculpture' was losing its currency. A national framework no longer seemed to make much sense in a world that was commonly perceived to be thoroughly globalised.

From a geopolitical point of view, this shift away from nationalist narratives does indeed reflect a wider drift towards antinationalism in capitalist democracies that occurred during the post-war period. It was, arguably, one of the legacies of the Cold War. Western countries, including the UK, had reacted to the threat posed by the Soviet Union by participating in supranational initiatives, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization, The European Economic Community, the World Trade Organisation, and so on. Culturally, the cumulative effect of these military and economic programmes was integrative. As John J. Curley suggests, by the 1990s presenting the work of artists in the UK as representatives of a British school – as was the case, for instance, with the YBAs – is maybe best seen in retrospect as a superficial attempt to locate difference in an increasingly homogenized global art market. Moreover, by then the ethnic diversification of artists based in the UK had also posed a major challenge to preconceptions outside the country about what it meant to be British. Rakhee Balaram explores this perceptively in her discussion of Anish Kapoor's representation of Britain at the 1990 Venice Biennale. For these various reasons, then, it is unsurprising that by the end of the century 'Britishness' no longer stood for a set of easily-recognisable character traits that could be handily ascribed to sculptures made in the UK.

If, during the second half of the twentieth century, the international art world lost confidence in the meaning of British identity, then the same is equally true for sculpture itself. Playing out in many of the articles is a well-known story of how a generation of artists who came of age during the 1960s abandoned the established skillsets that had come to define sculptural practice – carving, modelling, welding and so on – and began to nominate as sculpture an array of objects that were the outcome of very diverse kinds of activities. This tendency inspired London-based artists as much as it did their contemporaries in Tokyo, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Düsseldorf and Turin. In fact, there was a period, lasting for much of the

1970s, when any artist who wanted to develop an international reputation in the field of sculpture was practically obliged to demonstrate how she or he was challenging the very art form itself. This did not continue indefinitely. However, after that, attempts to reclassify or reaffirm the singularity of sculpture always ran the risk of sounding like a call to order. In short, by the century's end, the meaning of 'sculpture' was less certain and more contested than ever before, which only further undermined the coherence of the 'British sculpture' brand.

These two topics are addressed from many angles by the contributors. But the publication also raises other issues that are not followed through in depth. It might have benefitted, for instance, from a general assessment of the changes over the course of the period in the places around the world where UK sculpture was exhibited and debated. The title of the special issue, 'British Sculpture Abroad', is intentionally vague about matters of geographical coverage. Three of the entries devoted to the 1940s and 1950s focus on the reception of British sculpture in continental Europe, while one discusses Hepworth in Brazil. But the five articles that follow, and which discuss the 1960s, exclusively address how British sculpture was interpreted in the USA. The accounts then covering the 1970s onwards alternate more regularly between Europe and North America. Overall, only four contributors focus directly on the reception of UK sculpture beyond these two continents. In other words, the 'abroad' in the title does not refer equally to all countries around the world. Instead, the locations covered by the contributors form a map that is shaped less by concerns about representing all continents equally, than by the shifting centres of influence and reputation within a globalised art world.

Surely a serious history of how sculpture by British artists was seen internationally would need to take these 'imagined geographies' into consideration. To give just one example, in 1961 the British Council organised an exhibition, *Recent British Sculpture* that toured Canada, New Zealand and Australia. At that time, for these Commonwealth nations, their relationship to Britain was central to their cultural identity. It is thus understandable that their respective art worlds looked to London for inspiration. But by the end of the decade, British art had itself been provincialized by the rising international status of US artists. Consequently New York became the metropolitan centre to which Australians and Canadians increasingly looked. The fate and fortunes of 'British sculpture' does not stand apart from these wider, shifting perceptions of centres and peripheries.

There are other shortfalls to the 'how-they-see-us' approach that Curtis and Droth adopt towards the categorisation of British sculpture. For one, the decision to focus exclusively on British sculpture's international reception necessarily means that sculptors who never exhibited abroad are disregarded. This essentially means that the special issue mainly consolidates an already established canon of British artists. Moreover, outside the UK, perceptions of Britain are invariably less nuanced, and commentators are not as attentive to domestic cultural divisions. But because outsiders' perspectives are the dominant focus of this special issue, the cumulative effect of these articles probably overemphasises the resilience of British cultural identity during the second half of the twentieth century. Over the course of these decades it was undermined by the internationalism of global capital. Indeed, the decision in 2016 by the UK to exit the European Union is a reminder that ethnic nationalism is back in fashion. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this attests to the coherence and new-found resolve of the British national ego. 'Britishness' is likely to be further eroded, but this time from within – by the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalisms that British identity supposedly subsumes. Future historians, no doubt, will

write of the role that sculpture played in *this* unfolding political melodrama. For them, Curtis and Droth's special issue deserves to be essential reading.

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