Agents of Change

Women Working in Sculpture since the 1960s

Background Notes

Natalie Rudd — 1 October 2025

Figure 1: Phyllida Barlow (1944-2023), *dock* (2013), mixed media installation at Tate Britain, 2013

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For much of the twentieth century, sculptural discourse was dominated by male practitioners, with women sidelined in art education, denied exhibition opportunities, and overlooked by critics. Despite these systemic barriers, many women artists emerged as agents of change, finding innovative ways to challenge and reshape the field of sculpture. Their marginalised position, while restrictive, paradoxically created space for experimentation, encouraging the exploration of alternative materials, processes, and ideas. This talk looks specifically at women's contributions to the field of British sculpture since the 1960s to the present day. The timeframe provides scope to consider the influence of major figures in post-war British sculpture, including Barbara Hepworth (1903-75) and Elisabeth Frink (1930-93), and acknowledges the impact of second-wave feminism and postminimalism. Overall, this session aims to illustrate how women transitioned from a position of invisibility and marginalisation to achieving international attention for their sculpture from the early 1990s onwards. This session begins with a close analysis of the multifaceted challenges facing women wishing to pursue a career in sculpture.

Fundamentally, women were perceived as not fitting the conventional image of how a sculptor should look and act. For example, in 1966, the art critic, Robert Hughes visited Barbara Hepworth in her St Ives studio and commented: 'How could this diminutive woman, 62 years old, with skin and flesh laid over bones as delicate as a seagull's have modelled and carved a body of work five times the size of Michelangelo's in equally resistant materials and on as big a scale?' Hughes was unable to suppress his disbelief in Hepworth's physical capabilities **(2)**.

Elisabeth Frink also endured sustained critical scrutiny of her physical features **(3)**. Even her biographer, Stephen Gardiner, referred frequently to her 'somewhat masculine appearance.' Such assertions once again underscore widespread critical scepticism in the legitimacy of women working as sculptors.

Figure 2: Barbara Hepworth with her sculptures *Figure (Archaean)* in her home garden, in St Ives, Cornwall, 1961. © Bowness.

Figure 3: Elisabeth Frink photographed by Edward Pool, c. 1964-65. Photo: Frink Estate and Archive, Dorset History Centre

Given these entrenched perceptions, it is not surprising to discover that women studying sculpture in art schools found it difficult to source adequate levels of endorsement and support, particularly given the widespread absence of female role models among the teaching staff. As the American artist, Jann Haworth (b. 1942), a pioneer of Pop soft sculpture, commented on her experience studying at the Slade (1961-63): 'The assumption was that, as one tutor put it, "the girls were there to keep the boys happy". He prefaced that by saying "it wasn't necessary for them to look at the portfolios of the female students…they just needed to look at their photos"'. Phyllida Barlow's experience at the Slade (1960-63) was also challenging **(1)**. On her first day, the sculptor, Reg Butler (1913-1981), informed her that there was no point teaching her because, by the age of thirty, she would be busy 'having babies and making jam.' Reflecting on her experiences at Wolverhampton Polytechnic and Reading University,

Cornelia Parker (b. 1956) noted that women wishing to experiment with a wider spectrum of materials and techniques beyond the traditions of carving, modelling and welding had a hard time convincing their tutors that their work was 'proper sculpture'.

On graduating from art school, women faced significant barriers in securing exhibition opportunities. Group and solo sculpture exhibitions overwhelmingly showcased the work of men, and it was not uncommon for a group show to exclude women entirely. For example, *British Sculptors '72* - a survey exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1972 - represented the work of twenty-four sculptors, all men. Unsurprisingly, given this sustained lack of visibility, women also found it hard to achieve commercial representation, thus impacting on their ability to sell their work.

In a further bind, women sculptors received limited support from feminist art groups who took a low view of the medium given its connections with male art history. As the feminist artist, Alexis Hunter, declared in 1980: 'you cannot make a revolutionary statement with an establishment form.' Stuck between a rock and a hard place, women working sculpture had little choice but to remove themselves from their squeezed position and keep moving. It is fascinating to trace the different strategies that women sculptors used to establish new networks and harness liberated methods, materials and processes.

An important priority was to establish an alternative set of role models. At Chelsea School of Art, Phyllida Barlow and Shelagh Cluett (1947-2007) benefitted from the unorthodox teachings of the Head of Sculpture, George Fullard (1923-1973), who predicted that 'Women will actually be the major artistic drive in a few years.' Fullard encouraged his students to explore unconventional methods involving scavenging, chance and the collision of ideas. He also recruited women onto the staff, creating a more inclusive environment over time.

Women also scoured international art journals and exhibition catalogues in search of alternative role models. International developments in postminimalism held strong appeal, given the widespread focus on manipulating cheap, malleable materials often by hand. Sculptors could make work cheaply and without assistance, working on a large scale or in intimate ways. A major posthumous exhibition of sculpture by the German-American artist, Eva Hesse (1936-1970) at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1979, provided a huge source of inspiration to women, proving that it was possible to achieve significant recognition for animated works that occupied the cusp between two and three dimensions, strength and vulnerability **(4)**.

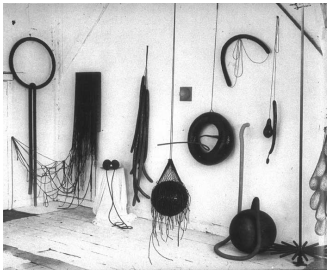

Figure 4: Works from 1965-66 in Eva Hesse's studio.

Women found numerous ways to circumnavigate the lack of exhibition opportunities, often creating their own platforms to exhibit their work. While women-only exhibitions offered crucial opportunities for visibility and solidarity during the 1970s and into the 1980s, they also carried the risk of reinforcing gender-based stereotypes and further marginalisation. Another way of tackling the lack of institutional exhibition opportunities was to establish artist-led spaces. Women played a central role in the establishment of a dynamic programme of open studio exhibitions in former dockland storage warehouses at Wapping. Transforming their studios into temporary galleries, artists including Shelagh Cluett **(5)** and Alison Wilding (b. 1948) were able to attract significant attention from curators, dealers and critics. Some women chose not to engage with the commercial world for ideological reasons, preferring to exhibit their work

in site-specific contexts or in ways that deliberately embraced impermanence, destruction and loss. For example, Phyllida Barlow often exhibited her work in public space, leaving it open to theft and decay. She also deposited some of her works into the River Thames, never to be seen again.

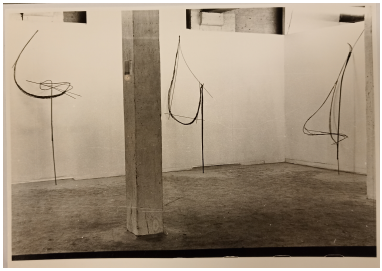

Figure 5: Shelagh Cluett's open studio exhibition for *55 Wapping Artists*, July 7-9, 1979. Shelagh Cluett Archive, Henry Moore Institute Archive, Leeds Museums & Galleries.

An examination of the sculpture created by women artists emerging in the late 1970s and into the 1980s reveals several shared concerns. There is a clear interest in working in resourceful ways, transforming overlooked, everyday materials to create new forms. To make *Territorial* (1987), the Montserrat-born British sculptor, Veronica Ryan, scavenged old blankets from the streets of London, before drenching them in plaster to make a flowing threatening form, like a Venus fly trap or a restless sea **(6)**. Indeed, a spirit of threat underpins many of the sculptures of this generation, evidenced in works that appear to hover on the brink of destruction, at risk of collapse, disintegrations or engulfment. Some artists, such as Shelagh Wakely (1932–2011), created works using perishable materials—such as ground spices or fresh fruit—that were designed to disintegrate or disperse over the course of an exhibition. All these sculptural strategies reveal a willingness to embrace change.

Figure 6: Veronica Ryan, *Territorial* (1987), plaster and bronze, 40 x 219.7 x 147.5cm, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. Photo: Anna Arca.

Operating on the margins of the art world arguably provided women sculptors the creative freedom to challenge conventions and venture into new sculptural territories. Through sustained acts of tenacity, creativity and collaboration, this generation laid the groundwork for those that followed. By the early 1990s, women began to attract international attention for major installations that embraced the tension of physical transformation, precarious brinks and the poetry of ephemeral traces. In 1991, Cornelia Parker achieved critical acclaim for exploding a garden shed and suspending charred fragments from the Chisenhale Gallery ceiling, in an act of dramatic resurrection **(7)**. Two years later, Rachel Whiteread - a former student of Phyllida Barlow and Alison Wilding - became the first woman to win the Turner Prize for *House* (1993) **(8).** To make this work, Whiteread cast the interior space of an East End Victorian terraced house earmarked for destruction. These ambitious works reflect individual innovation while also revealing the influence of earlier generations of pioneering women who championed lasting change.

Figure 7: Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), wood, metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, textile and wire, 400 × 500 × 500, Tate.

Figure 8: Rachel Whiteread, *House, (*1993), 193 Grove Road, London E3, now destroyed. Commissioned by Artangel. Photo by Sue Omerod

Selected further reading

The study of women's sculptural practices is a developing area within art history. This reading list provides a useful introduction and key entry points into the existing literature. Readers are also encouraged to seek out individual monographs to gain deeper insight into specific practices and careers.

Baring, Jo and Sarah Turner. *Sculpting Lives,* series 1 & 2. https://audioboom.com/channels/5014385.

Barnes, Joanna, and Marjorie Trusted, eds. *Discovering Women Sculptors*. Public Statues and Sculpture Association, 2024.

Hamnett, Melissa and Joanna Sperryn-Jones. *50 Women Sculptors.* Supernova Books, 2020.

Judah, Hettie. *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and other parents)*. Lund Humphries, 2022.

Perry, Gill, ed. *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice*. Blackwell, 2004.

Phaidon editors and Lisa Le Feuvre. *Great ~~Women~~ Sculptors.* Phaidon Press, 2024.

Rose, Pauline. *Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c.1885-1950*. Liverpool University Press, 2020.

Rudd, Natalie. *Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women Since 1945*. Hayward Publishing, 2020.