

Recent and Contemporary Sculpture

Background notes

Mary Acton — 24 March 2021



Joseph Beuys, *The End of the Twentieth Century*, 1983-5.

Introduction

We need to consider this subject in the context of two recent trends, namely Minimalism and Conceptual Art, and Land Art and Environmentalism. In both cases the main idea was of an art that makes us think and question, and includes the idea of the active and participatory spectator. One of the most important instigators in this development was the German artist, Joseph Beuys, whose installations [in particular this one called *The End of the Twentieth Century*] reminded us about post war considerations to do with the need to think about the recent past. Beuys, particularly, wanted everyone to be invited to think about history and its consequences; this continues to be the case and involves us in making sure we do not forget the past, as the modernists wanted us to do, but to re-assess it in all sorts of ways. Much of the sculpture we are going to look at today raises questions in all sorts of areas, particularly to do with memory and reconsideration.



Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper*, 2005-07

Slides

1&2 **Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper*, *Pregnant*, 2005-7**, marble, Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square.

3&4 **Mark Wallinger, *Ecce Homo***, Fourth Plinth Trafalgar Square, 1999, and inside a gallery.

To begin with we are going to consider the idea of public sculpture and the fact that it can get forgotten or passed by. In this context the figure on your screen now of Alison Lapper by Marc Quinn is a very good point. It was photographed when it was on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square between 2005 and 2007. In his description of how this came about, Richard Cork describes how in the year before 2000, the sculpture of *Ecce Homo* by Mark Wallinger had been placed there, and people were so moved by it that it led to the formation of a committee to decide what to do with this space for public sculpture; they came up with the idea of making it an opportunity for artists to apply to submit work for display there, [See Cork *Annus Mirabilis?* P. 244 & 248.] People were apparently moved by the lonely appearance of the figure and the fact that it looked so vulnerable being only life size in that enormous space. The figure of Alison Lapper raises more questions still, in that it is made from Carrara marble, and is carved in a very traditional way of a very traditional subject, namely the female nude. However, this figure is of a very beautiful woman who nevertheless suffers from a hereditary condition which affects her feet, legs and arms. The fact that she is pregnant adds to those questions about who we are and what we think we should look like. [See *Learning to Look at Sculpture* p. 70-71] Quinn has carved her in a traditional and very skilful craft-based way so that we can think about the whole issue of what public sculpture is for.

Slides

5. **Anya Gallacio**, *Red on Green*, 1992, Clare and James Hyman Collection, London.

6. **Tony Cragg**, *Britain seen from the North*, 1981, Tate Britain, London.

These two sculptures bring us into contact with other issues we have been considering, and that is the idea of the installation, which is not permanent, as it can be picked up and put away in a box, and so is not an object in the conventional sense, and can be made to cease to exist. The installation by Anya Gallacio is created from rose petals which fade and die and so have to be changed every three weeks in order to keep them fresh. Tony Cragg's piece is about the map of Britain and how it might look to someone living in the north of England which is topical still, and especially now. He has made it out of bits of cast off plastic, like a collage, and the sort of thing you might see and collect on a beach. The idea of rubbish and environmental damage remains a serious, lively and topical issue. Also, both of these sculptures are horizontal, and involve the spectator in that idea of the space of encounter, and the need to walk round it and feel your body in relationship to it.



Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter*, 1991

Slides

7&8 **Cornelia Parker**, *Cold, Dark Matter An Exploded View*, 1991, Tate Britain, London.

Parker is interested in the way an object can be changed by what happens to it, so her exploded shed was blown up by the army, so that she could re-create the exploded view. Each of the shards are strung up on wires to make a suspended sculpture, in which the pieces take on a different identity in this semi translucent form, and seem to float in space; it is not a kinetic sculpture in the early twentieth century sense of the word, like you might find in the work of a Russian Constructivist like Rodchenko, but the idea of moving sculpture is part of this all the same.

Slide 9. Cornelia Parker, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 1988-9. Tate Britain, London.

Here, on the other hand, the *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 1988-89, take on a more suggestive meaning. Parker is still working in the tradition of collage because she went round all sorts of car boot sales and collected lots of silver plate, and had that crushed so that it would form a number of circles of similar size, and then these are suspended in the gallery so that you can think about the biblical story. However, Parker would not want this to be a narrative piece; instead it is about you feeling free to contemplate the issues it might raise about the biblical story, or about rubbish, or just about the fact that we might have too much stuff. Again, questions are asked, to which there are no trite or fixed answers. [See Cork interview Face to Face p.178]

Slides

10. **Antony Gormley, *For Francis*, 1981,** Tate Britain, London.

11. **Antony Gormley, At work in his studio with an assistant, photograph.**

12. **Antony Gormley, *Sound 2*, Winchester Cathedral Crypt, 1986.**

Antony Gormley, *For Francis, Number 10* is the famous piece in which he used a cast of his own body, and we can see him doing it in the studio in this second picture. We see a life sized figure with arms outstretched, apparently marked with the stigmata, as indeed St Francis is supposed to have been. But, Gormley's fascination with the human figure is about its internal spaces as much as it is about the outside appearance. He famously described this in relation to the figure called Sound II in the crypt at Winchester Cathedral, which regularly floods, so then the reflections in the water become as important as the sculpture itself; he describes himself as being interested in the idea of presence as here [see Learning to look at Sculpture p. 68] or the idea of the body as a place where we all live, as a kind of collective subjective.



Antony Gormley, *Sound II*, Winchester Cathedral crypt, 1986

Slides

13. **Antony Gormley**, *Mould, Hold, Passage*, 1981, Installation.

14. **Antony Gormley**, *Learning to Think*, 1991, Installation.

15. **Antony Gormley**, *Another Place*, 1997, Cuxhaven.

These slides show Gormley's interests in the human body in another way, as it is presented on the floor, in various positions, or as suspended from the ceiling. Gone is any idea of a plinth, and the body is used to make us enquire about what it is doing in that position, and how it alters our experience of sculpture. Then, he also moves his casts outside, as in the figures in the sea off the North German coast at Cuxhaven, so that you can watch the way the tides change their appearance, and they are literally a presence as the light and atmosphere changes; the same could be said of the figures he places on top of buildings, as in Broad Street in Oxford.

Slide 16. Antony Gormley, *Angel of the North*, Newcastle, 1998.

This is the famous Angel of the North, 1998, which is much loved by all who see it, off the M1 outside Newcastle; it is a memorial to the industrial north of England, and its monumental size in Cor-ten steel, allows us to consider our recent past, which is represented here by enormous scale as if drawing attention to the huge achievements of industry in this part of England. In encouraging us to remember, it also introduces us to the idea of sculpture and memorials, which still play an important part in our heritage today.

Slide 17. Antony Gormley, *Quantum Cloud*, 2000., installed in Chicago.

This is about something more ephemeral, but still representing the human figure, but in a more translucent way. It is made of a huge number of separate pieces of metal, with a human figure inside it, and is still dealing with that idea of the outside and the inside.

Slides

18-21. **Maya Lin**, *Vietnam War Memorial*, 1982, black granite, National Park Service, Washington.

This remarkable memorial, to the killed and missing of the Vietnam War, in Washington DC, is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, because of the way it is slashed into the ground like a huge V, and, in its horizontality, it looks like a piece of land art and shows up even more effectively from the air. In order to see it properly from the ground, you have to walk into it and see the banks of names set into the polished Indian stone so that, in an eerie way, you see yourself reflected amongst the names of the dead, as if we were all implicated. As you walk in, the sides deepen from a few centimetres to approximately 3 metres so that you become more and more immersed. Even here though, the families

insisted on having a figurative commemoration, which is placed at one end; the whole memorial was very controversial to start with, but is now held in high regard; a small replica regularly tours the remoter areas of the United States, so that those who will never get to Washington can see it.

Slides

22-24. **Philip Jackson and Liam O'Connor**, *Memorial to Bomber Command*, 2012, Hyde Park, London.

The question of memorials has always been huge in sculpture and plays an important part still, as we have just seen; this is also true in the case of the memorial to Bomber Command set overlooking Green Park in London. Here the issue was that the families involved raised the money, and then they chose the form, which, in contrast to what we have just been looking at, is very conventional and figurative. When you first arrive there, the monument is shielded by a neo classical screen, and you would have no idea what is behind it. When you go inside, you see the figures in their very detailed uniforms, under the sky, standing on a plinth looking up at the stars. The reason why it took so long to raise a memorial was to do with the controversy surrounding the bombing of German cities during the Second World War, and the fact that it was not considered appropriate to commemorate the 55,573 aircrew who gave their lives; it raises the issue about who should decide in the case of public sculpture, and this is what is pinpointed in connection with the fourth plinth. A similar controversy raged up the road at Hyde Park Corner, about the Artillery memorial and the one to the machine gunners of the First World War.

Slides

25. **Rachel Whiteread**, *Ghost*, 1990, Chisenhale Gallery, London.

26. **Rachel Whiteread**, *House*, 1993 destroyed 1994, Grove Road, Bow, London.

27. **Rachel Whiteread**, *Study for House*, 1993-4, Correction Fluid on Laser Copy.

These next sculptures are all by Rachel Whiteread, and are also concerned with the idea of memorial. *Ghost* is literally a room which has been turned inside out, so that the interior walls of a living room are on the outside, and form a kind of monument to what has gone on inside; it is made of plaster and apparently built up from brick like forms; it is white which lends itself to the idea expressed in the title, although that implies something wraithlike rather than solid. Mummification is a word Whiteread uses quite frequently. More famous was her creation of *House*, in memory of a neighbourhood at Grove Road in the East End of London, which was being pulled down and rebuilt. The idea here was to remind people of what the place had been, and yet not to memorialise it permanently, but to allow it to be destroyed at the end of a limited time. Whiteread's description of the complicated techniques involved is revealed in what she told Richard Cork. [see *Face to Face* p.235 & 236] and the idea of embalming it. It is also about the concept of space as absence too, which brings it into line with the idea of space more generally, which has been important in a lot of the work in recent sculpture.



Rachel Whiteread, *Holocaust Memorial*, Vienna, 1995-2000

Slides

28-30. **Rachel Whiteread, *Holocaust Memorial***, 1995-2000, Judenplatz, Vienna, and a detail. When you go to see this memorial, it is very moving, as you would expect, but also quite frightening, and Whiteread describes it as brutal; it is right in the heart of the old city of Vienna, and commemorates the 65,000 Jews killed by the Nazis in Austria; the position is off centre in the square, near to sites of other killings and persecutions of Jews in the past, including a synagogue which was burned in 1421, and also, poignantly, not far from the luxury and grandeur of the Royal palace of the Hapsburgs. It is a library turned inside out, with the books all pointing inwards, so that you cannot see their titles; the names of the concentration camps are written on the step in Hebrew, German, and English and the doors are blindly shut too. However, what strikes you most, is a kind of relentless anonymity, and that is part of the brutal effect already referred to. Whiteread described it to Cork very clearly. [see Face to Face p.238].

Slides

31. **Anish Kapoor, *White Sand Red Millet***, 1982, Hayward Gallery, London.

32. **Anish Kapoor, *As if to Celebrate, I discovered a Mountain Blooming with Red Flowers***, 1981, Tate Modern, London.

33. **Anish Kapoor, *A Wing at the Heart of Things***, 1990, Tate Modern, London.

These are some of the earlier sculptures by Kapoor in which he shows us the origins of his idea of using colour, which comes from his Indian background. He uses the saturated colour of pigment to create an experience which is at once solid and ethereal. [see Face to Face p.154]. He was part of the development which allowed sculpture to expand its horizons, as we have seen in other contexts.

Slides

34-36. **Tony Cragg**, *Points of View*, 2007, and drawings.

Cragg, whom we saw at the beginning, is also very interested in the process and techniques of making sculpture, as he describes here [Learning to look at Sculpture p.271]. Cragg starts with drawings, and then turns them into sculpture in a very traditional way; he says he was very hesitant about putting sculpture outside, but it looked very effective when it was sited in the street outside the V&A in London. The process is important, but so is the fact that they always look as though they are moving, in an almost liquid way, even though they are made in bronze; he has turned his doodle - like drawings into something solid, which seems to be a contradiction in terms [see Face to Face p.132].



Emily Young, *Angel Heads*, 2003

Slides

37-40. **Emily Young**, *Angel Heads*, 2003, St Paul's Churchyard, London.

These busts all come from the area known as the Churchyard outside St Paul's in London. They are architectural, but not load bearing and are set into the semi- circular arrangement of the building facades looking towards the cathedral. They are generic, as angel heads, but they do convey a curiously mysterious and spiritual atmosphere, in this noisy and materialistic place. They are made from Portland stone, mounted on granite pillars. The faces are carefully carved, but emerging from uncut stone at the back. Their expressions are each slightly different and enigmatic, but if you look carefully, you realise that once again we are being made to think.

Slides

41. **Louise Bourgeois**, *Rejection*, 2001, Fabric, Steel and Lead, Private Collection.

42. **Janet Cardiff**, *Forty Part Motet*, 2001, Tate Britain, London.

These are two very interesting pieces because they are not what we would normally expect sculpture to be. The one, by Louise Bourgeois, is knitted, and, although there is recent sculpture made of felt and other soft materials, this is apparently soft but expressing powerful emotions about rejection, and appears to be screaming, so the feeling it is communicating is hard and uncompromising; the eyes are sunken, the mouth distorted, and the whole thing is full of emotional and physical tension. Much of Bourgeois's work is autobiographical, but this seems to be more generic. The piece by Janet Cardiff is also unlike what you would expect of sculpture as you are invited to sit in the centre of the 40 microphones to hear the *Forty Part Motet*, *Spem in Alium*, by Thomas Tallis. The experience is overwhelming, and very special, because the sound becomes like a wall around you, and you feel you can't get out. You look around and find uniformity in the microphones, and yet it does not seem real, so you, who, as the spectator, remain fascinated and puzzled at the same time; it is not a game, but a seriously disorientating experience which is quite different from being in a concert hall with all round sound.

Slides

43-45. **Dale Chihuly**, *Persians*, 2000, Exhibition installation, de Young Museum, San Francisco.

These are made of coloured glass and set in darkness, with lights shining on them and through them. Here also you feel disorientated, as you are reminded of walking through a flower garden, but the experience is quite different. This is coloured sculpture of a fascinating kind, and yet it is made from glass, which is, as Chihuly himself says, ancient and ultimately mysterious, and yet exotic in the way it calls to mind past periods.; he makes something decorative and yet enveloping which has to do with the way it has to be installed. Spatially and aesthetically, it is ambiguous, fragile and mysterious at the same time. [See Learning to look at Sculpture p.280 & 284]



Dale Chihuly, *Persians*, 2000 [Exhibition at De Young Museum]

Slides

46-49. **Thomas Heatherwick**, *Paternoster Vents*, Paternoster Square, London, 2000.

Heatherwick represents a very interesting area between the work of art and the functional object. Here, these vents off Paternoster Square in London, make the point very well, that functionalism can tip over into art, and be blended together in a fascinating way. He based his design on a piece of folded paper and then turned the steel into these wing like forms which remind you of birds in flight, or perched and about to fly. The size is enormous, if you look at this photograph with someone standing beside it, and it is also very architectural, which is a characteristic we have noticed a lot so far. They were designed as vents for an electricity sub- station below ground, and yet, when you first see them, you have no idea of that. They fit into the space surrounded by buildings very well, reminding us that sculpture is always about form and space and that the setting is always as important as the object which inhabits it.[See Learning to look at Sculpture p. 296 & 297]

Slide 50. Grayson Perry, *We've Found the Body of Your Child*, 2000. Artist's Collection.

Perry also has a strong feeling for this area between fine art and craft, and expresses it in his pots, which are beautifully made, and yet often convey an uncomfortable message like this one. In his exhibition at the British Museum in 2011, called the Unknown Craftsman, he acknowledged the importance of skill in whatever the artist does [see Learning to look at Sculpture p. 279]; and that it is not just about being revolutionary, as he also said in his book, *Playing to the Gallery*, where he suggests that we can do without the avant garde as it was understood in the past. [See *Playing to the Gallery* p.78]

Slides

51&52. **Richard Deacon**, *No Stone Unturned*, *Blow*, 1999, *After*, 1998, *Laocoön*, 1996, iTate Liverpool & Greek Sculpture, *Laocoon and his Sons*, c.175-150BC. Vatican Museum, Rome.

Richard Deacon's *Laocoon*, 1996, shows that, like the avant garde, the classical tradition need not be dead, but can be tackled in a more open-ended way, as is demonstrated here with the lattice work of wood laminated together, so that, although it is like the twisting movement of the classical *Laocoon* you can see through it in a more transparent or translucent way.

You could therefore argue that sculpture now can be anything, and, in a way you would be right, but, in all the work we have looked at, you can see that the three-dimensional aspect, together with the setting, are ubiquitously important for being able to see things in the round [see Learning to look at Sculpture p. 298] and that space has become even more significant, especially in relation to the spectator.

Reading List. The best sources for contemporary sculpture are articles, catalogues and Interviews. I have also included my own book Learning to look at Sculpture, as some of the artists discussed are included there.

Mary Acton, Learning to look at Sculpture, Routledge, 2014.

Annish Kapoor, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2009.

Antony Gormley, Blind Light, Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, London, 2007.

Antony Gormley and Martin Gayford, Shaping the World, Sculpture from Prehistory to Now, Thames and Hudson, 2020.

Grayson Perry, Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman, British Museum, London, 2011.

Rachel Whiteread, The Art of Rachel Whiteread, Thames and Hudson, 2004.

Rachel Whiteread, Exhibition Catalogue, Tate Britain, 2017-18.

Richard Cork, Face to Face Interviews with Artists, Tate Publishing, 2015,

Richard Cork, Four Paperback volumes of Articles about Modern and Contemporary Art, Thames and Hudson of various dates since the 1970s.

Richard Deacon, Tate Britain, London, 2014

Thomas Heatherwick, Making, Thames and Hudson, 2012.

Tony Cragg, Sculptures and Drawings, Scottish Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 2011.

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