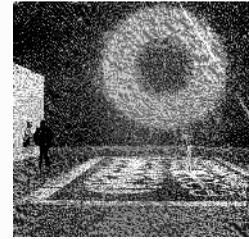


Renewing the New: British Sculpture in the 1980s

Article by **Greg Hilty**

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Abstract

Greg Hilty introduces the case studies in his 1980s section of “British Sculpture Abroad”. He also points to two exemplary instances of British sculpture’s expansion onto an ever wider global stage: Tony Cragg in Warsaw in 1988 and Richard Long in Paris in 1989.

One of the early defining exhibitions held in 1980s Britain excluded sculpture from its frame of reference yet presaged a shift in taste and practice that would become dominant through the decade. *A New Spirit in Painting* was selected by Christos Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal, and Nicholas Serota and presented at the Royal Academy in the spring of 1981.¹ The exhibition, as well as asserting a revival of interest in traditional painting as a medium, focused on key practitioners, on narrative and figurative content, and on national classifications. Later that year the Whitechapel Art Gallery presented its two-part survey *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century* (fig. 1).² As its title suggests this was an overview of the century but signalled also a reconsideration of Modernism’s traditions, inevitably in contradistinction to the experiments into the “expanded field” of sculpture that had marked the previous decade. The art critic John McEwen used the language of the day when he spoke of the “new spirit”, “zest”, and “eclecticism” of the exhibition (alongside its “inadequacies”).³



Figure 1

Exhibition catalogue, *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century*, Sandy Nairne and Nicholas Serota (eds), (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981).

A new generation of sculptors, trained in the rigours and inspired by the ambitions of conceptual and minimal practice, but unafraid to direct their disciplines to wider material and content considerations, quickly established itself through a rapid series of group exhibitions in the UK and Europe.⁴ These exhibitions provided a consolidated platform for the object- and image-based work of a group of artists who had come to maturity in the 1970s and early 1980s. The essays in this section consider different ways in which the influence of these artists extended beyond the UK to become the dominant “school” of British art during the decade. There were, to be sure, other highly significant practices, groupings, and individuals, but in the context of this journal a focused analysis of the emergence of the “New British Sculptors” and the dissemination of their work is essential.

Nick Baker’s quantitative analysis gives fascinating objective evidence of the surge of interest in British art and, especially, the new generation of sculptors internationally in the

1980s.

Anthony Bond—a key figure in the Australian contemporary art world in the 1980s— writes about *The British Art Show* organized by the British Council which travelled to museums in Australia and New Zealand in 1985–86. Describing the fresh nature of the work shown compared to the abstract sculpture of a previous generation, he picks up on characteristics of narrative, affect, and humour in the work shown, tending towards a “democratization of art” and its reception. Bond followed this exhibition with deeper personal and institutional engagements with a number of its key artists through repeat visits and residencies.

Bond attests to the highly active role of the Visual Arts Department of the British Council which was crucial during this period, both instigating initiatives and supporting projects in partnership with international partners. The Council’s key platform, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, gave three of its five slots during the decade to sculptors and supported numerous group shows globally.⁵

Mary Jane Jacob (whose early research into British sculpture was supported by the British Council) writes about her exhibition *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture since 1965*, which she co-curated with Graham Beal. Their 1987 project, a few years into the phenomenon of “New British Sculpture”, took a slightly longer view and focused on six artists of successive generations, pointing to the overlapping continuity and innovation in British art over two decades, including their common academic backgrounds, and identified certain shared characteristics of reticence and introversion underlying the work, which contrasts with the brasher, more Pop culture associations of the earlier group shows. Jacob and Beal’s project was exemplary in demonstrating a considered and specific curatorial perspective on an artistic moment that was still taking shape.

Julian Heynen writes of his close working relationship with Richard Deacon, focusing on the artist's dual exhibitions within the highly specific programme of the Haus Lange and Haus Esters which Heynen directed from 1981 as key venues in the Krefelder Landesmuseen. The programme concentrated on a tightly associated group of artists of similar generation and often friendship, including Juan Muñoz, Harald Klingelhöller, Thomas Schütte, and Richard Deacon. Heynen shows how Deacon, while remaining based in the UK, established strong individual artistic and curatorial relationships in continental Europe. Deacon was notable for his participation in the Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1987, alongside only two other British Artists, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Shirazeh Houshiary.

The galleries and institutions of the Rhineland were important for most of the New British Sculptors: their leading figure, Tony Cragg, moved his studio from Britain to Wuppertal in 1977 and became one of the region's most prominent artists. This did not stop him simultaneously representing "British" art and sculpture in particular. In 1988, he represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale and later that year won the Turner Prize. Less lauded, but nevertheless significant, was his modest show at the small but influential Foksal Gallery in Warsaw in the same year. The Foksal, as well as championing the most innovative Polish artists, was key in inviting leading international figures to show there during the years of Poland's cultural and political opening up. For Cragg, as well as the intrinsic interest of showing in such a dynamic context, this project awakened him to the possibilities and value of pioneering relationships with institutions in territories that many would have seen as on the margins of the art world.



Figure 2

Richard Long, *Red Earth Circle*, 1989, and Paddy Japaljarri Sims, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, Neville Japangardi Poulson, Francis Jupurrurla Kelly, Paddy Jupurrurla Nelson, Franck Bronson Jakamarra Nelson, Towser Jakamarra Walker and Yuendumu community, *Yam Dreaming*, 1989, installed in the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, 1989. Digital image courtesy of Centre Pompidou / MNAM-CCI / Bib. Kandinsky / Photo: Béatrice Hatala.

The artistic decade closed in 1989 with the paradigm-shifting exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris, for which Jean-Hubert Martin and his curatorial team selected fifty artists from "centres" and fifty artists from "margins" of the art world, notionally on equal terms whether established within the hierarchies of Western art or local traditions of visual culture. The problematics of the project were many and are well documented.⁶ At the same time the initiative heralded a significant, if inevitably contested, expansion of the art world from its perceived charmed inner

circle. One of the exhibition's most resonant juxtapositions was the presentation at the Grande Halle de la Villette of two site specific works: Richard Long's *Red Earth Circle* (1989) and *Yam Dreaming* by seven members of the Yuendumu community in Central Australia—Francis Jupurrurla Kelly, Frank Bronson Jakamarra Nelson, Paddy Jupurrurla Nelson, Neville Japangardi Poulson, Paddy Japaljarri Sims, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, and Towser Jakamarra Walker (fig. 2). The two works on a comparable spectacular scale were viewable (and often photographed) within the same visual field. They were both symbolic representations of the earth, both shared the formal similarity of vibrating circular motifs, and were handmade from materials taken from the earth. Long had had close connections with Australia since he was first invited to a residency there by John Kaldor in 1977. The Yuendumu community artists would present a related major work in Europe just a few years later in the exhibition *Aratjara: The Art of the First Australians* shown at museums in Germany, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. The iconic pairing of these two works at La Villette remains a ground-breaking artistic dialogue, pointing the way to the increasing range and depth of globalization of individual artistic practice and curation in the decades that have followed, in which British artists would play an important role."

About the author

Greg Hilty co-directed the Gallery at Riverside Studios, a pioneering arts centre in Hammersmith, in the 1980s. During the 1990s he was Senior Curator at the Hayward Gallery, where he co-curated contemporary group exhibitions including *Doubletake: Collective Memory & Current Art* (1992), *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting* (1994), and *Spellbound: Art & Film* (1996)—the latter one of a strand of exhibitions connecting art and wider visual cultures including fashion and sound. He was Director of Arts at the London Office of Arts Council England until 2005 when he set up Plusequals, a cultural brokering agency, in partnership with University of the Arts London. In 2011 he co-curated *Watch Me Move: The Animation Show* for Barbican Art Gallery, and *Galapagos*, a residency programme and touring exhibition. Since 2008 he has been Curatorial Director for Lisson Gallery, one of the leading contemporary art galleries since 1967, representing many of the artists most closely associated with "New British Sculpture" since the late 1970s.

Footnotes

1. The exhibition ran from 15 Jan. to 18 March 1981.
2. The exhibition ran from 11 Sept. 1981–24 Jan. 1982.
3. John McEwen, "London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century", *The Burlington Magazine* 124, no. 948 (March 1982): 183.
4. Notable among these were: *British Sculpture Now*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, Switzerland, 1982; *Objects and Figures: New Sculpture in Britain*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1981; *Objects and Sculpture: Richard Deacon, Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Peter Randall-Page*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, 1981; *The Sculpture Show*, Serpentine Gallery and Hayward Gallery, London, 1983.
5. These were Nicholas Pope (with Tim Head) in 1980; Barry Flanagan in 1982; and Tony Cragg in 1988.
6. See, particularly, Lucy Steeds, ed., *Making Art Global (Part 2): "Magiciens de la Terre" 1989* (London: Afterall Books, 2013).

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