

Arte Inglese Oggi, Milan, 1976: Between Formalism and Conceptual Art

Author(s):

Elena Crippa

URL:

<https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/arte-inglese-oggi/>

Citation (Chicago):

Crippa, Elena. "Arte Inglese Oggi, Milan, 1976: Between Formalism and Conceptual Art ." In *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/arte-inglese-oggi/>.

Citation (MLA):

Crippa, Elena. "Arte Inglese Oggi, Milan, 1976: Between Formalism and Conceptual Art ." *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth), Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016, <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/arte-inglese-oggi/>.

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Un Certain Art Anglais, 1979

Author(s):

Lucy Reynolds

URL:

<https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/art-anglais-1979/>

Citation (Chicago):

Reynolds, Lucy. "Un Certain Art Anglais, 1979." In *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/art-anglais-1979/>.

Citation (MLA):

Reynolds, Lucy. "Un Certain Art Anglais, 1979." *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth), Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016, <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/art-anglais-1979/>.

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Arte Inglese Oggi, Milan, 1976: Between Formalism and Conceptual Art

Article by **Elena Crippa**



Abstract

In the 1970s, **Arte Inglese Oggi* *(Palazzo Reale, Milan, 1976) was one of the major exhibitions organized by the British Council in partnership with foreign institutions towards the presentation of British art abroad. Covering the period 1960–76, the selectors aimed to represent contemporary developments while attempting to hold on to the categories of painting and sculpture, the latter divided into sculpture proper and the splinter section “alternative developments”.

The exhibition *Arte Inglese Oggi*—English art today—took place at Palazzo Reale, Milan, from February to May 1976. It was co-organized by the British Council and the municipality of Milan, which set up a joint selection committee formed of Guido Ballo, Richard Cork, Norbert Lynton, Franco Russoli, David Thompson, and Norbert Reid, who acted as president. Guido Ballo was a poet, prominent critic, and organizer of many exhibitions, including those he selected for the Venice Biennale over seven editions between 1956 and 1968. Franco Russoli, then director of the Pinacoteca of Brera, was a passionate supporter of the social role of art and the need to open museums to a wider public.¹ Russoli’s stance may have played a role in the decision to open the exhibition with a room wallpapered with large-scale pictures of contemporary popular British culture, including photographs of the illuminated advertising hoarding in Piccadilly Circus, of the Beatles, and of the artists who were participating in *Arte Inglese Oggi* posing for a group portrait in London’s Trafalgar Square.² This choice was also in line with the original and more propagandistic aim of the British Council: to promote knowledge of British culture, and thus to foster sympathetic appreciation of its foreign policy.³

The list of English representatives on the selection committee highlights the connections between the powerful institutions shaping the contemporary art world of that time. Norman Reid was Director of the Tate Gallery, a member of the Arts Council of Great Britain Art Panel from 1964 to 1974, a member of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Advisory Panel from 1965, and Chairman of the Fine Art Advisory Committee of the British Council between 1968 and 1975. David Thompson was a critic and Director of the ICA. Norbert Lynton was Director of Exhibitions at the Arts Council between 1970 and 1975, before returning to the academic world

as Professor of History of Art at Sussex University. Richard Cork, the youngest of them, was an art critic for the *Evening Standard* and a member of the Arts Council's Art Panel between 1971 and 1974. The Arts Council had, since the immediate postwar years, played a major role in the organization of exhibitions at home, and had recently organized shows at the Hayward Gallery and the Serpentine Gallery in London. Nevertheless, it was the British Council, which was responsible for British art abroad and foreign art in Britain, that was seen by some as more sympathetic to new artistic trends than the Arts Council, in part due to its reliance on independent critics rather than permanent staff.⁴

The seat of different government bodies since the medieval communes, the Palazzo Reale had numerous large rooms that, in enfilade, structured the imposing palace around an internal courtyard. The building, which had been partially destroyed following an English bombing raid in 1943, gained prominence as an exhibition venue in 1953, when Pablo Picasso—building on the material and symbolic history of the palace—chose it for his retrospective exhibition, centred around the display of *Guernica* (1937).⁵ By the time of the opening of *Arte Inglese Oggi*, the venue had received a simple but effective makeover, and its walls had been whitewashed in a fashion that was, by then, *de rigueur*.⁶ The major criteria guiding the configuration of the exhibition was that each artist was to be represented in depth, since the organizers' view was that they would otherwise not be properly appreciated by a public unfamiliar with their works.⁷ As a result, nearly all the artists were given a large room each.

The generous proportions of the building allowed for the participation of well over fifty artists. The works were not displayed chronologically or according to medium, but alternated painting with sculpture and moved from David Hockney to R. B. Kitaj, Anthony Caro, Bridget Riley, "New Generation" sculpture, Richard Hamilton, and so on. Nevertheless, the selection had been planned and the catalogue structured so as to maintain a clear distinction between media, with each selector writing an essay on the medium they worked with, followed by texts and images of the work of each artist, ordered alphabetically. Lynton was in charge of painting, which was by far the largest section, including twenty-nine artists. Thompson worked on sculpture, selecting thirteen artists. Nine artists featured in Cork's "Alternative Developments" category, while separate sections, with dedicated spaces, were given to performance and film, which were arranged by Ted Little and David Curtis respectively.⁸

In terms of the period surveyed, the initial intention to cover the whole postwar stretch was revised, as it appeared too heterogeneous and vast to be addressed in any depth.⁹ Instead, 1960 was chosen as a landmark year from which the survey would begin. In his text for the exhibition catalogue, Lynton justifies the choice not merely as an expedient to narrow down the selection, but on the grounds that 1960 signalled a "move out of painting and sculpture", a testing of their physical parameters and expanding of the materials and processes involved in their making.¹⁰ These included all sorts of works that did not fit within the traditional categories of painting and sculpture, and whose nomenclature, not yet fully established, encompassed "conceptual art, performance art, various forms of linguistic and symbolical art, artists' films and video-tapes", and much more.¹¹ While these types of works mostly fed into the section on "alternative developments", Lynton was flexible in his criteria for selection and included John Latham and Mark Boyle under the rubric of painting—despite seeing them as better aligned with "alternative art"—because Cork had excluded them from his own selection.¹²

By 1976, a number of important exhibitions, from *When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle Bern; Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld; ICA, London, 1969) to *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970) and *Documenta 5* (Kassel, 1972), had not only freely presented

contemporary art making as an activity that had fully broken loose from traditional categories, but had also expanded the range of its exhibits to a realm that seemed to relate to any aspect of human activity. The work of Italian artists such as Giovanni Anselmo, Mario Merz, and Gilberto Zorio, among others, had featured prominently as part of these developments and exhibitions. Between 1967 and 1970, the critic and curator Germano Celant had played a key role in giving visibility to Italian artists under the collective banner of *Arte Povera*, exhibiting their work with that of international artists in *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art* (Galleria Civica d'arte Moderna, Turin, 1970). He too, after having initially discussed *Arte Povera* in political terms as a form of “guerrilla warfare”, ultimately articulated his compatriots’ work in terms more aligned to the dominant international discourse, as inhabiting the new possibilities that had opened up in the diverse spectrum ranging from Minimalism to conceptual art.¹³ In Britain, the exhibition *The New Art*, curated by the Tate Gallery’s Anne Seymour for the Hayward Gallery in 1972, while Norbert Lynton was Director of Exhibitions, elected the post-medium condition as the criteria in the selection of British artists’ work.¹⁴ As Seymour stated in her catalogue contribution, the exhibition included a wide range of work that did not presuppose the categories of painting and sculpture, but involved “written material, philosophical ideas, photographs, film, sound, light, the earth itself, the artists themselves, [and] actual objects”.¹⁵

In this context, *Arte Inglese Oggi* was a strange and polymorphic endeavour. On the one hand, it attempted to maintain a traditional approach to medium specificity; on the other, it stated the demise of such an approach to art making. There are a number of reasons for these internal contradictions. The selection panel was heterogeneous: Reid, its chair, certainly privileged a more traditional approach in the discussion and presentation of art, while Lynton and Cork had a more progressive outlook. The Italian members were also interested in the representation of British sculpture proper—with which the Italian public had become familiar through a number of editions of the Venice Biennale, from Henry Moore in 1948 and Barbara Hepworth in 1950, to the group of sculptors labelled in terms of a “geometry of fear” in 1952.¹⁶ The same contradictions were first and foremost dictated by the very nature of the period covered—sixteen years marked by a rapid and radical transformation in British art—years that included Clement Greenberg’s championing of Anthony Caro’s work as the pinnacle of modern sculpture; the ascendance of British Pop; and the international exposure of a significant group of conceptual artists. If, over this period, painting had gradually come to include a wide range of new forms—collage, construction, the marks of gesture, the imprint of bodies, the insertion of found objects—sculpture seemed to have generated the most diverse tendencies, impossible to harmonize under a single rubric.

The choice to take 1960 as the beginning of the period covered by *Arte Inglese Oggi* legitimized the narrative whereby Anthony Caro’s mythologized trip to New York and his first abstract works of 1960 mark the starting point of a “New British Sculpture”, international in its transatlantic connection with “high modernism” and hence fully allied with medium specificity. This narrative was most clearly articulated in Thompson’s sculpture section, where Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull were the only artists who had been active since the immediate postwar years. The selection was otherwise shaped around sculptors who taught and had been trained at Saint Martin’s School of Art between the mid-1950s and early 1960s, with galleries dedicated to Anthony Caro, Phillip King, William Tucker, and Tim Scott; while their work also featured in a separate section on “New Generation” sculpture, alongside that of David Annesley and Michael Bolus.



Figure 1

Installation view, *Arte Inglese Oggi*, Palazzo Reale, Milan, Feb.–May 1976, showing Barry Flanagan, *4 casb 2 '67, ringl 1 '67, rope (gr 2sp 60) 6 '67*, 1967, gelatin silver print, 18.5 × 24 cm. Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016."

From younger generations, Thompson selected Nigel Hall, Barry Flanagan, Julian Hawkes, Tim Mapston, and Carl Plackman. Thompson conceded that Flanagan's work had a new attitude to the activity of sculpture in terms of process, unstable materials, and temporal configurations rather than finite objects; while Hall, Mapston, and Plackman's work was environmental in scale or related to the study of posture and human behaviour.¹⁷ He also admitted that the 1970s had been defined by the tendency to move away from the categories of painting and sculpture, and that artists' concerns in sculpture overlapped with those enlisted in Cork's section. Nevertheless, Thompson felt that one could continue to speak of sculpture as a cohesive discipline, as many artists still found that the issues proper to its activity continued to yield new expressive possibilities.¹⁸ Thompson's selection bore strong similarities to that of William Tucker for his exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture* at the Hayward Gallery in 1975, replicating the insistence on sculpture's belonging to a continuous tradition defined by its physical properties and materials.¹⁹ The fact that a demonstration had been staged outside the Hayward, protesting that thirty-six men and only four women had been selected by Tucker for his exhibition, did not seem to affect Thompson's nor Cork's selecting process: no women featured in either one's sections.²⁰ Cork's "Alternative Developments" section was there to make a very different statement on the most recent artistic developments. This was certainly something the organizers of *Arte Inglese Oggi* pursued, as Cork had started making a name for himself as a representative of alternative practices to painting and sculpture. In 1974 he selected work for *Beyond Painting and Sculpture: Works Bought for the Arts Council*, which toured to Leeds City Art Gallery, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol; and also for a *Critic's Choice* exhibition at Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, in 1973.²¹ A good number of the artists in Cork's section were second-generation Saint Martin's sculpture students: David Dye, John Hilliard, Gilbert & George, Tim Head, and Richard Long, alongside Keith Arnatt, Art & Language, Victor Burgin, and John Stezaker. Their work in *Arte Inglese Oggi* was primarily photographic and text based. In his catalogue essay, Cork stated that "the abandonment of painting and sculpture *per se* is by no

means the most significant distinguishing characteristic of the new priorities under discussion here.”²² Rather, he went on, an entire generation, in England and abroad, had come to the broader realization that “art does not necessarily have to be channelled either into the media or the critical preconceptions which have for a long time dominated the post-war avant-garde continuum.”²³ Reassessed was the centrality of the relationship between an idea and its material embodiment—a defining characteristic of art, that had been lost in postwar American art and criticism. What is more, Cork identified this shift with artists’ need to realign art with the society they live in and the strategies they develop within it and in response to it.²⁴

Just over a year prior to the opening of *Arte Inglese Oggi*, Cork was still speculating on the conditions for the survival of sculpture, and argued that the discipline was facing a “cross-road situation” between dissolution and redefinition.²⁵ He felt that, if sculpture had to survive the extreme reductive process undergone by Minimalism, and the alteration of its meaning and role—almost beyond recognition—on the part of conceptual artists, there was a need to re-examine its underlying premises and potentials.²⁶ By the beginning of 1976, with *Arte Inglese Oggi*, the relationship between “alternative developments” and sculpture was only brushed over and the demise of medium-specificity a *fait accompli*. In 1979, the art historian Rosalind Krauss took on the task that a few years earlier Cork had called for, but not pursued: the redefinition of sculpture. The starting point of her essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” was that all sculpture originates in the monument; and it proceeded to explore the meaning of sculpture in relation to site specificity in terms of architecture and landscape.²⁷ A different type of analysis may be applied to a development that was reshaping British sculpture and that made a quiet appearance in *Arte Inglese Oggi*.

Tim Mapston’s wooden sculptures, almost like props for the display of the interaction between man and his environment (fig. 2), and Carl Plackman’s installations featuring fish tanks, jars, and basic wooden structures (fig. 3 and fig. 4), are far from being concerned with monumentality and site specificity. Instead, they seem to relate more closely to a tradition that encompasses the domestic and transportable sphere, from votive sculptures and furniture all the way up to Picasso’s Cubist constructions, Kurt Schwitters’s incorporation of objects in his sculpture, Hubert Dalwood’s utensils-sculptures, or Caro’s “table pieces”—which did not feature in *Arte Inglese Oggi* despite the artist’s commitment to the series since 1966. Mapston and Plackman’s works relate to touch more than sight and to one’s physicality on a basic and intimate level. In so doing, they inevitably signal a return to concerns relating to a more social dimension of art. Barry Flanagan’s sand-filled canvases and “rings” of sand poured and carved from within, whilst maintaining a more direct interest in the behaviour of materials and an emphasis on process, also spoke of dislocation and a sort of physical, soft-edge state defined by contact (fig. 4). Concerns about human behaviour and social exchange, grounded in one’s physical experience, were beginning to signal a new type of engagement with sculpture that had a presence in *Arte Inglese Oggi*. Yet the sculptors exploring these concerns could in this context only speak softly, their different premises eclipsed by the highly vocal nature of the two already over-defined titans they were squeezed between—formalist sculpture on the one side, and conceptualism on the other. This was reflected in the reception to the exhibition of Italian critics, who, while being on the whole impressed by the Pop generation of painters (particularly David Hockney), nevertheless discussed the exhibition in terms of the already historicized dichotomous relationship of sculpture proper on the one side, particularly in the well-known abstract work of Caro, King, and Tucker, and “alternative developments” on the other, with Gilbert & George and Art & Language amongst its leading figures.²⁸



Figure 2

Installation view, *Arte Inglese Oggi*, Palazzo Reale, Milan, Feb.–May 1976, showing Tim Mapston, *Sculpture III*, 1974, gelatin silver print, 16.3 × 21.6 cm. Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016.



Figure 3

Installation view, *Arte Inglese Oggi*, Palazzo Reale, Milan, Feb.–May 1976, showing Carl Plackman, *Sisyphus Descends Again*, 1974, gelatin silver print, 20.5 × 13.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016.



Figure 4

Installation view, *Arte Inglese Oggi*, Palazzo Reale, Milan, Feb.–May 1976, showing Carl Plackman art work, gelatin silver print, 18.5 × 24 cm. Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016.

About the author

Elena Crippa is Curator, Modern and Contemporary British Art at Tate, London. Her role focuses on the research, display, exhibition, and acquisition of artworks from the period 1940–80. She has recently organized exhibitions and displays of the work of Frank Auerbach, Bruce McLean, Tracey Emin, and Jo Spence. She conducted her doctorate research working as part of the Tate Research project “Art School Educated” (2009–13), investigating the relationship between new approaches to art teaching and art making as they emerged in the British art school in the 1950s and 1960s. She has recently co-edited and contributed to *Exhibition, Design, Participation: “an Exhibit” 1957 and Related Projects* (Afterall Books, 2016), has published essays on the relationship between sculpture and performance art in the 1960–70s, and on the work of Art & Language, Manon de Boer, and Victor Pasmore.

Footnotes

1. See Franco Russoli, *Il museo nella società: Analisi, proposte, interventi (1952–1977)* (Milan: Feltrinelli Economica, 1981).
2. The exhibition was documented photographically in an unusually extensive way. Photographic documentation was taken at different stages: during the installation, once the

- installation had been completed, and during the private view. See TGA 200317/2/1/184 – TGA 200317/2/1/193, Tate Archive, British Council collection. The photograph of the artists in Trafalgar Square is also published in the exhibition catalogue, *Arte Inglese Oggi, 1960–76*, 2 vols. (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1976), 1: 6–7.
3. This was the aim set out in the 1940–41 Annual Report of the British Council, a few years after its foundation. For a history of the British Council, see Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years* (London: Cape, 1984).
 4. Lynda Morris, “Arte Inglese Oggi”, *Data* 20 (1976): 45.
 5. The exhibition was the occasion of the return of *Guernica* to Europe from the USA after fifteen years. It was the first and only time the painting was shown in the same space as *Massacre in Korea* (1951), and *La Guerre et la Paix* (1952), before their permanent installation in the chapel in Vallauris. See Gijs van Hensbergen, *Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 207.
 6. On the tradition of white walls in art museums, see Christoph Grunenberg, “The Modern Art Museum”, in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 29–31.
 7. See Francesco Ogliari and Gerald Forty’s Foreword to *Arte Inglese Oggi*, 1: 1.
 8. The films were projected as a programme in a dedicated room in Palazzo Reale, while performances took place in the octagon of Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, a few minutes’ walk from the main venue, across the Piazza del Duomo.
 9. Guido Ballo and Franco Russoli, “A Propos of the Exhibition”, in *Arte Inglese Oggi*, 1: 8.
 10. Norbert Lynton, “Painting: Situation and Extensions”, in *Arte Inglese Oggi*, 1: 14.
 11. Lynton, “Painting: Situation and Extensions”, 14.
 12. See Norbert Lynton’s review of Richard Cork’s book, *Michael Craig-Martin* (2006), in *The Art Book* 14, no. 4 (2007): 20–21 (21).
 13. On this transition in Celant’s conceptualization of Arte Povera, see Jacopo Galimberti, “A Third-worldist Art? Germano Celant’s Invention of Arte Povera”, *Art History* 36, no. 2 (April 2013): 418–41.
 14. For a detailed account of this exhibition, see Joy Sleeman, “*The New Art*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1972: New as compromise, or when what happens around the exhibition is as interesting as what happens in the exhibition”, *Sculpture Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012): 63–74.
 15. Anne Seymour, Introduction to *The New Art*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1972), 5.
 16. See Ballo and Russoli, “A Propos of the Exhibition”, 8.
 17. David Thompson, “Sculpture”, in *Arte Inglese Oggi*, 1: 228–29.
 18. Thompson, “Sculpture”, 232.
 19. William Tucker, *The Condition of Sculpture*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1975), 7.
 20. See John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 226. Very few women featured in the exhibition: Rita Donagh and Bridget Riley in the painting section, Annabel Nicolson and Lis Rhodes in the film section, and members of Coum Transmissions, and Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron in the performance programme.
 21. The Arts Council touring exhibition included work by Keith Arnatt, Victor Burgin, David Dye, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert & George, John Hilliard, David Lamelas, Gerald Newman, and John Stezaker. The exhibition at Arthur Tooth & Sons included work by Conrad Atkinson, David Dye, Gilbert & George, John Hilliard, John Latham, Bob Law, Richard Long, Gerald Newman, Nice Style, and John Stezaker.
 22. Richard Cork, “Alternative Developments”, in *Arte Inglese Oggi*, 2: 310.

23. Cork, "Alternative Developments", 311.
24. Cork, "Alternative Developments", 340.
25. Richard Cork, Introduction to *Sculpture Now: Dissolution or Redefinition?*, exh. cat. (London: Royal College of Art, 1974), n.p. The exhibition coincided with the Lethaby Lectures which Richard Cork delivered.
26. Cork, Introduction to *Sculpture Now*.
27. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October* 8 (1979): 30–44.
28. See Giuliano Briganti, "Arrivano dall'Inghilterra il 'pop' e il suo contrario", *La Repubblica*, 11 March 1976; and Lorenza Trucchi, "Arte Inglese Oggi 1960–76", *Momento Sera*, 12 March 1976.

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Imprint

Author	Elena Crippa
Date	18 July 2016
Category	Article
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group)
License	Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/ecrippa-1976
Cite as	Crippa, Elena. “ <i>Arte Inglese Oggi</i> , Milan, 1976: Between Formalism and Conceptual Art .” In <i>British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000</i> (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/arte-inglese-oggi/ .