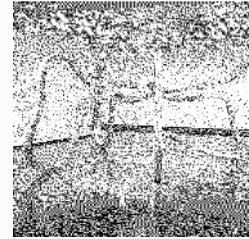


A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965

Article by **Mary Jane Jacob**



Abstract

This essay traces the thought processes behind the composition of artists for the exhibition *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture since 1965* (1987-88). The exhibition introduced American museum audiences to the burgeoning activity in London in the 1980s and which foreshadowed even greater intensity in the following decade.

This essay reflects on the exhibition *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture since 1965* (1987-88), which was organized by the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and traveled to several venues in North America. Revisiting this project offers the opportunity to revisit it offers the chance to test them against what we know today.¹ In retrospect, twenty years might seem a fine gauge on history, while the six artists featured represented a narrow view of the art scene. As curators, we posited that the period 1965–85 in British sculpture had an unprecedented impact on and dialogue with the international scene, even though Henry Moore and his circle of other prominent sculptors working before and after the Second World War had become known beyond England's shores. Instead this show positioned the artists it included in regard to the radically experimental anti-form and Minimalist art that severed ties with the modernist tendencies of the earlier twentieth century. Proclaiming their departure, artists starting in the mid- to late 1960s came to be understood as creating "contemporary" art (with "postmodern" later coming more fully into parlance), and found a new connectedness to artists working at that time in other European centres and in New York.

Initially, in a preliminary proposal, I posited three possible approaches for the exhibition:

1. an historical overview of British sculpture from the 1960s or 1970s to the present;
2. a selective showing of current work by artists who had emerged since the late 1970s, including artists who had studied in but were no longer living in England; and
3. an international exhibition around a narrative tendency carried out through the use of found, everyday objects.²

By mid-1985 I had joined forces with Graham Beal, a forerunner of the wave of prominent British contemporary art curators who would come to work in the United States. His concurrent interests in this subject, I felt, could offer an insider's perspective. Institutionally, this also

seemed a promising partnership, averting redundancy and competition for loans, and putting us on a firmer footing in organizing a national tour, securing fundraising (in the end only the US National Endowment for the Arts was a significant sponsor), and accomplishing other shared tasks (for instance, Chicago oversaw the publication, while San Francisco managed the circulation of works). Our first joint plan was to show between ten and twelve British sculptors from the late 1960s to the present.

We can see now that Britain was defined as the art scene in England, and this happened naturally for several reasons. England predominated in the selection as the seat of power and the location of galleries—commercial and not-for-profit—and of art schools that, respectively, gave exposure and fed the art system, with London as the primary place for research. As to the birthplace of the artists included, Tony Cragg, Richard Long, David Nash, and Bill Woodrow were from England, with Richard Deacon and Barry Flanagan born in Wales (though Nash had set up studio there), while Cragg lived in Wuppertal, then West Germany. A research visit had been made to one artist in Scotland; Northern Ireland was not part of the scope of research. Today a view to include representation of all UK countries would have been part of my consciousness, and would probably have been given priority. In fact, just what constituted Britain had been eroding in the years following 1945, so representation of other places that constituted the British Empire, at that time or previously, was beyond our consideration. It would be a few years before postcolonial discourse and cultural criticism had their full effect on the visual arts in England, with the work of theorists led by bi-national writer and Harvard professor Homi K. Bhabha, whose books in the early 1990s extended the 1978 landmark work *Orientalism* by American Edward Said. Another factor under consideration was England's historicizing impulse: the penchant to tell its own story, to make its history a history of world importance seen through its own eyes, to detail a lineage which, while not royal, had its protagonists nonetheless. As we proceeded with our research, sculptors were consistently discussed as generations, one leading to the other throughout the century. With this in mind, we put forward six artists who, while all born in the 1940s, came of age at somewhat different times in the 1960s or 1970s. This was represented by showing work that spanned from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s: Cragg (1975–86) (fig. 1), Deacon (1981–86) (fig. 2 and fig. 3), Flanagan (1965–84) (fig. 4), Long (1967–86), Nash (1975–86), and Woodrow (1979–86) (fig. 5).



Figure 1

Installation view, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965*, 1987–88, showing, left to right: Tony Cragg, *Postcard Flag (Union Jack)*, 1981, and *Città*, 1986. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago.



Figure 2

Installation view, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965*, 1987–88, showing Richard Deacon, *Listening to Reason*, 1986, laminated wood, 226 × 609 × 579 cm. Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago.



Figure 3

Installation view, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965, 1987–88*, showing, left to right: Richard Deacon, *Turning a Blind Eye No. 2*, 1984–85; *Art for Other People No. 5*, 1982; *Tall Tree in the Ear*, 1983–84; *Out of the House*, 1983. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago.



Figure 4

Installation view, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965, 1987–88*, showing, clockwise from left: Barry Flanagan, *Ubu of Arabia*, 1976; *Vessel (in Memoriam)*, 1981; *Soprano*, 1981; *Leaping Hare on Crescent and Bell*, 1983; *Baby Elephant*, 1984; *Pile 3 '68*, 1968; *pdreeoo*, 1965. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago.



Figure 5

Installation view, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965, 1987–88*, showing, clockwise from left: Bill Woodrow, *Armchair and Washing Machine with Bobo Mask*, 1982; *The Empty Spoon*, 1983; *A Passing Car, A Caring Word*, 1982; *Ship of Fools, Captain's Table*, 1985. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago.

The role of academic institutions in making art history and forming generational networks of artists as a result (which is not so direct or succinct in American discourse) seemed particular to London. Moreover, the revision in art teaching initiated by Anthony Caro at Saint Martin's School of Art was cited as a route by which sculpture students were encouraged to question the use of conventional materials in order to enrich their understanding of three-dimensional object-making. This was a major jumping off point that unified all six sculptors. From Flanagan's burlap and polythene works, to Long's documentation of his walks across countries, to Nash's processes, to the choice of materials as well as process of Cragg, Deacon, and Woodrow—each sculptor was finding their own intersection with daily life, as well as questioning the conditions of spectatorship.

Canvassing London via the galleries led to studio visits—a phenomena that was not the case for young artists in New York, and certainly not in Chicago or Los Angeles at that time. The galleries in London maintained a high profile, absorbing artists fresh out of art school—with the density and competition among the schools bolstering the energy and quality of their output. Galleries, too, kept up the strong representation of sculpture, and grew in international power in succeeding decades. I was wary of the big group show that could read like a scattershot approach—or a menu with too many possibilities to digest—leaving audiences without a true understanding of the artists' intentions and ideas. I did not want this effort to be taken as giving credibility to a scene that could ultimately be promotional for the commercial market or a national initiative. My inclination was to present a few artists in depth, with the hope that by doing so viewers would gain a greater insight into their concerns, forms, and techniques. Then there was also an issue of the scale of sculpture and the modest space of the inaugural venue, the

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where I was chief curator, that had yet to find a more generous home (a new building was opened in 1996). So each artist was represented by between seven to ten works.

Just how much of an historical approach we would ultimately take would become a point of contention with some in London, for whom history was the story. Choosing not to trace a sequence of artistic development based on lineages of figures among a canon of practitioners, we instead sought to explore connections between a small, yet diverse, group of artists. We were cautious not to give in to a wave of enthusiasm for younger British sculptors in the 1980s, or the perpetual urgency to label the current things “new”, believing that proclaiming the innovations of the slightly younger sculptors could be over-emphasized at the expense of the revolutions of those that preceded them by a few years. So by deviating from the accepted dialectical style of art history’s telling of British sculpture, and linking these two otherwise labelled “generations”, we focused on the one hand on their distinct directions, and on the other on their shared continuities. “Quiet” was added to the title to convey that Britain had been “reticent to enter fully into an open international dialogue”, perhaps in part due to its determined sense of national uniqueness and separation from the United States and Europe—an island if not an empire.³ Our position too was that these artists were both part of a British story and part of a wider American and European moment in contemporary art in which conceptual and performance art—that is, the use of process-based actions and the presence of the body—had affected the way that sculptural objects were made by the artist and engaged with by the viewer. Seeking to assert a period in history rather than an evolutionary stance, we wrote this exhibition description to dealers, scholars, and the British Council that had been consulted:

Seen together they indicate shifts of attitude over these decades while also pointing to certain continuities. Certainly other artists could be included in an historical survey and in the course of our research many others were visited and considered. However, all attempts to mold these artists into a single lineage of an “English School” seemed far too simplistic, so in the final analysis we chose to make our main focus the best sculpture to have emerged out of England in the last twenty years. This point of view, which is distinguished from that presented in other recent British sculpture surveys, will be reflected in the structure of the exhibition and catalogue. Designed as a series of six simultaneous one-person exhibitions, a selection of about ten works throughout each artist’s career is being assembled. The accompanying catalogue will take a two-fold approach. First, paralleling the exhibition, it will include monographic essays on each artist, half to be written by Graham Beal and half by me. Secondly, it will place these six artists within their milieu through a major essay written by Charles Harrison on the period of the late 1960s into the 1970s, and one by Lynne Cooke on more recent developments of the 1970s to the present. In the exhibition and catalogue, therefore, we intend to present both the artistic individuality of the artists represented and give a sense of this twenty-year period by showing them together and defining the scene more broadly through the comprehensive essays of the English scholars noted above.⁴

It is relevant that this was the Thatcher era. With staggering unemployment, the economy was on everyone’s minds. We had seen this played out at home in the US with Ronald Reagan’s cuts in federal sponsorship and privatization of what had heretofore been seen as the public services; on both sides of the Atlantic Neoliberalism would continue to take a bite. I followed *A Quiet Revolution* two years later with *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—a show filled with US artists’ concerted efforts to

comment on the times, dominated by the postmodern style of appropriation. One approach to helping the visual arts climb out of economic decline—before the National Lottery's Good Causes funding created bright spots all over the isle, before the reinvention of the Tate under Sir Nicholas Serota, and before anyone heard of the Young British Artists (YBAs)—was provided by the efforts of the British Council to fund the foreign exposition of their artists.

I had seen this before with German museum professionals and Italian critics along with commercial galleries, aiming to show their own and naming and claiming new movements: Neo-Expressionists or *Neue Wilden* and Italian Trans-avantgarde, respectively. But, not coincidentally, these were painting movements, with objects ready for the market and more easily collectable than sculpture. France tried to catch up in the early 1980s, and I was among the first American curators invited by the Ministry of Culture to survey hundreds of studios across Paris and the provinces. But I took my own approach with the 1988 retrospective of the then-forgotten artist Christian Boltanski. At the same time I brought to the US the German sculptor Rebecca Horn (1984) and Arte Povera artists Giuseppe Penone (1984), Jannis Kounellis (1986), and Mario Merz (1989), even straying as far as Poland to introduce Magdalena Abakanowicz (1982) and present Icelander Dieter Roth (1984). In all of these exhibitions sculpture as well as installation art predominated. So it was of interest to look at Britain, an underdog at that moment of European gallery and art-world competition, with research assistance from the British Council.

All of this was going on with an eye for the major European cities of Paris, Cologne, and Milan, as well as London, to regain their collective status as a centre that had been so dominated by New York since the 1950s. To engage an American curator in this process was to make complicit the enemy, but I had come up through the curatorial ranks during the feminist period of change that challenged the status quo. When I began curating, to show women artists was radical—and I did so, over and over. To respect the regional and show so-called local artists was also a mission of mine in Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and also to participate in and further the multicultural movement in the arts in the US. So to take part in a widening of the view of the art world was welcome, even though it seems nearly inconceivable now that Britain or London would lag behind when questions around representation are so much wider today and the art world so much more globalized.

While we kept some names Beal brought to the table, notably David Nash, we eliminated others by virtue of a curatorial truce. Perhaps by that time, or by inclination, it was not possible to go back to an earlier list to expand beyond the six artists we had first agreed upon. The enormous effort and cost involved in touring sculpture may have kept us from increasing the number of artists, especially considering we wanted to show a body of work for each artist included.

Finally, some artists we visited but left out of the exhibition were afterwards remembered. As a result of this exhibition research, I would later work with Boyd Webb in 1988 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in addition to a show that year by Richard Deacon of recent works that included a commissioned temporary public work, *Distance No Object*, on the museum's plaza. In 1991 I would have Ian Hamilton Finlay and Antony Gormley create new site-specific projects for the 1991 exhibition *Places with a Past* in Charleston, South Carolina, and in 1997 I would work with Anish Kapoor at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, later writing on his work *Cloud Gate* in Chicago's Millennium Park, for his 2008 retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

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About the author

Mary Jane Jacob is a curator who has actively worked with artists to expand the practice and public discourse of art as a shared process. As chief curator of the Museums of Contemporary Art in Chicago and Los Angeles, she staged some of the first US shows of American and European artists. Then, shifting her workplace from the museum to the street, she critically engaged the discourse around public space with such landmark site-specific and community based programmes as *Culture in Action* in Chicago, *Conversations at The Castle* during the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, and *Places with a Past* for the Spoleto Festival USA, which catalyzed two decades of community engagement in Charleston, South Carolina. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Jacob launched Sullivan Galleries, located in the famed Louis Sullivan building in Chicago's Loop, in 2008; then in 2016 she established the Institute for Curatorial Research and Practice, which she directs, to further the creative processes undertaken by curators and foster advanced thinking in the field. Artists' relation to audiences and their work within the wider realm of society have been the subject of Jacob's co-edited volumes, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (2004), *Learning Mind: Experience into Art* (2010), *Chicago Makes Modern: How Creative Minds Changed Society* (2013), *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (2010), and the *Chicago Social Practice History Series*.

Footnotes

1. The exhibition was organized by the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. From 1987–88 it toured to Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, and was accompanied by a book of the same name, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).
2. Mary Jane Jacob with Graham Beal, exhibition proposal, dated 1 Feb. 1985, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Archives.
3. Graham Beal and others, *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 8.
4. Preparatory materials for mailing, dated 26 Feb. 1986, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Archives.

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