

BRITISH ART STUDIES

Issue 3 – July 2016 – July 2016

Sight Unseen: Anthony Caro's *Prairie*, 1967

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WORD COUNT: 2,416



Prologue: Out of Sight

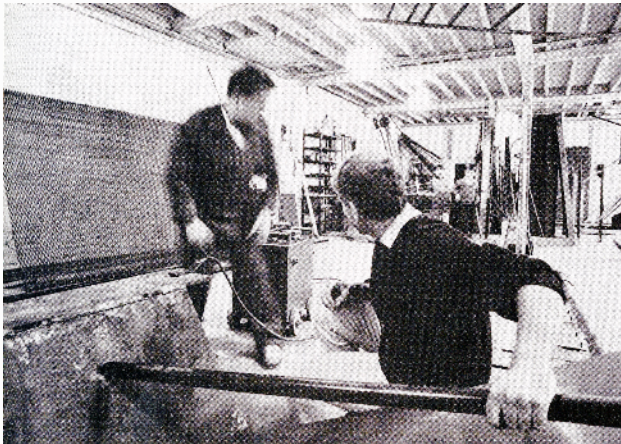


Figure 1

Anthony Caro and assistant Charlie Hendy with Prairie in process at the Loudon Road studio, circa 1966–67. The artist's sons, Tim and Paul Caro, are seen in the background. Digital image courtesy of Barford Sculptures Limited.

Prairie, a modern masterwork of painted steel by Sir Anthony Caro (1924–2013), has crossed the Atlantic no fewer than eight times since its making in London in 1967 (fig. 1). The international life of *Prairie* is extensive, especially considering the serious logistics involved in disassembling, shipping, and installing a sculpture that measures 38 x 229 x 126 inches (96.5 x 582 x 320 cm):

Recent Sculpture, Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967

Anthony Caro, X Bienal de Sao Paulo, 1969

Anthony Caro, Hayward Gallery, London, 1969

Anthony Caro: A Retrospective, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1975

Anthony Caro: A Retrospective, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, MN, 1975

Anthony Caro: A Retrospective, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1975

Transformations in Sculpture, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1985

British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1987

British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement, Royal Academy of Art, London, 1987

Caro a Roma, Trajan Markets, Rome, 1992 (fig. 2)

Anthony Caro, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1995

Anthony Caro, Tate Britain, London, 2005



Figure 2

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in *Caro a Roma*, Trajan Markets, Rome, 1992, painted steel, 96.5 × 582 × 320 cm. Digital image courtesy of Barford Sculptures Limited.

Prairie did not, however, make the trip for the 2015 double down of Caro survey exhibitions jointly organized by The Hepworth Wakefield and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP).¹ Titled *Caro in Yorkshire*, the aim of these complementary exhibitions was to celebrate and commemorate the career of Caro with a showing of notable works such as *Twenty Four Hours* (1960), *Sculpture Seven* (1961), *Month of May* (1963), and *Promenade* (1996), to name a few. Adrian Searle of *The Guardian* called the exhibition “Larger and more comprehensive even than the Tate Britain Caro retrospective of 2005”, and yet *Prairie* was conspicuously missing from this robust reunion.² Also obvious was the fact that an exhibition of Henry Moore’s work held the place of pride in the YSP’s main gallery at the time of this important survey of Caro’s work.³ Instead, Caro’s work could be found dwarfed throughout the YSP’s rolling fields and at the Park’s Longside Gallery, roughly two kilometres out from the YSP Centre. At The Hepworth Wakefield, Caro was deftly inserted within the canon of great British sculptors of the twentieth century as the exhibition there was indirectly framed within the superb permanent collection. The myopic selection of works for the exhibitions held in Yorkshire in 2015, suggests that the best of Caro from the point of view of the UK is different than the best of Caro from an American point of view. Caro in the UK is a crescendo after the major movement of Moore. Caro in America struck an all-new chord. In 2007, Caro recalled his close American connections, and the freedom of disconnection abroad:

*When I went to America the excitement in New York was in painting not in sculpture. When I went to Bennington, my friends and neighbours were painters Olitski and Noland. At weekends, Noland would have people to stay, critics, and painters. I cannot think of a single sculptor. For me it was very interesting. I could almost divorce myself from the history of sculpture.*⁴

His relations with David Smith are curiously missing in the above statement. This erasure implies that his “almost divorce” from the history of sculpture may not have been just a matter of new contexts (geographic and social) but actually a conscious decision of the artist who revelled in the disassociation from notions of patrimony in sculpture.

Was *Prairie* not included in the survey mounted by YSP and The Hepworth Wakefield because, to the British eye, it appears to be an outlier? Caro felt that *Prairie* was his most successfully abstract sculpture ever.⁵ Referring to nothing outside of itself, *Prairie* does not serve to

demonstrate the patrimony of British sculpture. Even the title feels American, although it is a misnomer: not, in fact, referring to low-lying fields of golden crops, but actually pointing to the commercial name for the paint colour “Prairie Gold” that the artist had intended to use (though ultimately did not) after first painting the sculpture blue (fig. 3).⁶



Figure 3

An advertisement for Jeep, painted in Prairie Gold, 1966. Digital image courtesy of www.paintref.com.

While a relatively limited number of people had the opportunity to see *Prairie*'s inaugural display in 1967 at Kasmin Gallery in London, a wide American audience for *Prairie* was cultivated just months later, in 1968, by the championing words of Michael Fried that landed the sculpture on the cover of *Artforum* (fig. 4).



Figure 4

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, *Prairie* on the cover of *Artforum* (Feb. 1968), with the background wall evidently erased through doctoring of the original photograph (compare to photograph in fig. 5). While the choice to white-out the background may have been done for cover design purposes alone, it also acts to lend even more levity to the sculpture and unity with the ground. Digital image courtesy of Artforum / Lewis Cabot, USA / Kasmin Gallery / Barford Sculptures Limited.



Figure 5

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967. Digital image courtesy of Artforum / Lewis Cabot, USA / Kasmin Gallery / Barford Sculptures Limited.

The Eye's Mind: *Prairie* and Michael Fried

The American art critic and art historian Michael Fried first met Caro in 1961 in Hampstead, London.⁷ There, in the artist's courtyard, Fried had an epiphany of sorts, claiming to have seen two of the most groundbreaking abstract sculptures he had ever seen: *Midday* (1960) and *Sculpture Seven* (1961).⁸ Six years later, Fried would again be impressed by the progressive abstraction of two more Caro sculptures. After seeing Caro's *Deep Body Blue* (1967) and *Prairie* at Kasmin Gallery, Fried wrote a compelling (and now oft-cited) review titled "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro" for *Artforum*'s February 1968 issue (figs. 6–10).⁹ Both sculptures were displayed in one room, but *Prairie* caught Fried's eye most of all:

*More explicitly than any previous sculpture, Prairie compels us to believe what we see rather than what we know, to accept the witness of the senses against the constructions of the mind.*¹⁰

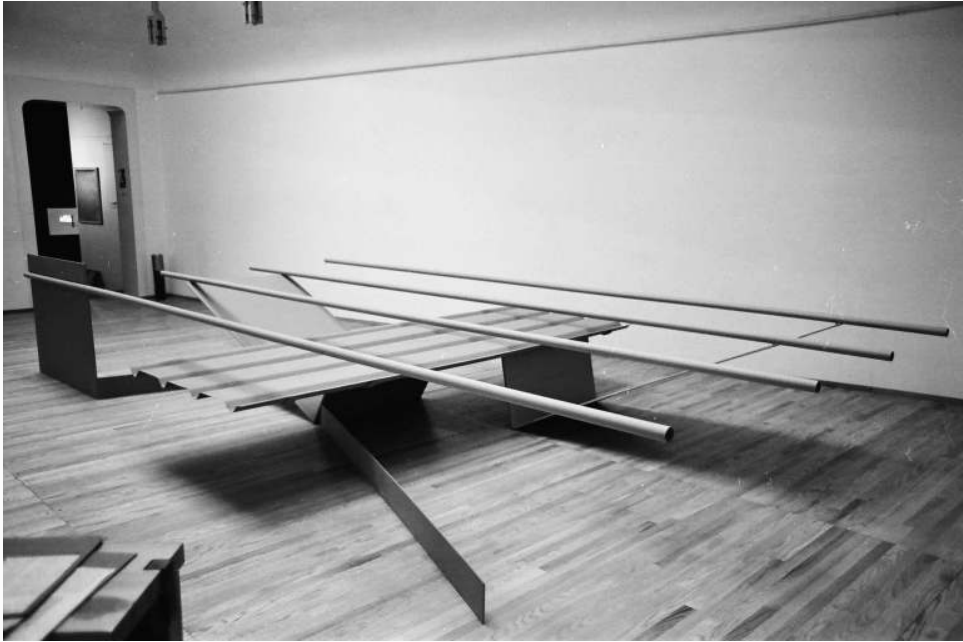


Figure 6

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967 (the sculpture's first ever exhibition). Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.



Figure 7

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967. Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.



Figure 8

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967. Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.

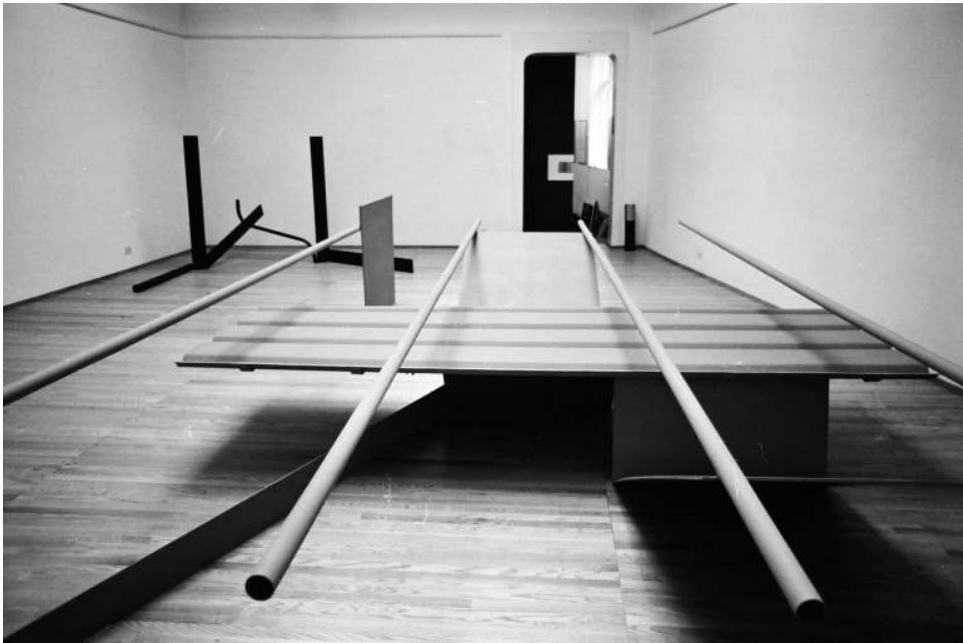


Figure 9

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, in the foreground, and *Deep Body Blue*, 1967, in the background, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967. Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.



Figure 10

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967. Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.

Fried's review put *Prairie* on the map in America, bolstered by the fact that it made the cover of *Artforum*, making it the top model for abstract sculpture in the US, despite its English birth. Following the popular review in *Artforum*, Caro wrote two letters to Fried (29 February and 24 March 1968):

*I am delighted that the sculptures meant so much to you—your description of Prairie is the first accurate one . . . except that, believe it or not—thanks to Charlie (Hendy)!—the poles are steel . . . The way you saw just exactly what the upright rectangle that supported the pole in Prairie was doing, and it gives me a real thrill of pleasure to have my work so accurately grasped.*¹¹

Fried's review had not pointed to the lineage of sculpture that came before *Prairie*. Instead, he pointed to philosophy and even briefly to architecture when describing the 1967 work by Caro. Fried celebrated *Prairie*'s "extraordinary marriage of illusion and structural obviousness", feeling no need to add significance to the work by weaving it within a history of sculpture and influences.¹² Fried cast a purely American eye (or a purifying American eye) upon *Prairie* that allowed for a new generation of painters and sculptors to accept it as their own new way forward. It is fitting that a steel sculpture praised for its defiance of gravity would grant a certain amount of levity to young sculptors who were encouraged to feel unburdened by the history of building and shaping mass in their sculptures.



Figure 11

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed in the *Recent Sculpture* exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, London, 1967.
Digital image courtesy of John Kasmin / Barford Sculptures Limited.

In the spring of 1967, Caro would publicly protest against the Tate's proposal to permanently display (by facilitation of public funds) a large gift of Henry Moore's work. Along with about forty other British artists, Caro signed an open letter to the *Times* to declare, among other firm points, that:

*Whoever is picked out for this exceptional place will necessarily seem to represent the triumph of modern art in our society. The radical nature of art in the twentieth century is inconsistent with the notion of an heroic and monumental role for the artist and any attempt to predetermine greatness for an individual in a publicly financed form of permanent enshrinement is a move we as artists repudiate.*¹³

Ultimately, Moore made a major gift of original plasters to the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, which built a permanent gallery with Moore's input on the architecture of the purpose-built space.

***Prairie* in the USA**

Caro had expressed his enthusiasm for *Prairie* to Lewis Cabot, a Boston-based connoisseur of Modernist art who would become a longtime supporter of Caro.¹⁴ Remaining in the United States, Cabot purchased *Prairie* sight unseen from its 1967 London debut at Kasmin Gallery.¹⁵ Cabot made the purchase with the understanding that he was building a careful repository of works by Caro, and waited several years before shipping *Prairie* to his own storage in the US. Before taking physical possession of the sculpture, Cabot lent *Prairie* to important exhibitions, including the X Bienal de Sao Paulo and London's Hayward Gallery in 1969.

By 1975, when *Prairie* was shown in the artist's first American retrospective, which toured widely,¹⁶ *Prairie* had changed hands to the collection of Lois and Georges de Menil, who were

also based in the USA.¹⁷ In 1977, the de Menils placed *Prairie* on long-term loan with the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, DC, where it resides today (figs. 12, 15, 16) The accession file on the sculpture and its history in the custody of the NGA is chock-full of firm letters from the de Menils, who consistently, and successfully, argue for the near-constant public display of *Prairie* at the gallery.¹⁸ While in the custody of the NGA, *Prairie* has continued to be shown far and wide, including Rome in 1992, Tokyo in 1995, and back to its birthplace in London, for Tate Britain's Caro retrospective in 2005. It is notable that *Prairie* was included in Tate's Caro retrospective but not in the most recent in-depth survey in Yorkshire. Posthumous large-scale exhibitions are, of course, quite a different thing from a major show during an artist's lifetime—when curators and museums must respect what the artist points to as being important. After death, alternate stories are much easier to articulate.



Figure 12

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2016. Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil. In the background: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Donna che indica* (Woman who points), silkscreen print on polished stainless steel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Henry Moore, *Three Motives Against Wall, Number 1*, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Maya Lin, *Latitude New York City*, 2013, Vermont Darby marble, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*, 1914, marble, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Digital image courtesy of the author.

After *Prairie*: Kenneth Noland and *Cadence*

Prairie caught the eye of the American painter Kenneth Noland (1924–2010). His admiration of *Prairie* evolved into asking Caro to make something like *Prairie* for him— and *Cadence* (1968/72) was born (fig. 13).¹⁹



Figure 13

Anthony Caro, *Cadence*, in process (circa 1968) in the courtyard of Anthony Caro's studio in Hampstead, London. This photograph has been published previously but the sculpture in view has often been misidentified as *Prairie*. Digital image courtesy of Barford Sculptures Limited.

If not looking too hard, *Cadence* might be understood as an icon, serving to harken back thoughts of *Prairie*, yet held in equal reverie by onlookers. In 1967, Rosalind Krauss issued some critical pushback that could have served as a preemptive strike to anyone claiming to see *Cadence* as pale by comparison:

*It has become a reflex action, a kind of literary tic, of current formalist art writing to consider a given work or a given juncture in an artist's style only from the point of view of a progression.*²⁰

Caro was close to the best formalist writers but certainly did not think twice about looking back in his work. Fried called *Prairie* “a touchstone for future sculpture”, lending it a superlative power that might have made other artists freeze up with the pressure of having reached a high watermark.²¹ Caro recalled:

*I hoped at the time I made [Prairie] that I would be able to go even more abstract. But in the end I wanted to put something of the real world in my sculptures. Indeed, since Prairie, all my sculptures have a part that is directly linked to the world around.*²²

The link that *Cadence* made to the world was to point back at *Prairie*. By definition, “cadence” may refer to a slight change or inflection in one’s voice, or expression. *Cadence* is a variation on *Prairie*. It was also made with Noland in mind (fig. 14). *Cadence* remained in Noland’s possession for the rest of his life and now resides in a private collection in Canada.



Figure 14

Anthony Caro, *Cadence*, 1968–72, and Kenneth Noland, Stripe Paintings, from left to right: *Untitled*, circa 1967, *Via Noon*, 1968, *Untitled*, 1967, *Via Imbound*, 1969, displayed by Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Art Basel, Miami Beach, 2010. Digital image courtesy of Car Pelleteri / Paintings: © the Estate of Kenneth Noland / Sculpture: © the Estate of Anthony Caro.

The View

As addressed at the outset of this article, the exhibition *Caro in Yorkshire*, shared between the YSP and The Hepworth Wakefield in 2015, nestled the artist firmly within a British context. In the midst of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, *Prairie* holds court with a variety of masterful works of art from around the world (fig. 15). In the context of the NGA, *Prairie* is seen as a triumphant Modernist sculpture—displayed without narrative, but simply in conversation with other select works of art. If it were displayed at the National Gallery, London, would it be framed as a chapter within a wider history of sculpture?

Reviewing the photographs throughout this essay, it is apparent that *Prairie* looks different from every angle. The viewer has a similar experience in “walking” this sculpture (fig. 16). Round and round, and round again, *Prairie* takes up one’s entire field of vision at one moment and then effortlessly slips away with virtually no sense of mass from another view. For now, photographs will have to suffice, as *Prairie* has just come off display at the NGA. A “Caro in America” show may be due, or even overdue, lest *Prairie* remains sight unseen.



Figure 15

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2016. Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil. In the background: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Donna che indica* (Woman who points), silkscreen print on polished stainless steel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Digital image courtesy of the author.



Figure 16

Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, 1967, installed at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2016. Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil. In the background: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Donna che indica* (Woman who points), silkscreen print on polished stainless steel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Digital image courtesy of the author.

Acknowledgements

This essay would not have been possible without the generous support of Barford Sculptures Limited (including insights from Olivia Bax), John Kasmin, and Harry Cooper with the National Gallery of Art, who all generously approved or provided images. For their insights as dedicated patrons of the artist, I would like to sincerely thank Lewis Cabot, David Mirvish, and Lois and Georges de Menil. I would also like to thank the artist's son, Paul Caro. A debt of gratitude is also due to the subject of my essay, Anthony Caro, who had always accepted interviews with me and was truly a kind and generous man.

About the author

Dr Stanners completed her PhD in art history at the University of Toronto (2009), as well as a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of British Columbia (2009–11). Her dissertation, *Going British and Being Modern in the Visual Art Systems of Canada, 1906–76*, focused on the impact of British authority on the founding collections and exhibition practices of museums across Canada. She has published extensively on the topic of Henry Moore and Canada, as well as Color

Field art, and co-curated the major Jack Bush retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada (Nov. 2014—Feb. 2015) with their Director and CEO, Marc Mayer, which toured to the Art Gallery of Alberta (May—Aug. 2015). Dr Stanners is the author of the forthcoming *Jack Bush Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, and regularly delivers talks on her research and experience in compiling a major catalogue raisonné. She is currently Director, Curatorial & Collections, at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

Footnotes

1. *Caro in Yorkshire*, The Hepworth Wakefield/ Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 18 July–1 Nov. 2015.
2. Adrian Searle, “Anthony Caro in Yorkshire review—Sculpture that can take your breath away”, *The Guardian*, 16 July 2015.
3. *Henry Moore: Back to a Land*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 7 March–6 Sept. 2015.
4. Anthony Caro in interview with Patrick Le Nouène, Dec. 2007, Anthony Caro Association of Museum Curators in the Nord Pas-de Calais Region (2008), 30, quoted in *Caro in Yorkshire*, exh. cat. (Yorkshire Sculpture Park/ The Hepworth Wakefield, 2015), 23.
5. Anthony Caro, *Caro*, ed. Amanda Renshaw (New York: Phaidon, 2014), 168.
6. Caro, *Caro*, ed. Renshaw, 170.
7. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
8. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*.
9. Michael Fried, “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro”, *Artforum* 6, no. 6 (Feb. 1968): 24–25.
10. Fried, “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro”, 25.
11. Excerpts provided to author by Barford Sculptures Limited, 20 Feb. 2016.
12. Fried, “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro”, 24–25.
13. Open letter from Craigie Aitchison and others, “Henry Moore’s Gift”, *Times*, 26 May 1967, 11.
14. Author in conversation with Lewis Cabot, 11 Jan. 2016.
15. Author in conversation with Cabot, 11 Jan. 2016.
16. The exhibition *Anthony Caro: A Retrospective* was shown at Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1975, before touring to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
17. Lewis Cabot recalls selling *Prairie* around 1973 or 1974 at the time of his divorce. Author in conversation with Cabot, 11 Jan. 2016.
18. *Prairie* was just recently taken off public display at the NGA in May 2016.
19. Author in conversation with Lewis Cabot, 11 Jan. 2016; and author in conversation with David Mirvish, 17 June 2016.
20. Rosalind Krauss, “On Anthony Caro’s Latest Work”, *Art International* 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1967): 26–29.
21. Fried, “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro”, 25.
22. Caro, *Caro*, ed. Renshaw, 168.

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— — —. “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro.” *Artforum* 6, no. 6 (Feb. 1968): 24–25.

Krauss, Rosalind. “On Anthony Caro’s Latest Work.” *Art International* 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1967): 26–29.

Imprint

Author	Sarah Stanners
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/sstanners
Cite as	Stanners, Sarah. “Sight Unseen: Anthony Caro’s <i>Prairie</i> , 1967.” 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/car0-prairie/ .