

Expanding the Field: How the “New Sculpture” put British Art on the Map in the 1980s

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Sensational Cities

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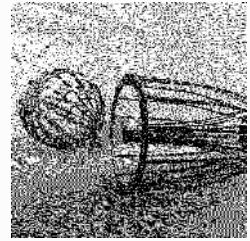
Curley, John J. “Sensational Cities.” *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth), Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016, <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/sensational-cities/>.

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Expanding the Field: How the “New Sculpture” put British Art on the Map in the 1980s

Article by **Nick Baker**



Abstract

This paper shows that sculptors attracted much of the attention that was paid to emerging British artists during the 1980s. The group of young artists represented by the Lisson Gallery and collectively referred to at the time as the “New British Sculptors” were particularly successful in gaining coverage.

Introduction

In 1978, John Kasmin, a leading London dealer in contemporary art, told an interviewer that “most of the serious European collectors, like Mr [Peter] Ludwig for instance, go to New York to buy pictures. I do not think he has ever been to London.”¹ In the same year, the British art critic Richard Cork complained of “Britain, where an innate parochialism in matters of art is scarcely helped by a complete dearth of large international surveys.”² The London-based magazine *Studio International* that Cork edited had recently ceased publication temporarily: its co-publisher explained that “This recognises that magazines such as *Studio* can only survive if there is a viable market for contemporary art, which regrettably, there is not really today in the UK.”³ Ten years later, London-based art student Damien Hirst and his friends mounted the exhibition *Freeze* that is widely seen as the beginning of the international success of the so-called “Young British Artists” or YBAs. Charles Saatchi, who was by this time already recognized internationally as a leading collector of contemporary art, bought work from this show.⁴ Hence it would appear that within a decade Britain, and in particular London, had moved on from being a backwater that leading collectors did not even bother to visit, and was poised to become a vibrant hub of art making and art collecting. Data concerning the coverage given to emerging British artists by art journals during the late 1970s and 1980s reveals the considerable attention paid during this period to sculptors, and in particular to a group referred to at the time as “New British Sculptors”. They also indicate the importance of exposure overseas, both in exhibitions and journals, to the establishment of these artists’ reputations.

The Sample

The principal state-funded collections of contemporary art in Britain are (and have been for over thirty years) those of the Tate Gallery (now Tate), the Arts Council, and the British Council. Between 1975 and 1990, some three-dozen artists had work acquired for the first time by all three of these collections. I have taken these to represent a good approximation of those artists whose reputation became established in Britain during this period. The thirty-six artists, including one pair of individuals who worked as a team, are listed below. Twenty of them worked primarily as sculptors, indicated by the suffix “(s)”. Another thirteen made work that involved painting or drawing, indicated by “(p)”, while two used photography as their primary medium — “(ph)” — and one produced texts and documentary material — “(t)”. It should also be noted that only nine of these thirty-seven individuals were female.

Roger Ackling (s); Edward Allington (s); Conrad Atkinson (t); Glen Baxter (p); Boyd & Evans: Fionnuala Boyd and Leslie Evans (p); Steven Campbell (p); Helen Chadwick (s); Marc Camille Chaimowicz (s); Stephen Cox (s); Tony Cragg (s); Richard Deacon (s); Norman Dilworth (s); Maggi Hambling (p); Tim Head (s); Susan Hiller (s); Shirazeh Houshiary (s); Peter Howson (p); Anish Kapoor (s); Christopher Le Brun (p); Leonard McComb (p); Stephen McKenna (p); Lisa Milroy (p); Dhruva Mistry (s); David Nash (s); Paul Neagu (s); Julian Opie (s); Roger Palmer (ph); Nicholas Pope (s); Paula Rego (p); Trevor Sutton (p); Boyd Webb (ph); Richard Wentworth (s); Kate Whiteford (p); Alison Wilding (s); Adrian Wiszniewski (p); Bill Woodrow (s).

Journal Coverage

Although coverage in art journals represents only one element in the reputational success which an artist can achieve, it is likely to be an indication of other forms of exposure, as exhibitions in both public and commercial venues are often the trigger for press coverage. There are several independent sources of information about references to individual artists in art journals and other relevant publications during this period. For this exercise I cross-referenced *ARTBibliographies Modern*, *Bibliography of the History of Art*, and *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*.

The journals covered by these sources were primarily published in Britain, Western Europe and the USA, reflecting both the international nature of the contemporary art world in the late twentieth century and its predominant bias towards the so-called “developed economies”. In order to see how far the British artists’ reputations were built in different parts of the world, I have categorized the references to sample artists according to whether they occurred in journals published in Britain; the USA; Europe (including the Republic of Ireland); or “Other”, consisting mainly of Canadian and Australasian journals, with occasional references from Latin America. This last category represented less than 5 percent of the total references over the period, and has not been shown on the graph below. The proportion of references to have come from each region may be, at least in part, a function of the regional biases of the sources used. The figures should not therefore be taken as an authoritative indication of how much attention the sample gained in one part of the world compared to another in any one year. They can, however, be used as an indication of trends over time, and this is summarized in graph form below, using three-year rolling periods to smooth out anomalies.

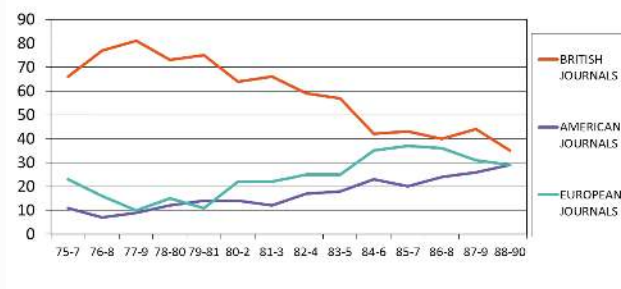


Figure 1

Proportion of Mentions of Sample Artists by Region of Journal Publication.

This suggests that the balance between British, American, and European journals shifted significantly during this period. The proportion of all the mentions of our sample provided by British-based journals almost halved from 66 percent in the late 1970s (when there were relatively few references in total) to 35 percent at the end of the 1980s (by which time the total number of mentions each year had more than doubled). The proportion of coverage in American journals increased steadily throughout the entire period from around one-sixth to almost one-third. European journals also accounted for about one-sixth of references at the start of the period; this rose to one-third or more by the mid-1980s, then levelled. This indicates that, for this particular sample at least, British art began to attract more attention overseas during this period. The number of mentions received by individual artists in the sample varied considerably, as indicated by the diagram below.

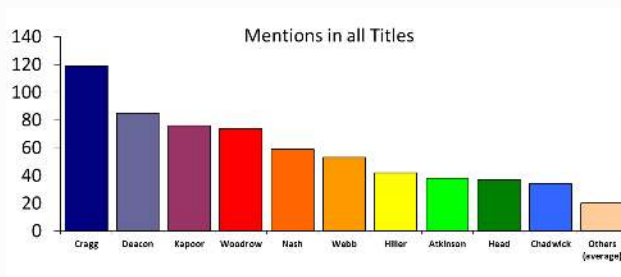


Figure 2

, Coverage Received by Most Reported Artists,.

It is striking that Susan Hiller and Helen Chadwick are the only two female artists to appear in this “Top Ten” and neither of them were amongst the top five. The preponderance of sculptors among the most reported “new” British artists is also remarkable. None of the ten most covered artists were painters, with Boyd Webb and Conrad Atkinson the only ones whose practice was not primarily sculptural. In total, the twenty sculptors accounted for 77 percent of the total press coverage given to all of the thirty-six artists in the sample.

The diagram below shows the same artists in the same sequence, but in this case the height of the bars indicates the proportion of the coverage that each received from British as opposed to overseas journals.

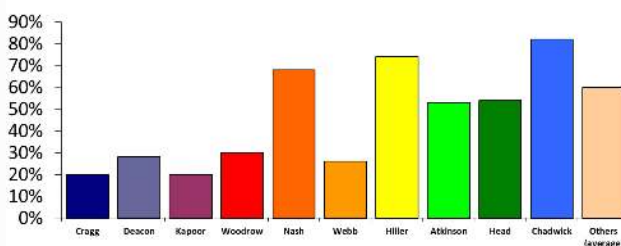


Figure 3

Proportion of Coverage Received from British Journals.

Less than half of the coverage devoted to Cragg, Deacon, Kapoor, Woodrow, and Webb was in journals published in Great Britain. This was not the case with any of the other top ten artists.

The Role of the Lisson Gallery

Some of the artists in the sample were not represented by any commercial gallery, whilst others changed gallery during the period. However, most of those who received the greatest media coverage stayed with the same commercial gallery throughout. The Lisson Gallery in particular was associated with the highest-profile artists in the sample, all of whom were sculptors. It represented Cragg, Woodrow, Deacon, and Kapoor—the four artists who received most press attention for the period overall. Apart from these the Lisson also represented three other artists who ranked in the top half of the sample for press coverage; these were Opie, Allington, and Wentworth. Houshiary was also represented by the Lisson, and if Ackling, who left the gallery in 1984, and Stephen Cox who did not exhibit there after 1981, are included, there were in total ten “Lisson artists” (all of whom worked primarily as sculptors) in the sample. Even if references to

Cox after 1981 and to Ackling after 1984 are excluded, Lisson Gallery artists accounted for 473 press references, or 41 percent of the total for the sample. No other gallery came anywhere near this total of coverage, or represented so many of the artists in the sample.

The name that was most commonly used to denote these artists and some of their contemporaries was “New British Sculptors”. On occasions their identity was linked to that of their London gallery, as when the critic Waldemar Januszczak commented with regard to Richard Deacon, that “Exhibition organisers confronted with his work usually place him among the so-called Object Sculptors or Lisson Boys, Woodrow, Cragg, Vilmouth etc.”⁵

The historic importance of sculpture within British art, and of Britain within the “world” of sculpture, was widely discussed at the time. In an interview published in 1985, Nicholas Logsdail, the proprietor of the Lisson Gallery, argued that his artists should be viewed within a specifically British tradition: “There has been a continuity, a development in sculpture, a progression from one thing to another.”⁶

In 1991 the critic Paul Overy wrote about the political and economic background to the promotion of sculpture by British cultural institutions since the Second World War.⁷ Overy’s article was prompted by the recent success of “New British Sculptors” including Cragg, Deacon, Woodrow, and, in particular, Kapoor, who had represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1990. Overy contextualized this within a narrative of how the British state had used sculpture as a symbol of national cultural vitality since 1945.

Exposure for the Lisson’s group of “New British Sculptors” in public exhibitions overseas followed soon after the exhibition *Objects and Sculpture* at the ICA and the Arnolfini Gallery in 1981 (London and Bristol respectively) had included work by Allington, Deacon, Kapoor, and Woodrow.⁸ *Englische Plastik Heute* (English Sculpture Now) took place in 1982 at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, with support from the British Council. It featured just five artists: Cragg, Deacon, Kapoor, Woodrow, and Stephen Cox. Ten young British artists were included in the “Aperto” section of that year’s Venice Biennale. These included four of the Lisson’s “New British Sculptors”—Kate Blacker, Houshiary, Kapoor, and Woodrow—alongside two other artists represented by the Gallery (Stephen Cox and Stephen Willats). Kapoor and Woodrow represented Britain at the 1982 Paris *Biennale des Jeunes Artistes*, while Cragg and Jean Luc Vilmouth featured in *Documenta 7* at Kassel in the same year.

The British Council also supported the exhibition *La Trottola di Sirio* at the Centro d’Arte Contemporanea in Syracuse in Sicily in 1983. This featured work by Allington, Cragg, Kapoor, and Woodrow. Cragg, Deacon, Kapoor, and Woodrow were among the artists whose work was on show in *Transformations: New Sculpture from Britain*, Britain’s contribution to the Sao Paulo Biennale in the same year, which subsequently travelled to Mexico and Portugal. These four were also included in *An International Survey of Recent Paintings and Sculpture* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984. In 1985 the British Council collaborated with the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney to mount *The British Show*. Twenty-four “non-temporal” artists were shown, including Cragg, Deacon, Kapoor, Opie, and Woodrow, and two other sculptors represented by the Lisson Gallery: Houshiary and Wentworth.

Across the period 1975 to 1990, the ten Lisson Gallery sculptors accounted for 64 percent of the total coverage of all the sample artists in European and American journals, compared to just 23 percent of that in British journals. This seems to bear out the comment made in 1985 by the critic Sarah Kent: “The Lisson Sculptors have thrived . . . because Nicholas Logsdail has persistently promoted them abroad.”⁹

Conclusions

The success of the “New British Sculptors” during the 1980s in attracting attention from art journals is an episode in art history that can be contextualized within a number of wider narratives. One represents the theme of this issue of *British Art Studies* itself; the succession of British-based sculptors who achieved international recognition during the twentieth century. This was much discussed at the time, and with hindsight the “apostolic succession” from Moore and Hepworth to Caro and beyond can now be extended to include Hirst and his YBA contemporaries.

Another context more specific to the period 1975–90 was the reaction against the Greenbergian, New York-centred, painting-focused hegemony that had dominated curatorial and critical discourse during the 1950s. Linked to this are the ways in which the legacy of conceptual art began to reshape the attitudes, behaviours, and relationships that constitute the art world as a whole. Concern with the institutional framing of artworks, and not just with the object itself and its materials, involved a parallel shift in the role of the artist from small-scale craft manufacturer to value-added service provider.¹⁰ Within this context, young British artists including the “New British Sculptors” began to question the idea that professionalism had nothing to do with selling or even exhibiting their work, and became more proactive and cooperative in their attitude toward commercial galleries.

The “New British Sculptors” were eager to work with the Lisson Gallery partly because of its involvement with the conceptual art network established in Europe by Konrad Fischer.¹¹ During the 1970s this had provided an audience (if not a market) for pioneering British conceptual artists like Art & Language, Gilbert & George, Richard Long, and Bruce McLean. They in turn inspired and were to some extent role models for the young artists whose reputations became established by the Lisson Gallery in the 1980s. Cultural and political pressures had combined in the late 1970s and early 1980s to restrict the supplies of state-funded revenue for artists in Britain, whether this came from teaching in art schools, grants and subsidies from the Arts Council, or the “dole”. The “New British Sculptors” led the way in exploring new career opportunities for artists that involved working constructively with art dealers, and actively pursuing opportunities to show their work overseas."

About the author

Nick Baker has worked as a marketing strategist since 1978. In 2015 he completed a PhD at the Open University, “A Market of Reputations: The British Art-World 1975–1990 and the Marketing of the ‘New British Sculpture’”. He has given papers on topics based on his research at Tate, the Henry Moore Institute, and the Association of Art Historians Conference, as well as contributing to *Sculpture Journal* and the *Oxford Art Journal*.

Footnotes

1. Lynda Morris, “Kasmin on ‘K’”, *Art Monthly* 15 (March 1978): 9. The themes and issues discussed in this article are explored in greater detail in Nick Baker, “A Market of Reputations” (unpublished doctoral thesis, Milton Keynes, The Open University, 2015).
2. Richard Cork, “What does *Documenta* Document?”, *Studio International* 194, no. 991 (1978): 37.

3. D. Thomas Bergen, quoted in *Art Aktuell* (Jan. 1978): 696.
4. *Freeze* exhibition was held in Surrey Docks, London, 6 Aug. to 29 Sept. 1988.
5. Waldemar Januszczak, "The Church of the New Art", *Flash Art* 120 (Jan. 1985): 29.
Januszczak's use of the term "boys" was somewhat inaccurate given that Kate Blacker and Shirazeh Houshiary were also "Object Sculptors" represented by the Lisson Gallery.
6. Simon Vaughan Winter, "Interview with Nicholas Logsdail", *Artscribe* 41 (1985): 35.
7. Paul Overy, "Lions and Unicorns: The Britishness of Postwar British Sculpture", *Art in America* 79, no. 9 (1991): 105–10, 153–55.
8. The exhibition also included works by Peter Randall-Page, Margaret Organ and Antony Gormley (who were not represented by the Lisson Gallery) as well as the work of Jean Luc Vilmoth, a French artist based in London who was on the Lisson's roster.
9. "Likely Prospects: A British Art Questionnaire", *Artscribe* 41 (1985): 31. This feature simply reported the responses of a cross-section of British artists, dealers, critics, and curators to a short questionnaire about the place of British art within the international art world.
10. This theme has been discussed in relation to American artists of the 1960s and 1970s by Caroline A. Jones in her book *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
11. Fischer's role in building up a network of European galleries sympathetic to conceptual art during the 1970s is documented in Sophie Richards, *Unconcealed, The International Network of Conceptual Artists, 1967–77: Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections* (London: Ridinghouse, 2009). However, during the 1980s Fischer was involved with the Anthony D'Offay Gallery in London, which represented prominent sculptors such as Carl Andre and Richard Long, but was also the principal British showcase for Neo-Expressionist painters including Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Francesco Clemente, David Salle, Sigmar Polke, and Sandro Chia.

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