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A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965

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The British Show in Australia, 1985

Article by **Anthony Bond**



Abstract

In 1984–85, *The British Show*, an exhibition largely made up of New British Sculpture, was curated for Australia and New Zealand. This essay discusses the context and effects of the exhibition on art in Australia. It also seeks to define the sources of originality and innovation of the artists included.

In 1983/84 William Wright, Assistant Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, and myself, at that time Assistant Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth, agreed that a major exhibition of British art was well overdue.

The timing for an exhibition seemed perfect, as there was a wave of new conceptual and Postminimal sculpture emerging after several years of expressive figural painting that had dominated the market following the exhibitions *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy, London, in 1981, and *Zeitgeist* at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, in 1982. Many of the most interesting new sculptors had a background in conceptual practice; some of them were associated with Saint Martin's College of Art. The Lisson Gallery showed a number of these alongside an older generation such as Stephen Willats, Bob Law, and Richard Long, who we also wanted to include. While the exhibition *The British Show* is largely remembered for the new sculpture, we also decided to include sound and performance works that had fallen within the scope of sculpture departments in art schools. The immediate critical and public success of the new sculpture may have been due in part to the return to figuration and/or narrative, but unlike *A New Spirit in Painting*, it was not based on self-expression or quotation but took a conceptual approach, informed by the structures and constraints of Minimalism mediated by the powerful language of things that surround us in everyday life, in the wake of Marcel Duchamp. It was art that appealed not just to the eye but also to an intellectual fascination with the problems of representation through the lens of conceptual art.

Patsy Zeppel and Peter Prescott at the British Council in Sydney encouraged us to pursue this idea and agreed to fund the project. Later, the Australia Council and the philanthropist and collector John Kaldor also agreed to contribute, giving us the chance to make the most of the opportunity. *The British Show* was launched in Perth and travelled to Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane, and New Zealand during 1985–86. The role of the British Council was key not only to this particular exhibition taking place but also to the rapid dissemination of the key ideas embodied in the art of this generation and of its successors. Exhibitions Officers Brett Rogers and Lewis Biggs made our research process efficient and pleasurable. They never sought to determine our choices but they encouraged us to look far and wide. In the end we followed a fairly specific route, which focused on the experience of the exhibition, and making this new material accessible for an Australian audience. For us it was important to capture key features of the new sculpture rather than to make an inclusive survey. A few months after our opening in Perth, an exhibition assembled by the Arts Council in the United Kingdom, *The British Art Show II*, did just such an inclusive survey. Many of the artists in the Arts Council exhibition would have been worthy of inclusion in the Australian selection. However, we were determined to make sense out of the diversity of ideas that were in play, so did our best to find specific works that taken together conveyed some of the essential factors that made this body of work so engaging and novel.

The term “New British Sculpture” was a gross oversimplification. While there was a notable surge of new sculpture in the early 1980s, its diversity and the apparent contradictions between, say, Shirazeh Houshiary, Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley, Richard Deacon, Richard Wentworth, and Ian Hamilton Finlay, suggest that British art has often been best characterized by its differences, individuality, and even the eccentricity that makes British art an infertile ground for homogeneous movements—even if the media and, unfortunately, some curators push hard to create and promote these reductionist categories. Our task nonetheless was to find clear strands or sets of associations that allowed a degree of coherence to emerge through the exhibition. The New British Sculpture cannot meaningfully be described as being of a kind or a coherent movement, yet the sculptors had certain ideas in common, such as a commitment to meaning relating to the experience of being human, often investigating the relationship between consciousness and matter and how art works in the gap between them. The sculpture was intensely material but in very different ways, ranging from the Postminimal use of found material to finely crafted stone, bronze, and lead. It also nearly always alluded to the human form or to everyday attributes of human life. The level of direct political engagement varied and was often mediated by a sense of humour. Richard Wentworth, for example, made some very serious but amusing points about the way we navigate the world, by recognizing curious happenstance, such as assemblages accidentally occurring on the street, or tracing the pathways of desire in the environment that so often bypass the determinist planners’ prescribed pathways. One of the works we selected was Wentworth’s *Toy* (1983), made by soldering an oval sardine tin into a sheet of galvanized steel that in turn is soldered into a galvanized oval bathtub, suggesting the surface of water in the tub. Wentworth’s interest was initially sparked by the formal resonance between the two ovals. He had also floated an empty sardine tin while playing with his child in the bath, so there was a personal story being recalled too. At the same time, Margaret Thatcher’s war against Argentina had come to a head with the notorious sinking in 1982 of the Argentinian vessel the *Belgrano*. The formal response and the material process were related to Minimalism, and the conjunction of the bathtime game with Thatcher’s war was purely circumstantial. The space provided by the ambiguity and the playful set of associations created the possibility for a viewer to play in turn with the possible associations he might find there. Such ambiguity would be anathema to a Minimalist, but it is precisely this allowed space that I think marks out the particularity of the New British Sculpture.

Wentworth's *Toy* also reflected upon Jacques Lacan's idea of the gaze that is returned by an object. In Lacan's version, the return suggests a narcissistic projection onto the thing, but I see Wentworth's approach rather as one that invokes empathy with the external world. Wentworth speculates that when he sees a floating sardine tin, the tin sees him back, creating a kind of identification and unleashing multiple associations. Empathy is one of the most useful parts of the art repertoire, and a closely associated element is affect in art. As John Latham noted in relation to the Destruction In Art Symposium (DIAS) in 1966, affect is the sleeper that often, unacknowledged, crosses the boundaries of popular culture and the avant-garde. For example, the cultural rumour of an artist destroying a musical instrument as part of DIAS later came to the attention of Pete Townsend of rock group the Who, who began making the destruction of his guitar a regular feature of his performances. In both cases the instrument stood for a cultural convention that was being violently repudiated. This destructive behaviour strategy also played an important part in Fluxus performances. Affect need not be cathartic, however, and in the case of the New British Sculpture the vehicle was often humour. The British sense of the absurd informed the narrative they revived in art. Their use of everyday objects brought a very particular perspective into postconceptual art that resonated with Arte Povera, but was in many ways far more accessible to the public, even though it relied less on purely aesthetic delectation. I think this is part of what made the later generation of artists from Goldsmiths work so well in the 1990s.

The generation of British artists growing up after the Second World War were exposed to the absurdist humour of the radio comedy programme *The Goon Show*, that captured an anti-authoritarian strand in postwar thinking, and in an unexpected way meshed with the rebirth of the avant-garde in the 1960s. The new mood reacted against the existing order and, like the early avant-garde, sought to engage in a more comprehensive way with the public. The Goons were widely appreciated by a public exhausted by the restrictions and pomposity of the establishment. But they were also more than a comedy act, occasionally dropping hardly registered, usually parodic references to postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault or Havelock Ellis. This goonery continued in the work of the Cambridge Footlights and later the Monty Python team. Unlike the more radical countercultural activities of the 1960s, such as the exhibitions at Better Books and the poetry events organized by John Hopkins and John Sharkey, along with Jeff Nuttall and many others at the time, the humour of the Goons was a gentler form of counterculture that permeated the whole of society in a more accessible way. It may not have had the visceral power of the hardcore cultural avant-garde, but together they emerged into the broader culture and paved the way for a long-term democratization of contemporary art. We hoped that the core group we chose for the 1985 exhibition could help define some shared characteristics of the new generation of sculptors. Amongst these were Tony Cragg, Richard Wentworth, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley, Alison Wilding, and Shirazeh Houshiary—all of whom came to be represented in the collection at the AGNSW over the next few years, as did Stephen Willats, Richard Long, and Bob Law. Cragg, Kapoor, Wilding, Gormley, and Wentworth also came to Sydney as part of a residency programme in the late 1980s, again funded by the British Council, to follow up on the significant impact these sculptors had had on a younger generation of artists in Australia. What characterized the core selection for me was what I came to think of as a Postminimal aesthetic in which the material and process were privileged, and yet the raw presence of matter was turned to expressive or narrative purpose more akin to Arte Povera than to Minimalism. There was a sense of humour in many of the works, but also a philosophical turn that was to influence my career as a curator and help to

shape the collection at the gallery over the next twenty-nine years. Prior to *The British Show*, abstract steel sculpture and formal installations were dominant. There had been a narrative, quirky strand in the 1970s, partly influenced by West Coast American sculptors, but the very specific use of everyday objects and materials as signifiers that embody meaning, rather than simply illustrating it, was a powerful new stimulus from the British sculptors. Since the mid-1980s, this has been a given for most art students with an interest in sculpture. Generations of Australian sculptors emerging in the 2000s continue to take this way of thinking about making art for granted. I could cite the work of Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, whose first major installation out of art school followed the strategy of an earlier Tony Cragg, in which he stacked the demolition materials from a house into a perfect rectangular solid. It was neither a homage to, nor a repetition of, Cragg's piece, although the process closely followed his. I am reasonably assured that the young Australians had never seen the work by Cragg in question, but this way of thinking was in the air and in large part this was possible in Australia because of *The British Show* in 1985.

In the course of developing the exhibition I moved to Sydney to start a new collection of international contemporary art that was made possible by the Mervyn Horton bequest specifically for this purpose. The gallery was also building a new wing to house the collection. Prior to this there had been no history of collecting modern or contemporary art from overseas. I conceived this collection around a set of ideas about what art could be, rather than trying to be encyclopedic or even broadly representative: there was neither the room nor the budget to do that well. I decided instead to collect works that had an aesthetic in common, that included teasing meaning out of objects and materials. In this way I would be able to make coherent installations out of the collection without relying on purely formal affinities or art-historical narratives.

Some of my conversations with the British artists helped put flesh on these ideas. Cragg talked about the artist having a pencil and paper and how, regardless of whether they use it to draw or to write down ideas, a similar mysterious process occurs. He described making some marks, erasing, altering, or adding to them, and then stepping back to look at what he had done only to discover something unexpected: "I did not know that", was how he put it. The pencil was part of the material process that guided the artist's mind towards a state between knowing and being in the world—something that the mind alone cannot imagine. This is the most concrete expression I have heard about the engagement between ideas and things.

As part of the residency programme at the AGNSW I took Antony Gormley and later Anish Kapoor into the bush. Gormley wanted to place a concrete sculpture based on his crouched body onto a claypan in the desert. He specified a place with 360 degrees of flat horizon: no trees or hills. This is not all that easy to find, even in the Australian desert, but we located the spot and spent several days installing and documenting the piece, making good the surface of the claypan for our documentation so that it looked untouched. The piece was named *Room for the Great Australian Desert* (1989, fig. 1). We also collected enough red bull dust to make 1,100 small earthen figures on our return to Sydney. This was to be his first field installation: *A Field for the Art Gallery of New South Wales* (fig. 2), now in the collection of AGNSW. The red figures rise from the earth perfectly embodying the idea of consciousness arising from the material plane.

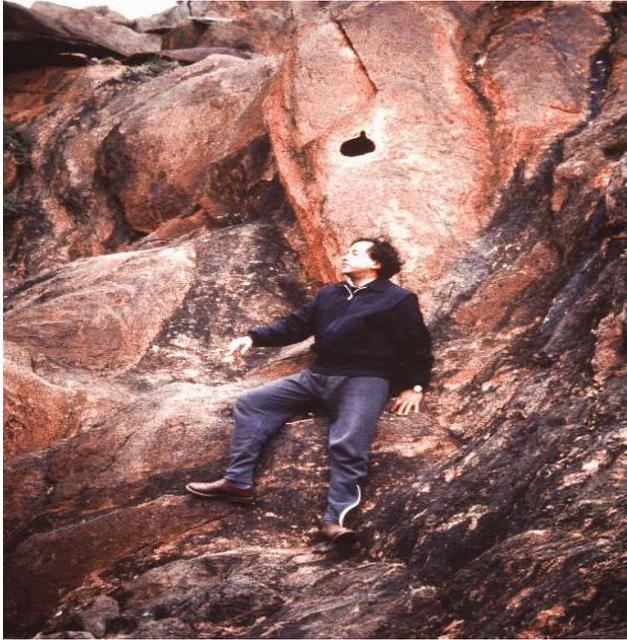


Figure 1

Anish Kapoor discovers a naturally occurring void stone at Uriowe outback New South Wales, 1990. Digital image courtesy of Anthony Bond.



Figure 2

Antony Gormley, *Room for the Great Australian Desert*, 1989, concrete, 92 × 58 × 51 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Digital image courtesy of Anthony Bond.

While camping out in the bush we talked about many things including the relationship between consciousness and the material world out of which it arises. Located in a place where when you stood up you were the highest thing this side of the horizon was vertiginous, and underlined the place of the human figure as a conductor between matter and the void. As a result of this experience I have come to think of art as crucially placed between idea and matter, and this is borne out in the work of many of the artists in *The British Show*. One day Gormley and I traced the Mootwingie creek to its source, that turned out to be a vagina-shaped opening in the rock, “l’Origine du monde” (fig. 3)?



Figure 3

Antony Gormley, *A Field for the Art Gallery of New South Wales*, 1989. Digital image courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales / Photo: Ray Woodbury / © Antony Gormley.

That was 1989. The following year I was in the same area with Anish Kapoor. This time we camped out one night in a gorge, arriving after dark. In the morning we discovered that the walls of the gorge were covered in ancient erotic engravings. We also discovered a black hole carved out of the sandstone by the wind (fig. 4). It was exactly like one of Kapoor's void stones that we had just acquired for the gallery. We climbed up to discover that the circular black hole had radiating lines engraved around it suggesting energy pouring out of the void. This was strikingly in keeping with the idea of the void in Kapoor's stones, and with his later drawings and prints of the sexualized void, such as *Blackness from her Womb* (2001). An anthropologist subsequently told me that the desert varnish deposited over the carving indicated that this site was over twenty-thousand years old. Since our chance visit, the property where we found the gorge has been returned to the indigenous elders and can no longer be accessed without permission.

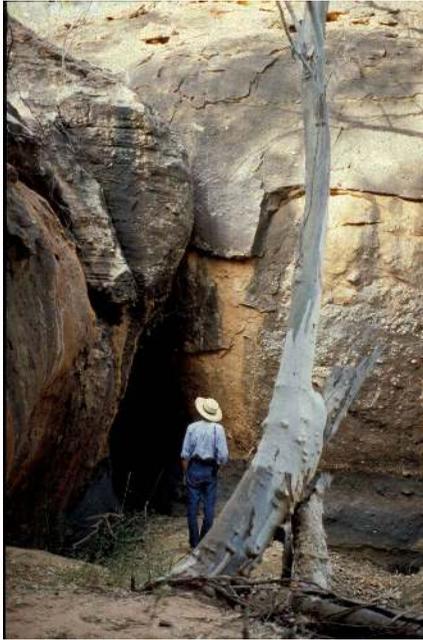


Figure 4

Antony Gormley discovering the source of Mootwingie creek in the shape of "l'Origine du monde", 1989. Digital image courtesy of Anthony Bond."

These experiences brought intensity to the ideas I had been developing in response to conversations with artists about the horizon and the void, metaphors about being and not being, of consciousness and matter. Other works now in the collection embody these ideas in different ways: in Bob Law's *Blue Black Indigo Black* (1977), the black surface unexpectedly opens up a window onto infinity, with veils of indigo and blue appearing behind or within the black; a later work by Shirazeh Houshiary, *Unknowing* (2002), reveals on close inspection thousands of the Arabic letter Alif drawn with fine graphite strokes on the apparently blank white surface, summoning energy out of the void in a kind of Sufic mantra, repeating the name of god over and over.

Perhaps the most surprising example in the gallery collection is Stephen Willats's **Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp** (1981). Willats has evolved a way of working collaboratively with communities, in this case people displaced from the East End of London to an estate near Hayes in West London. The kids growing up in these soulless tower blocks had nowhere to go; even the open land nearby was fenced off. This land they named the "Lurky Place", and they nonetheless got in through a hole in the Cyclone wire fence. Willats found one of these young people, Pat Purdy, who was interested in collaborating with him. She introduced him to the life they lived between worlds. When they left the determinist space of the tower blocks through a hole in the fence they entered another, utterly different, world. It was a space where they made their own rules, built their own camps, and inhaled heated glue. They had created the opposite of what they left. Maybe it was dysfunctional and dangerous, but it was theirs.

The structure of Willats's work is a set of four triptychs, each triptych consisting of a photo of the estate and another of the Lurky Place. Between them a smaller panel shows the hole in the fence. Next to the hole Stephen found objects that had been dropped. He collected these and attached them to the photo. He showed how a pragmatic object like a glue can completely

changed its function as it moved through the hole. From a binding agent of construction it became the centrepiece of a wild dysfunctional journey to the edge of oblivion and dissolution. The hole in the fence, then, was another kind of event horizon relating to consciousness and its loss.

Since the time of *The British Show* in Australia, British sculpture has appeared globally, initially through exhibitions supported by the British Council but also in commercial galleries as well as in biennales and museum exhibitions. Individual curators, such as Martin Kunz at Kunstmuseum Luzern, also made early exhibitions of the new sculpture in the 1980s. I attribute the success of this new work to the fine balance the sculpture has maintained between a solid underpinning of Minimalism's structural privileging of material and the process with a playfulness that could pack multiple readings into the objects, contrary to the anti-referential premise of Minimalism; yet it is a scaffold that protects the art from undisciplined self-expression. The ordinariness of the found objects makes the humour and affect imbued in the objects accessible to a wider audience than had previously been possible with Minimalism and conceptual art. This generation of artists undoubtedly paved the way for the energy of the Young British Artists (YBAs) who came after them and continue to be amongst the most visible sculptors around the world today. At the Venice Biennale in 2015, the British Council presented Sarah Lucas: this was a hilarious installation capturing the best of British comedy laced with tragedy. It perfectly represented the lineage I have been suggesting. I might also add that Ed Atkins's film installation, *Hisser* (2015) in Istanbul in 2015 was original, Pythonesque tragicomedy, right up to the denouement when he disappears into a sinkhole under his bed. Although I confess no one else seemed to see it that way."

About the author

Anthony Bond OAM is a freelance writer and curator. Until recently he was Director Curatorial at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where he was responsible for collecting and displaying international contemporary art since 1984. He publishes in journals and catalogues here and overseas. He curated *The British Show* that toured Australia and New Zealand in 1985. He has curated two international Biennales, one in Sydney (1992) and one in the UK (1999). He has also curated historical exhibitions such as *Body* at AGNSW, Sydney (1997) and *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary* at the National Portrait Gallery, London and AGNSW, Sydney (2005–6). Other curated exhibitions include Anselm Kiefer, *Aperiatum terra* at White Cube, London and at AGNSW (2006–7); *Francis Bacon: Five Decades* at AGNSW (November 2012); and *The Ghost who talks*, an exhibition of Mike Parr's recent performance videos shown at Venice Biennale (June–November 2015). His latest book, *The Idea of Art*, was officially launched at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in August 2015.

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