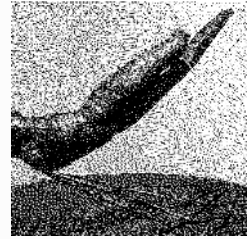




## “Induced Tension”: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of British Sculpture in the USA

Article by Arie Hartog

WORD COUNT:2,451



### Abstract

This essay looks at the reception of the sculptor Reg Butler in the USA and the role of Addison Franklin Page. This art historian, who was the first Curator of Contemporary Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, has been overlooked in the history of modern sculpture although (or because) his work represents an alternative narrative to dominant art history in the aftermath of Clement Greenberg. Page was an important exponent of the American tradition of art education. His core ideas were that art had a meaning for society as a whole and that every individual can read a work of art symbolically. Within this framework Butler became important. The decline of these ideas and the rise of new elitist ideals of art may explain why Butler's reputation has been omitted from prevailing narratives of the period. Between them, Butler and Page suggest alternatives to dominant art history.

The first retrospective of the British sculptor Reg Butler (1913–1981) was held in October 1963 in the USA. The J. B. Speed Art Museum in Louisville showed 104 works, including 61 sculptures. Afterwards a female benefactor gifted one of the exhibited works, the first cast of the bronze *St Catherine* (fig. 1), to the museum. In 2012 this work was discarded from the collection as a “secondary example” and sold through an auction house in New York.<sup>1</sup> A British artist who had ranked as one of the most important contemporary sculptors in the early 1960s had become irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1

Reg Butler, *St Catherine*, 1959, bronze, 54.6 × 45.1 × 45.1 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images.

Running in the background to this shift was the confrontation between the world's formerly pre-eminent empire, which was now using culture as its only remaining means of international influence, and a new global player which understood art as part of its foreign policy mix. This was evident visually from the international exhibitions of the 1950s and early 1960s, and is reinforced in print by the exchange of views of two art critics, the British Herbert Read and the American Clement Greenberg.<sup>3</sup> Both represented completely different views about the medium of sculpture: in September 1963, when the British sculptor Anthony Caro (1924–2013) brought the New York ideas about disembodied three-dimensional constructive sculpture back to his native country in his first solo exhibition at the London Whitechapel Art Gallery, it quickly became clear which view would shape the future.

Greenberg's verdict on the work of Reg Butler was scathing. But today's common knowledge of that condemnation has caused Butler's positive reception in the USA—reflected in the thirty documented museum acquisitions and an as yet unknown, but significant, number of purchases by private individuals—to be overlooked. When Butler began having his bronzes cast by Susse Frères in Paris in 1956, half of every edition went to the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York.<sup>4</sup> The catalogue for the exhibition in Louisville mentions loans from twenty-five private collectors in the United States. A cursory glance at Butler's reception in the US brings to light processes and writings which are generally overlooked today. The dismissal of Butler's *St Catherine* as "secondary" in 2012 is symptomatic of today's relatively narrow art-historical narrative about the period post-1945, a time when conversely a very broad spectrum of artistic production was taking place. Butler's work around 1960 was rooted in a different narrative, which—once the bare bones of it have been reconstructed—yields pointers towards the forgotten diversity of sculpture at this period.<sup>5</sup> The examples of the now-famous Caro and near-forgotten Butler also remind us in passing that the interplay between Britain and the US was

more complex than is generally assumed. The understandable impulse to reduce artists to their national origins seems to cause this confusion. Sometimes sculpture that was ostensibly British either came from the US (Caro) or only exerted a particular influence across the Atlantic, as in Butler's case.

## I

Clement Greenberg's famous essay of 1956 about the American sculptor David Smith (1906–1965) is probably the clearest indication of Butler's prominence in the US. In this piece, Butler and his colleague Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003) are appropriated as negative foils in order to prove the particular qualities of Greenberg's favourite: Smith is what Butler is not, and that is why he is good, according to Greenberg's line of argument. This only made sense because the author could safely assume that his readers knew the British sculptor's work. The reference is directed towards the 1955 exhibition *The New Decade* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where twenty-two contemporary European painters and sculptors were presented; prominent among these had been the British sculptors Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002), Butler, and Chadwick. In opposition to the expressive tradition that had emerged in Europe, Greenberg was setting a genuinely American tradition, which revolved around the essence of the given medium and a radical rejection of all and any content. The British sculptors, Greenberg wrote in his essay on Smith, were repeating the language of classic modernism without really having advanced it. Therefore he found even the works of classic European sculptors like Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981) and Fritz Wotruba (1907–1975) a good deal more convincing than the seemingly modern, linear work of the Brits.<sup>6</sup> The fact that since 1952 Butler's work had moved away from welded iron frames and was now combining modelled bodies with constructions, had not been registered by the critic—or, more to the point, was irrelevant to his argument. From his perspective on the essence of sculpture, this was perhaps a retrograde step, whereas for Butler it was quite the opposite, a way to extend the possibilities of his medium.<sup>7</sup>

In 1959, Butler's work figured in the exhibition *New Images of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art, which brought together American and European expressive figurative art containing an existential message about humanity. Contrary to the developments in New York, content rather than media-specific aspects determined the selection. While the exhibition is now maligned for having constructed a false opposition between abstract and figurative art,<sup>8</sup> art history took it as the basis from which to construct a somewhat oversimplifying contrast between an American formal and a European existential tradition. The latter certainly has some explanatory value but should be supplemented with details and intermediate positions.

## II

Butler's retrospective in Louisville was the first exhibition of international contemporary art at the J. B. Speed Art Museum. It was initiated by Addison Franklin Page (1911–1999), the museum's director at the time. Nowadays largely forgotten, this art historian played an important part in the reception of British sculpture in the US, so it is all the more striking that his name goes unmentioned in scholarship. Born in Princeton, Kentucky, Page studied at Wayne State University in Detroit; initially painting and sculpture with Gilbert Alden Smith (1912–1993) and subsequently the history of art. In 1947 he became Junior Art Curator in the Educational Department of the Detroit Institute of Arts. His first documented publication of any size was a picture book about modern sculpture in the collection, which exemplifies attempts during the

postwar period to communicate modern art to a wider public.<sup>9</sup> In 1954, Page was promoted to the position of Assistant Curator in the Education Department. In the annual reports of the Detroit museum, he crops up as the initiator of panel discussions on contemporary art. Page was well known as an expert on contemporary sculpture. In the summer of 1955 he had travelled to Europe, where he attended the third Biennale for contemporary sculpture in Middelheim Park in Antwerp, and probably also the international exhibition in Park Sonsbeek in Arnhem.<sup>10</sup> The following year, the San Francisco Museum of Art invited him as a speaker on the subject. He also wrote book reviews of Henry Schaefer-Simmern's *Sculpture in Europe Today* and Carola Giedion-Welcker's *Contemporary Sculpture* in *Art Quarterly*.<sup>11</sup> Although the reviews are relatively short, they permit a cautious art-historical positioning of Page in the context of contemporaneous debates on modern sculpture. He emphasized the role of spatial perception and feeling over any form of verbalization. Furthermore, he explicitly distanced himself from two positions which were to dominate thinking about art: the idea that art is a self-contained system and the idea that literature and psychology have nothing to do with visual art; both of which left him unconvinced.

In May 1957 Page was appointed the first Curator of Contemporary Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The first contemporary sculptures to be acquired after this were British: Barbara Hepworth's *Curved Form with String* (1956) and Butler's *Cassandra* (1953).<sup>12</sup> His first exhibition with a supra-regional impact was *Sculpture in Our Time* from the collection of Joseph H. Hirshhorn.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition was shown in the summer of 1959 in Detroit, and subsequently toured seven other North American cities in a reduced form. For the first time an American public could see the vast spectrum of contemporary sculpture. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Page makes no mention of David Smith as an example of a contemporary American sculptor, citing instead Herbert Ferber (1906–1991), Seymour Lipton (1903–1986), and Theodore Roszak (1907–1981). The great diversity that characterized Hirschhorn's collection, he acknowledged, raised the question of the “community of spirit” that renders it accessible to the viewer. Page's writings are never resolute. The impression he gives is that he sees contemporary sculpture principally as an occasion to address questions to artworks, at a time when the roles of criticism and art history were in flux. While the wider public now accepts modern art—Page asserts—what really matters is that it takes on some meaning in their lives.

### III

For Page, a modern artwork was first and foremost an object produced by an artist which enables a viewer to have a psychological response—this being the only way in which a work can transcend mere existence. This position is dismissed as utterly and self-evidently “romantic” today, but explains the success of modern sculpture with wider sections of the public: it is how this art acquired meaning. Since the viewer's individual psychological response is undergoing a renaissance in present-day art education, it seems important to recall the origins of this approach in the mainly American-led field of art education since the 1930s.

Page was personally familiar with Butler's work, probably since his trip to Europe in 1955, and possibly even before that. In 1960 he visited the artist at his studio in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire.<sup>14</sup> Their contact intensified, and when the Pierre Matisse Gallery showed Butler's work in 1962, a questionnaire by Page and a detailed letter of reply from the sculptor were reproduced in the catalogue. Among other things, Page asked about the disappearance of Butler's floating figures and the statue-like heavy mass of his most recent works, and elicited from Butler a response in which he expressed his view of the psychological aspects (glances) of a figure as

sculptural energies aside from the mass, and thereby gave an impression of his broader and thoroughly deliberated concept of sculpture.<sup>15</sup>

The first solo exhibition of a contemporary artist that Page organized as the new director in Louisville was about Butler. A remarkable catalogue was published for the exhibition in which Page linked all the works on show into a coherent narrative, and in the process articulated the existential feelings conveyed by the figures (fig. 2). The first chapter described Butler's development up to 1947 and the beginnings of a new style in his drawings. The main text guided the reader around the works in the exhibition and ended with a short epilogue, which presented the artist's newest ideas in plaster, more or less straight from the studio, and set out to elucidate the fundamental openness of Butler's development. These ideas related to six figures, three small heads (fig. 3), and the design for *Great Tower*.<sup>16</sup> Page quoted the sculptor:

*Perhaps a "face" can only be convincing any more in sculpture so small that it is on the threshold of vision; perhaps only so can it compete with the fleeting experience which passes across a television cinema screen . . . the dimension of time overcomes our disbelief in the cinema by perhaps the same effect as is achieved by the minuteness of these heads.*<sup>17</sup>

The quote shows how Butler thought through the classic categories of his medium (perception in space and time) in relation to contemporary challenges. On the other hand, the architecture of the tower, he claimed, had been the only remaining possibility for a sculptor to continue working monumentally today. Both scenarios, however, are signs of a crisis of the figure for Butler: signs that the artist was on a quest for fundamental decisions and was running up against the limits of his art.<sup>18</sup>

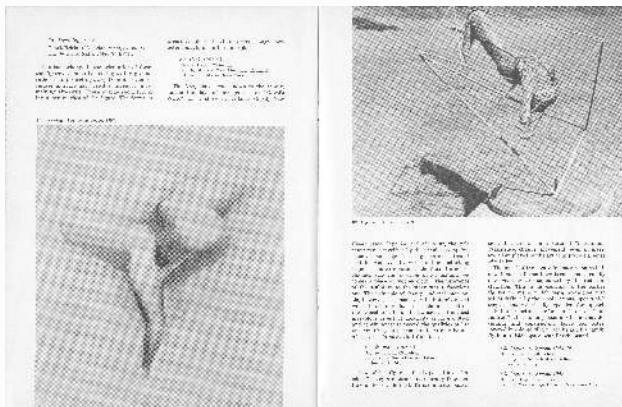


Figure 2

Double-page spread, *Reg Butler: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat., J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY, 1963.



Figure 3

Detail, *Reg Butler: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat., J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY, 1963.

The exhibition in Louisville, a month after Caro's presentation in London, marked the peak of Butler's international career. After this, for unexplained reasons, the sculptor withdrew from the public eye and did not pursue further the scenarios that he was working on in 1963. Butler's fundamental idea of making individual modern art which could provide society with symbolic images appeared to have failed, despite the fact that in Addison Franklin Page he had found a partner who shared and actively propounded this view.<sup>19</sup> Neither Butler in Berkhamsted nor Page in Louisville, however, played any role in the subsequent development of sculpture.

## IV

In 1964, the Art Association of Indianapolis received Butler's *Figure in Space—Catapult* (1959; fig. 4) as an endowment, probably directly from the exhibition in Louisville. Page wrote a brief text about it, in which he said that the hallmark of all art was "induced tension". This tension could be "intellectual, physical, mental or any other conceivable kind". Although the *Figures in Space* were a series, he continued, Butler had taken completely different aspects as the theme in each of the sculptures. Some figures are perceived as flying, others as tortured, although this was not open interpretation but merely showed that unless completed by a communicative experience and the viewer's imagination, Butler's work only half exists. In this writing Page once again emphasized the communicative aspect of Butler's art.



Figure 4

Reg Butler, *Figure in Space—Catapult*, 1959, bronze, 61 cm high. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Digital image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art.

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Page belonged to the category of art historians who saw a "Western" tradition that was determined by the human figure in the broadest sense. Communication not about, but with, the artwork was the aim. In 1965 the museum in Louisville presented the exhibition *The Figure in Sculpture, 1865–1965*, with twenty-five sculptures from Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) to Richard Stankiewicz (1922–1983) as representative of the most recent positions.<sup>21</sup> In the same exhibition, Page also showcased works by Barney Bright (1927–1997), thereby continuing the tradition initiated in Detroit by Clyde Burroughs (1882–1973) of including local artists in international exhibitions.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition included just one work from the museum's own collection, however: Reg Butler's *St Catherine*.<sup>23</sup>

The connection between the British sculptor Reg Butler and the American art historian Addison Franklin Page which has been alluded to only briefly here, gives three pointers for further research into the history of modern sculpture. Firstly, in the 1950s, museums in the US had a strong interest in modern art for the wider public. That need was met by the expressive tradition of the British sculptors from the generation after Henry Moore, because, secondly, its generally comprehensible images permitted individual perception and communication. Thirdly, the disappearance of this art from the museums and from art-historical consciousness is the logical

consequence of developments after 1963, and of the radical constriction of the concept of sculpture to questions of media. Remembering Butler and Page keeps other alternatives in mind. Translated by Deborah Shannon — Academic Translation

## About the author

Dr Arie Hartog (b. 1963, Maastricht, NL) is Director of the Gerhard-Marcks-Haus in Bremen. His research focus is the history of sculpture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is the chair of the German association of sculpture museums <http://www.bildhauermuseen.de>.

## Footnotes

1. Christie's New York, Sale 2576, Christie's Interiors, 28–29 Aug. 2012, lot 32. For references and support in obtaining material I am grateful to Mayken Jonkman (RKD, The Hague), Miranda Lash (Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY) and Amy Purcell (Archives, University of Louisville).
2. The museum still owns four drawings by Butler, as I was kindly informed by Miranda Lash.
3. David Getsy, "Tactility or Opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith: Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg on *The Art of Sculpture*, 1956", in *Rereading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, ed. Michael Paraskos (London: Freedom Press, 2007), 152–67.
4. Margaret Garlake, *The Sculpture of Reg Butler* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2006), 66.
5. On diversity as a hallmark of the period, see Arie Hartog, "Winners and Losers—On English and West German Sculpture Between 1945 and 1965", in *Those Early Years: British and German Art after 1945*, ed. Carina Plath (Cologne: Snoeck, 2014), 56–63.
6. Clement Greenberg, "David Smith", *Art in America* 69 (Winter 1956/57): 30–34; reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 3: *Affirmations and Refusals: 1950–1956* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 275–79.
7. See Arie Hartog, "Decent Sculpture: Der Bildhauer Reg Butler", in *Reg Butler: Decent Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Bremen: Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, 2006), 33–47.
8. Dennis Raverty, "Critical Perspectives on New Images of Man", *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 62–64.
9. William A. Bostick and Addison Franklin Page, *Modern Sculpture: A Picture Book of Modern Sculpture in the Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1950).
10. A. F. Page, [Review of] Henry Schaefer-Simmern, *Sculpture in Europe Today*, *Art Quarterly* no. 16 (1956): 223–24, in which Page reports on his visit to Antwerp.
11. Lecture: *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 36, no. 2 (Annual Report Number) (1956/57): 39. Reviews: Page, [Review of] Henry Schaefer-Simmern, *Sculpture in Europe Today* (1956), A. F. Page, [Review of] Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture*, *Art Quarterly* no. 19 (1956): 326–28.
12. A. F. Page, "Recent Gifts from the Friends of Modern Art", *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 36, no. 3 (1956/57): 70–72.
13. Oral history interview with William Bostick, 11–19 Aug. 1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-william-bostick-11715>, last accessed 28 June 2015).
14. Garlake, *Sculpture of Reg Butler*, 25. Contrary to her assumption, at that time Page was not yet the director at Louisville.



15. Butler's complex, shifting concept of sculpture is a worthwhile theme for further research.
16. The three heads are missing from the catalogue raisonné (Garlake, *Sculpture of Reg Butler*).
17. *Reg Butler: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat. (Louisville, KY: J. B. Speed Art Museum, 1963), [34].
18. On Butler's crisis around 1963, see Garlake, *Sculpture of Reg Butler*, 25, 84–85, 90–94; Hartog, "Decent Sculpture", 46–47.
19. Hartog, "Decent Sculpture", 40–46.
20. A. F. Page, "Figure in Space by Reg Butler", *Bulletin of the Art Association of Indianapolis* 51 (1964): 29–32.
21. *The Figure in Sculpture, 1865–1965*, exh. cat. (Louisville, KY: J. B. Speed Art Museum, 1965).
22. Interview with William Bostick (1981).
23. In 1965 the sculpture also figured prominently in an essay by Page. A. F. Page, "20th Century Sculpture", *Art Education* 18, no. 8 (1965): 25–27.

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