



British Art Studies

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British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000

**Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina
Droth**

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Cover image: Installation View, Simon Starling, Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima), 2010–11, 16 mm film transferred to digital (25 minutes, 45 seconds), wooden masks, cast bronze masks, bowler hat, metals stands, suspended mirror, suspended screen, HD projector, media player, and speakers. Dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of the artist

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Un Certain Art Anglais, 1979

Lucy Reynolds

Abstract

This retrospective look at the 1979 British Council travelling exhibition to Paris, Un Certain Regard Anglais, considers whether it was an accurate picture of English art practices at the end of the decade. I examine the aims of its English and French curators, and its reception by art critics and audiences. I find that the exhibition raises timely questions about how national characteristics might be reflected in art practice, and how, despite the cultural and societal shifts of the 1970s, omissions on the grounds of colour and gender prevail. With this in mind, my short essay finds that the radical objectives which are often attributed to this period of English art practice were not so widespread as history would have us believe.

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Cite as

Lucy Reynolds, "Un Certain Art Anglais, 1979", British Art Studies, Issue 3, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/lreynolds>

Writing in the April 1979 issue of *Artscribe*, Terence Maloon considers the use of the adjective “Certain” in the title of the British Council touring exhibition, *Un Certain Art Anglais*, an ambitious show which took the work of thirty British artists to the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris that January and February. According to Maloon, the use of this qualifying word acts as a disclaimer, and enabled the British Council and the exhibition’s curators—ARC’s Suzanne Pagé, Richard Cork, Sandy Nairne, and Michael Compton—to “profess a resolute impartiality in regard to the art they promote, seeking not to influence, exhort or misrepresent the kinds of art being produced in this country, but rather to passively reflect”.¹ Maloon goes further to point to the reductive inevitability of survey exhibitions seeking to encapsulate the national cultural picture for a given period, suggesting that the term “relativises the selected artists while leaving their context, the interests and merits of excluded artists *uncertain*”.² However, it could be argued that it is precisely through a closer look at the work included in *Un Certain Art Anglais*, and those artists left outside its canon, that a picture of contemporary art practice in Britain on the cusp of a new decade can be identified.

Because whilst there is no doubt, as Maloon infers, that the exhibition *Un Certain Art Anglais* presents a particular face of British art practice, it is perhaps not the one that is reflected in contemporary reviews and essays, nor in the brief mentions that the exhibition has received in histories since, nor in current expectations of what artists were making at the end of the 1970s.³ Maloon’s review, as well as that by Ralph Rumney in *Art Monthly*, and Richard Cork’s introductory essay for the catalogue, “Collaboration without Compromise”, suggest an exhibition which continues the conceptual approaches rooted in non-traditional art media such as photography, performance, and text, which have come to characterize the decade; seen in the 1972 Hayward gallery show, *The New Art*, for example, or, an earlier curatorial project by Cork, the 1974 touring show, *Beyond Painting and Sculpture*. Indeed, in retrospective scholarship, artists in the show such as Conrad Atkinson, Art & Language, or Stephen Willats are often seen as paradigmatic of conceptual practices distinct to the British context during the 1970s, engaging overtly with the country’s political dimensions, particularly around the subject of activism, labour, and class and its representations. John A. Walker, for example, recalls that “what was new and significant about art in Britain during the 1970s was its repoliticization and feminization, its attempt to reconnect to society at large”,⁴ whether through the Artist Placement Group’s attempts to create dialogue with industry, or the inclusion in the exhibition of the Muralist Painters Group, whose paintings were developed within local community groups rather than white cube institutions. Walker is nevertheless at pains to stress the arbitrary and misleading nature of decade-based periodization, when there are “continuities that connect the 1970s with earlier and later decades”.⁵

Located on the cusp of the 1980s, *Un Certain Art Anglais* might thus offer an intimation of the concerns which would exercise artists in the decade to come, such as the theoretical dominance of Postmodernism; as well as accounting for how artists' attempts to engage with a shifting political and social landscape had played out, bracketed on the one side by the student protests of 1968, and the rise of a new political right under Margaret Thatcher on the other.

Yet, a glance at the subheadings in Rosanne Saint-Jacques's review of the exhibition for *Vie Des Arts* would appear to offer a narrative of British art practice in which political rhetoric plays a small role within a show largely defined by a continued engagement—albeit deconstructive—with well-established fine art genres, if not media, and stressing aesthetic rather than overt political enquiry. Referring back to the catalogue's introductory text by the exhibition's French curator Suzanne Pagé, Saint-Jacques traces three emerging areas of practice, or "trois directions".⁶ The first two do not include an engagement with contemporary socio-political contexts, but are situated, rather, within the familiar fine art genre traditions of the "portrait/paysage",⁷ which she perceives as "plus particulièrement-anglaise-ou-intimate", and "Art/Illusion/Réalité", a deconstructed term for new approaches to the enduring still life genre.⁸ In Hamish Fulton's images of the Bering Sea, Richard Long's *Slate Circle* and *Night Sea Journey*, Glen Onwin's installed boat and waxed wall of reeds, for example, the residue of the land art movement of the preceding decade can be traced alongside the enduring landscape painting tradition, perceived by Saint-Jacques as a national trait (fig. 1 and fig. 2, both 1979). But, as she stresses, in line with land art these works attempt to rethink landscape beyond pictorial convention through their emphasis on the indexed mark of photographic time; documenting changing weather conditions in the photographs of Phillippa Ecobichon, for example, the drawn marks of David Tremlett, or the slate circle which evidences Long's walk through Sligo.



Figure 1.

Installation View, *Un Certain Art Anglais*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, January - March 1979 (showing Richard Long *Slate Circle*, 1979), Gelatin Silver Print, 113 x 225mm Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016

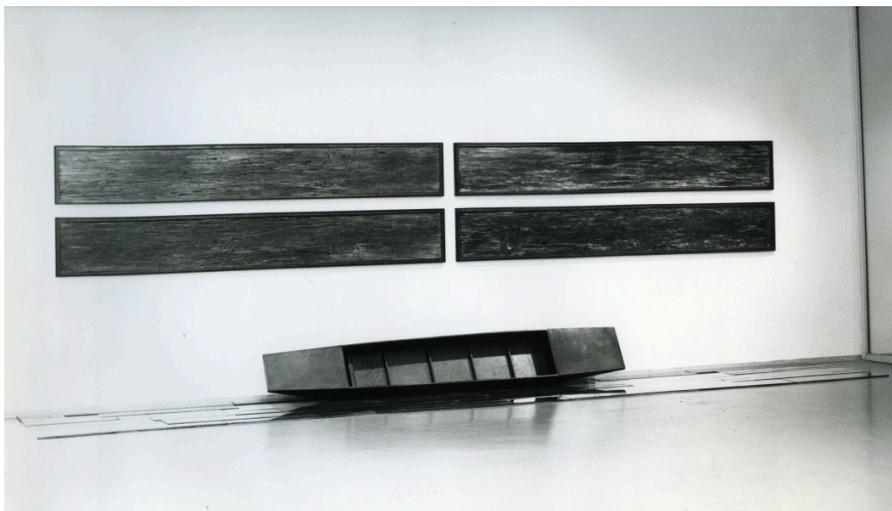


Figure 2.

Installation View, *Un Certain Art Anglais*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, January - March 1979 (showing Glen Onwin's *Night Sea Journey*, 1979), Gelatin Silver Print, 128 x 222mm Digital image courtesy of British Council Collection archives / © Tate, London 2016

Certainly the introduction of performative presence and photographic document to reinvigorate landscape or still life genres reflects the turn away from traditional art media which characterizes the decade. As Cork recalls of the period:

it was exciting to encounter artists of my own generation employing any strategies they wished, including film, video, performance, raw documentation, photography, texts and many other alternatives, in the conviction that their work need no longer conform to the old hierarchy.⁹

However, it could also be argued that this mode of practice and use of media, particularly that practised by Fulton and Long, was a well-established approach to landscape by the close of the 1970s, despite its attempt to efface the aesthetic conventions associated with landscape painting. And, rather than offer new dialogues with the vexed question of British landscape in relation to property rights or environmental concerns, it could be that these artists were concerned with documenting a singular, even poetic, engagement with its temporal and spatial dynamics—just as Michael Craig-Martin's enlarged outline wall paintings of domestic objects do not trespass beyond a Pop art play with scale into the more profound questioning of representation for which his 1973 conceptual work, *An Oak Tree*, had been lauded.

Furthermore, as Saint Jacques's review suggests, a national preoccupation with landscape was to be expected from British artists, raising the question of how the exhibition was charged not only with presenting a snapshot of those figures deemed significant in British art at the close of the 1970s, but also of making a particular address to French expectations of British cultural preoccupations. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Pagé, who was a key figure in the conception and realization of the exhibition through the independent organization ARC,¹⁰ stresses that the exhibition was more concerned with reflecting the diversity of contemporary British art to a Paris public unfamiliar with it, than attributions of individual excellence.¹¹

However, she does identify particular traits of restraint and objectivity across the exhibition which imply a certain reading of national characteristics.¹² Maloon's more blunt assessment of the exhibition as "heavily Methodist" supports the notion of a specific English sensibility of pared-down religious asceticism, against his argument that "British art is a far hardier, more vigorous beast than the French have been given to believe. The best of it is diametrically opposite in spirit to the thin-lipped puritanism of this exhibition."¹³

Maloon does not clarify exactly which missing artists might constitute a more vigorous approach to the English reserve on display in the exhibition, but neither does the exhibition challenge the canonic hegemony of the white male artist, despite its ambitions to address the realities of lived experience outside the gallery and museum. Of the twenty-seven works represented, it

is notable that only three were by women, suggesting that despite the vocal and well-organized efforts of the Women Artists Workshop during the 1970s, exhibition spaces such as the Women's Free Art Alliance, and the attempts at redress by an all-female exhibition panel for the Hayward Annual the year before, the significant presence of women artists as part of the diversity of English art, which Pagé seeks to address, is little acknowledged.

However, of those works which were included, two make a significant and confrontational address to women's lived experience.¹⁴ The exhibition offered the French public their first encounter with Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), a diary of the developing bond between mother and growing son inscribed in its material and observational phenomena: carved into stone, and stained onto cloth. It also included photographic text-works and drawings by Alexis Hunter. The suggestive yet sinister undertones of her out-of-focus photo series *Gender Confusion: Incubus/Succubus* (1978) makes implicit reference to rape through allusion to the mythical figures of Incubus and Succubus.¹⁵ In the photo work *A Secretary Sees the World* (1978), a woman's hands on the keyboard of a typewriter in the photographic sequence assert the continued struggle for recognition of women's labour, following the compromises of the 1975 Equal Pay Act (fig. 3). Part of the series *Approach to Fear*, in which close-ups of a woman's hands are shown undertaking a number of different incongruous actions, such as an impeccably manicured hand rubbing itself in oil¹⁶ or holding a burning shoe,¹⁷ *A Secretary Sees the World* contributes to a wider refrain across the exhibition addressing the fractious labour relationships which dominated Britain in the 1970s. This is also apparent in Nick Hedges's quiet photographs of factory workers, and Art & Language's polemic paintings and texts, *Our Progress Lies in Hard Work, Dialectical Materialism No 4*. A certain irony can also be read in a related work by Hunter, which might have made an apt addition to the show, entitled *The Marxist's Wife (Still Does the Housework)* (1978). Here, a female hand in close-up, attempting to clean an image of Marx, reminds us that the radical engagements professed by some artists included in the exhibition did not always extend to equal terms for their female comrades.



Figure 3.

Alexis Hunter, *Secretary Sees the World*, 1978, 20 hand coloured Xeroxes in 4 panels, vintage, 120 x 37cm (each panel) Digital image courtesy of the Estate of Alexis Hunter. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery.

Whilst there is no mention in contemporary reviews of the exhibition of this impoverished representation for women artists at a time when feminism was well established, it was even less so for people of colour, as an open letter to the British Council in *Art Monthly* from David Medalla and Rasheed Araeen demonstrates. Medalla and Araeen write of their concern that the British Council

is adamant in persistently projecting the white image of Britain abroad, as if there are no black people in Britain or they are not part of British reality, and as if black artists have done nothing significant in the field of art reflecting a contemporary reality. ¹⁸

They demand an explanation, one not apparently forthcoming in later issues of the magazine. If the exhibition was indeed attempting to represent the diversity and direction of English art practices across the 1970s, Medalla and Araeen's contributions prove a striking omission. For both were highly visible in their challenges to prejudice within and without the art establishment, confronted in Araeen's slide performance *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)* (1977; fig. 4), or Medalla's founding of Artists for Democracy in 1974 to protest, through art, the dictatorship in Chile and other political repressions. ¹⁹ As well as bringing an international perspective to a country where, as John Walker contends, much radical art

appeared “parochial in its concerns”,²⁰ their explicit commitment to addressing political concerns within their work would also appear to make them fitting for “socio-critique”,²¹ the third category of the exhibition articulated by Pagé, and the one which chimes most readily with the conceptual paradigm of English 1970s art with which the exhibition is associated.



Figure 4.

Rasheed Araeen, *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)*, 1977, live event with slides and sound, Artists for Democracy, London
Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen

But rather than commitment to the politics of the day, the show’s conceptual markings may be better identified in a preoccupation with language, whether Tim Head or Craig-Martin’s play on still life genre representation, or a use of text with photographic image in the work of Victor Burgin; although, as one critic observed, conceptual art’s linguistic turn did create problems of translation for a French audience, “where the French have to cope with (mostly) English language conceptual works, with work unfamiliar to them, and with that private reserve of the British character, there is little to help them”.²² Furthermore, whilst individual artists such as Kelly, Atkinson, and Art & Language might posit the political, the impact of their images of labour or the troubles in Northern Ireland loses potency when situated in dialogue with works of predominantly aesthetic concerns, such as Alan Charlton’s abstract paintings or Long’s slate circle. Thus, there is an implicit paradox in Pagé’s use of the word “neutralization” to explain the cool objectivity brought to bear by these artists on matters of politics, representation, as well as the landscape or still life image.²³ For it would appear that the lively and heterogeneous qualities of art in England (itself an ambiguous term which

elides questions of Scottish and Welsh art) which Cork and Walker remember as responsive to the decade's political and social contexts, become neutralized when they are subsumed into a wider body of competing artwork, to become institutionalized and out of context. For all its organizers' good intentions, *Un Certain Art Anglais* could be seen to reflect the anxiety of the decade's endgame, by endorsing art which perpetuated established fine art traditions and their canons. Yet, it might also be argued that perhaps radical art had a smaller part to play in the landscape of 1970s art practice than art history would like to believe, and that, in the main part, the exhibition presents an accurate view of artists' enduring engagement with the singular problems of individual practice.

Footnotes

- 1 Terence Maloon, "English Uncertainty in Paris", *Artscribe* 17 (April 1979): 48.
- 2 Maloon, "English Uncertainty in Paris".
- 3 Conceptual art practices in Britain during the 1970s were well recuperated by the exhibition *Live In Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965—1975* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2000), and John A. Walker's *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
- 4 Walker, *Left Shift*, 2.
- 5 Walker, *Left Shift*, 2.
- 6 Rosanne Saint-Jacques, "De L'Autre Côté de la Manche", *Vie des Arts*, 12 March 1979, British Council Files, Tate Britain Special Collections.
- 7 Saint-Jacques, "De L'Autre Côté de la Manche".
- 8 "Une autre direction, elle meme très rigoureuse, interroge les relations Art/Illusion/Réalité à travers de savantes constructions ou mises en espace d'objets divers, nouvelles approches de la nature morte traditionnelle." Suzanne Pagé, "Introduction", *Un Certain Art Anglais: Selection d'Artistes Britanniques, 1970-1979* (British Council/ARC, 1979), 6.
- 9 Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.
- 10 Associated to the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and based in their building, ARC was an independent curatorial and research body which organized events through the 1970s, its acronym standing for Art/Animation, Research, Creation/Confrontation.
- 11 "Cette exposition ne prétend pas être une présentation du meilleur art anglais d'aujourd'hui mais apporter une information sur sa diversité et sa singularité propres, en tenant compte, toutefois, du niveau d'information du public parisien." Pagé, "Introduction", 6.
- 12 "Un des traits spécifiques de l'art anglais, vu à travers cette sélection, tiendrait alors, peut-être, à ce qui se joue entre une extrême sensibilité, subtile, prégnante, et sa neutralisation par des effets d'objectivité et d'ordonnance strictes, de sobriété et de froideur impeccables." Pagé, "Introduction", 6.
- 13 Maloon, "English Uncertainty in Paris", 49.
- 14 The third women artist represented was the aforementioned Phillippa Ecobichon, who showed a series of landscape photographs.
- 15 In medieval folklore, Incubus is a male demon who has intercourse with a sleeping woman, and Succubus is his female counterpart. In Hunter's photographs, Incubus is represented by a mouse seen adjacent to female genitalia, and Succubus takes the form of a cat, attacking the mouse to defend the woman.
- 16 *Approach to Fear III: Taboo—demystify* (1976).
- 17 *Approach to Fear XIII: Pain—destruction of Cause* (1977).
- 18 David Medalla and Rasheed Araeen, Open Letter to the British Council, *Art Monthly* (April 1979).
- 19 It was founded with John Dugger, Guy Brett, and Cecilia Vicuña.
- 20 Walker, *Left Shift*, 11.
- 21 Pagé, "Introduction", 6.
- 22 *Un Certain Art Anglais*, *Art Review* (1979): 87 (Tate Archive).

- 23 "Un des traits spécifiques de l'art anglais, vu à travers cette sélection, tiendrait alors, peut-être, à ce qui se joue entre une extrême sensibilité, subtile, prégnante, et sa neutralisation par des effets d'objectivité et d'ordonnance strictes, de sobriété et de froideur impeccables." Pagé, "Introduction", 6.

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