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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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British Sculpture Abroad: An Introduction, Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth



# British Sculpture Abroad: An Introduction

Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth

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**Figure 1.**

Henry Moore Institute, flyer for 'British Sculpture Abroad' conference at Tate Britain, 12-13 March 2004, featuring Tony Cragg's, *Postcard Flag (Union Jack)*, 1981, in the collection of Leeds Museums & Galleries (City Art Gallery) Digital image courtesy of Henry Moore Institute

This project goes back a good way, and we are delighted it has now come to fruition. To review its history will go some way to explaining its format, but will not quite explain why we thought it was important. It began when we were colleagues at the Henry Moore Institute (HMI), and continued after we both went elsewhere. Three events have shaped the content: the first, a two-day conference, *British Sculpture Abroad: 1945 to Now*, was organized by the HMI and held at Tate Britain in 2003. The second, a related but more focused event held at the Getty Center in 2008, was again a collaboration with the HMI. This was *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945-1975*, and has since been published on the Getty website. The last, held in 2012 at the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA), was a smaller, more private event organised with the precise intention of returning to the subject of British sculpture abroad, and to develop a publication around it.

British sculpture of the twentieth century has been so thoroughly established as a collective grouping—through exhibitions, catalogues, and related writing—that it has become a category. It appears readily identifiable, even if its terms may differ more or less subtly over time and place. The conjunction of these two words has an immediate resonance, which calls to mind in particular Henry Moore, who has become the organizing principle for British sculpture of the twentieth century—both when he is at the centre, and when he is intentionally set aside.

Although the Henry Moore Institute was not, and is not, exclusively focused on British sculpture, it very often found itself dealing with the category, whether through its collections, exhibitions, archive, or its programme and fellows. And it was very much because the category had become enshrined nationally, notably after 1945, that we felt it should be examined internationally. In many ways, activities on the international field consolidated the nationalism of the category, and yet, ironically enough, very little attention has been paid to how the category acquires or shifts meaning once it moves beyond the national terrain. This group of responses is, therefore, a deliberate attempt to understand more about the development of a national category internationally. Individually the different articles reveal how the category shifted over time, and according to its geographical context. Taken together they assert, we believe, the international bases of what might otherwise look like a home-grown product.

The start date, 1945, seemed fairly clear to us from the outset: the immediate postwar period is when “British Sculpture” really became consolidated as the category we now take for granted. The closing date was less easy to determine, but we settled for around 2000, to give us the scope to trace first the hardening and then the natural dissipation of the category. As the “global” has eclipsed the national, even a gold mark standard, like that of British sculpture has become dispersed and slipped off stage. Thus these articles begin with the rise of Henry Moore and his promotion by the British Council, and look in some depth at the phenomenon of the “New British Sculpture”, again promoted by the Council. They close with a recognition—whether in the form of the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, or the many different Biennales which have been established since that date—that the category no longer has the market value or recognition which it had much earlier, and even as late as 1998, when *Sensation* moved from London to Berlin and Brooklyn. And yet, despite the obsolescence of the national category, it is clear from the case studies that the British still offers a more concrete framework than the global.

Throughout this period, a sculpture which was almost always English has been called “British”, perhaps to reflect the institutional role of the British Council. Although the English designation has recently become more rather than less explicit—with the emergence of national pavilions for the Irish,

Welsh, and Scottish—the umbrella term is retained by the British Council for the British Pavilion in Venice and in its name and work more generally. We have accepted the existence, indeed inescapability, of this category, and rather than apologizing for its name, have instead sought to examine it, by exploring its shifting character across different times and places.

We asked our contributors to look critically at all three terms, but to pay special attention to them in combination. What happens to “British Sculpture” when it is shown abroad? Does it acquire new meaning? Does it reverberate locally, or back at home? How do we understand the distinctions between the meaning of Moore in 1950s Yugoslavia and in 1970s America? How does the Englishness intrinsic to the language of conceptualism affect its reception relative to place? We sought to find commentators who themselves reflect a variety of national contexts and positions relative to the subject. We readily acknowledge that we move from those who have studied the period as art historians, to those who were physically on the ground, involved as witnesses and sometimes as protagonists. It seems like a pertinent moment to examine a phenomenon which may now be seen to have run its course over the second half of the twentieth century, precisely because of the changing global dynamics around it.

The language issue is an interesting one, and goes beyond the use of English in conceptualism. Several of the contributions make reference to the fact that critics talked of the “modesty”, “discrimination”, “reticence”, or “restraint” of English sculpture, and we can speculate to what extent this represents a conflation of language with the national characteristics of a people and/or its artistic production. The question is stimulating but not easily assessable. The exhibition *Un Certain Art Anglais*, shown in Paris in 1979, had a clever title in that it pointed to something and nothing at one and the same time. It was particular, but it was ambiguous. Perhaps this neatly sums up the state of affairs by the 1970s, and might be seen to represent a kind of midway stage in the evolution of a category which began unapologetically, indeed determinedly, and then shifted as it was both used and questioned, ultimately to dissolve.

Zelimir Koščević points to the human quality, which we associate with the postwar reading of Moore, but only Arie Hartog makes the connection with the popular; that is, that British art, and especially sculpture, could, in its motifs, be an easier way for new audiences to learn about Modernism. This may be what Lawrence Alloway was unknowingly, or unwittingly, picking up in his attempt in 1961 to de-theorize the Constructivist work on show in Tallahassee (see Sam Gathercole’s essay). When abroad, the inner complexities of a national school can more easily be smoothed out and even jettisoned. But, and equally, there may well be a non-theoretical quality to British sculpture which has made it a successful avatar.

In fact one might go so far as to say that we do think that the national category is a useful one, but that understanding it through its internationalism has been insufficiently exploited. There has been a tendency over the last generation to reject the national as a sustainable category, but it has nevertheless been used. It is therefore unhelpful not to examine what it means and why, especially in its wider usage. Even some of our own writers, despite accepting the invitation to write up case studies, have been wary of the category. They have been more or less explicit in their examination, but we believe that, taken together, these case studies do a job of clarifying and examining a category which was largely made abroad.

The format should be easy to follow: five chronological sections, each confined to a decade, apart from the first, which establishes the new terrain marked out by Herbert Read and Henry Moore. Each section carries four or five case studies, devoted most usually to individual exhibitions or artists. Each section is introduced by its editor, with a more synthetic essay drawing on these case studies, among others, to consider the subject in the period. Two artists, Simon Starling and Gerard Byrne, provide a different kind of material view on to the same area. The twenty-five case studies cannot hope to add up to being comprehensive, but they do make an important contribution to thinking about British sculpture abroad, and we thank all our authors for their patience and forbearance with the long gestation of this project. We also thank the team at the Paul Mellon Centre, notably Hana Leaper and Sarah V. Turner, for helping us with all its complexities.

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