

# Hearsay, Rumours, Bed-sit Dreamers and Art Begins Today

I am having difficulty in pinning down what the significance of the 1965 *New Generation Sculpture* exhibition could be. I have resorted to compiling lists, lots of them, and each one with a different inflection. But the crucial thing has to be how to edit these lists into something relevant for this conference. And I keep on going back to the subject of the conference – is it, what is the future *for* sculpture, or the future *of* sculpture, or, maybe, does sculpture have a future? And who cares anyway.

The 1965 *New Generation* exhibition has stuck in my memory, but not because it was an exceptional artistic experience. The opposite is more the case. As Mary Horlock cites in her catalogue essay for this exhibition, *Early One Morning*, Bruce McClean referred to the 1965 exhibition as more of the same: *New Generation* sculpture was nothing more than Henry Moore with stripes. The exhibition was more relevant to its immediate past than to anything new. *New Generation* was a kind of mutton dressed as lamb.

Dominating my lists has been the word 'new'. New does signify clean, fresh, bright, unused, unopened, spotless, even pure. Certainly not second-hand, nearly new, borrowed. And when the new is spoilt, even in the slightest way, a tiny scratch on the new car body, or a spot of grease on new clothes, the entire effect is ruined, and the new becomes a ruin. To have removed the word 'new' from the title of the *New Generation* exhibitions would have lost everything: to have called them the "Next Generation" would have meant nothing, but would have been, in fact, nearer the truth.

And 'new' does also mean 'young'. Importantly, the *New Generation* exhibitions did herald the importance and excitement of showing new, young artists' work when previously there were few such exhibitions.

But despite the brightness and so-called newness of the *New Generation* exhibition, there was an inherent familiarity about it. A dullness took over: the stillness of the sculpture was bland, not atmospheric; its weight was leaden rather than illusionary; its colour, although its greatest asset, too reminiscent of what had been shown in the previous year's *New Generation* painting exhibition. The 1965 exhibition was destined to be short lived, and all too quickly it became consumed by institutionalism, its fate sealed into academicism.

The exhibition became a demonstration for how sculpture could be learnt. As an all male preserve, the *New Generation* exhibition offered a collection of workshop practices, born out of essentially male-based activities: welding, fibreglass and resin casting and construction, and semi-industrial assemblage. Sculpture as such provided an ideal for a 'school of sculpture' to be established, based on sheet metal assemblage and fibreglass and resin techniques, and exercises accompanying these would reveal all.

Also, there was this all-pervading suspicion, through rumour and hearsay of course, that all that was going on in New Generation sculpture, UK, had its origins in the USA, and those who had an inkling of this were disappointed in the claims bestowed upon the exhibition. Dominating the experience was not a sense of newness but more of an eclecticism culled from various of the moment, American styles. American art was what was craved: stripes, colour fields abounded within and without art schools making the exhibition several years overdue, and out of date quicker than it could have expected.

Therefore, going to see the current Tate Britain collection of 1960s New Generation sculpture re-stated exactly that sense of dull academicism, where crucial missing ingredients deny the possibility of a more enchanted experience. The emotional denial inherent to the work brought back how easily the New Generation sculpture had become fodder for designers who had plundered its bright, toy-like style for their own ends, making the work indistinguishable from the burgeoning Habitat domestic commodities, Galt's faddish, pseudo crafted toys, as well as packaging, textiles and new innovations with easy to assemble furniture and DIY, also a burgeoning, new industry.

The increasingly tedious debates about sculpture then: to plinth or not to plinth, the value of the laborious grind of making, truth to materials etc., etc., paled into more art school academicism as new rumours and hearsay of what was going on elsewhere began to filter through. And what was it that was being talked about and rumoured? Stories of works in deserts and excavations in derelict warehouses employing a different kind of labour: straight manual labour as seen on the street and building site: diggers and excavators, were being appropriated to make sculpture, whilst at the opposite end of the scale, resin and a new material, latex, were being used like paint, not as a substitute for bronze, but as stuff in its own right, to be dunked into, painted on cloth to make it rigid, moulded off rigid forms to make them soft, poured, spilt and thrown. Weight, mass, scale and size were all being usurped by gesture, touch and the here and now. And artists were taking to the streets, like so many others at that time, and foregoing the studio; anywhere and everywhere was a site, and anything and everything could be made into art. Excitement and imagination had arrived. By 1968, the New Generation exhibitions were dead history.

So, what is newness? Interestingly the current exhibition, *Early One Morning*, does not make such a claim, but, as the title suggests, offers energy, vitality and an anything goes exuberance. It clearly does delight, and, because it does not offer any definitions for sculpture – which the 1965 show became associated with – there is a free spirit about this exhibition. Whether this free spirit is new or not is another matter, but certainly the 1965 exhibition could make no such claim. All the old rules were firmly in place: craft, weight, formal autonomy, symmetry, asymmetry. The 'new' could be learnt, and art schools were where you went to learn it. A new academicism had been born, and an all male one at that! Freeness, imagination and surprise did seem to be missing from the 1965 exhibition. And as the hearsay

and rumours increased from the USA and Europe, the more academic and institutionalised the British art scene seemed to become. The hearsay and rumours offered an entirely different experience, an experience rooted in the forbidden and despised notion of theatricality. No more the need for permanency, weightiness, handcraft, the learnt and to be taught restraints of what was and what was not sculpture. Instead, in with impermanency, temporariness, dematerialisation, the fugitive, the ephemeral, the here and now. Out with the welding shop and the learnable techniques and in with experimentation with anything and everything: materials and physicality were opened up for anything, everything, everywhere. And the artist him or herself could be anyone, and as such they could be subject and object of the work.

The beauty of the theatrical lay in its potential to take on anything, anywhere: the stage became container and protagonist for the work, and could be anything and everything. Absolutely anywhere could be appropriated as an art space.

Sculpture became the activity incarcerated within an art school, to be taught and learnt. The street and anywhere else became the time and the place. Creative freedom was reciprocal to the political activities raging around Europe and the USA. The incident, the act itself was the work, and how it would have permanency would be through its potential for rumour and hearsay, all of which could be endorsed by the most significant of reporters, the camera: the Super 8 movie camera and the 35 mm SR, and their rolls of black and white film. These were to become the most important travelling companions and accomplices to this ephemeral work.

So for me the legacy of the 1965 exhibition was not in the show itself but in what it spawned as an opposition to it. Sculpture continued to be made in studios but there was a burgeoning feminising of the processes, and a different take on labour intensity was beginning to emerge. The studio could look beyond itself for inspiration. The kitchen, the dressmaker's, the garage, agriculture, road works, building sites and, of course, the bed sit, the home of most art students, could all provide processes to be plundered and appropriated as means to an end. Speculation was the game and time was of the essence. Why try to compete with the super-artists, and their corporate support: the former rebels, who had become the then established global exhibitors: the Smiths, Caros, Kings, Tuckers, yesterday's equivalents to today's Turrells, Violas, Christos, Pistolettos. Why devote hours to labour intensive activities when results could be produced immediately, as was beginning to be seen through the work of Hesse and Bourgeois. Why go to the macho means of production when twiddling your thumbs and putting things together from your immediate environment was all you could afford to do. What about staring at the bed-sit ceiling and dreaming up the wild, the wonderful and the way beyond from the patterns on the ceiling and making it become reality by any means possible? The smoothed out surfaces of the fibreglass and resin aficionados were becoming clichéd, let alone the fact that resin was carcinogenic, and therefore an unsuitable material to spend too much time with. All the more reason for speedy, direct application; all the more reason for hit and run techniques.

Theatricality and time became absorbed into all aspects of sculpture. Issues about the plinth blurred into comparative obscurity and irrelevance. Space became location and place, a material in its own right and the object could both occupy and disown that space: the object could be dematerialised. Its presence could, and can, for that matter, be manifested through its absence, and again the hearsay and rumours of such work were as important as the work itself. Again, it was and is the camera in all its guises which provided the evidence, and it is only evidence, of such work. Therefore, I believe, sculpture as a fundamentalist activity which could only tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth became tedious and irrelevant. Released from its history of permanency and absolute materiality, sculpture could fragment space, could be cinematic in its relationship to how to occupy space, and could fib and lie itself into its own reality. Objects could connect and interrelate over spaces that they

would charge with atmospheric and moody resonances, and time had to be taken to experience the whole encounter: objects, space, time.

And so hearsay, rumours, bed-sit dreams and 'art begins today' attitudes came to stay and have stayed. Sculpture, for myself, still resides in the experience of unreality: the walking around of things that have no use in the world and which defy absolute categorisation and definition. I do not want to be told about things which I already know about, unless of course it is to be surprised, to be offered a glimpse of something which I could never conceive of being what it is. The fugitive and the ephemeral are still exciting; the place of where something might be and could be, whether that is brought into an official art space, or whether that is claiming somewhere else, is still exciting. And the here and now, which has to be the most exciting and enduring of sculptural experience, where once you have gone away from the object it somehow cannot quite be retrieved. It demands that you have to be there with it, to experience it, to know it.

Even though conceptual art raged like wildfire, and tried its hardest to establish its own domination, it could not override the enthusiasm for making-and-doing in its revitalised, theatrical form. It did have an influence, undoubtedly so, causing a wave of doubt and reconsideration of who art was for, where it should, and could be seen, with what, how, and why. Again, the dominant tool was the camera, and so a cross over between the mental and physical approaches to making became inextricably bound, and the rest is history.

Likewise with commodification: it may come and go, with its boxed, based and vitrined symptoms of conventionalism and conservatism; they may have abounded, and still do abound, incarcerating and taming aesthetics, and emasculating and caging form, as they do, where the wild, untamed and visceral is brought to heel under the whip of consumerist, product-led and commercially driven incentives. Importantly as well, hearsay and rumour have now found perfect accommodation within the catalogue, which has undoubtedly become the most important record, souvenir and take-away memorandum of what is shown: no catalogue, no exhibition? So what becomes of rumour and hearsay under these circumstances? Time will tell.

But the most significant influences on sculpture for the present and for its future do still remain beyond the institutions, firmly residing in the sphere of the artist him or herself. Where, with what, how, why, when, can still surprise, be momentary, difficult to access, or even be known about, but because of these difficulties and awkwardnesses, not despite them, hearsay, rumour, bed-sit dreamers, and art-begins-to-day attitudes, will prevail, and will be initiated and stimulated by the favoured art of the time, even by default, even for the sake of contrariness, even to stake out an opposition, all of which provides the resource and incentive for what will happen next.

The 1965 New Generation sculpture galvanised something: whether, through opposition, it was an anti-historicism and anti-institutionalism on one hand, which has not endured. Or whether it is the spirit of adventure centred on the individual and how he or she releases that, whatever their life experience, bed-sits or otherwise, which *has* endured. Whatever the influences from 1965 might be, if any, the future of sculpture always lies in the unexpected. Therefore, this most awkward, recalcitrant and unmanageable of art forms can be relied upon to make believable the imagination. Imagination has to be what is inherently new and surprising, and essential to sculpture, its past, its present and its future.

This text was presented as a talk at the *Early One Morning* exhibition seminar *Next Generations – Current Sculptural Practice in the UK and Beyond*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, July 20 2002. *Early one Morning* showcased 5 young British Sculptors: Gary Webb, Clare Barclay, Eva Rothschild, Jim Lambie and Shahin Ahrussinabi.

**Reds, Bodything, Lie**  
Fabric, elastic, upholstery foam,  
wooden frame, red felt, rubber  
Each work: 100 x 120 x 120 cm  
1995  
Contemporary Arts Society,  
Royal Festival Hall, London



