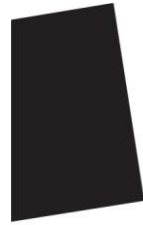


Interview with Stephen Hepworth and Phyllida Barlow  
29 January – 5 March 2005



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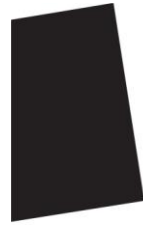
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**Stephen Hepworth: Your work seems to exist somewhere between the site specific and the autonomous sculpture. How important is the site in thinking about a work?**

**Phyllida Barlow:** I do not think of my work as site specific. I do think of it as opportunist. For example, the height of both Baltic in Gateshead and Bloomberg SPACE is a challenge and I want to respond to that aspect of the spaces, but in very different ways. I see this as a reaction to what is there, which is for me different from using these spaces site specifically. However, I cannot deny the importance with both works of the preliminary visit. My immediate response to a space does seem to inform a lot of decisions about how to initiate the work. It has been the same for past works. I was in a group show in the summer of 2003 and the venue for my work was an old mill. It was a wonderfully challenging site. It was difficult to access and there was very little light. There was old machinery and awkward walls jutting into the space. It was very rural with the sound of running water. Again, it was a very lofty building with cross beams and a vaulted roof. My immediate response to that space was to use the height as well as using very bold, brightly painted objects that stood out, and so were very singular and separate from each other. It was as if they were relating to the left behind machinery, but more like unidentifiable furniture – very different from what I have done at Baltic and what I will be doing for Bloomberg.

The site, which I relate to more as a location, is comparable to a stage, very corny I know, but which accommodates my need to activate space with something equivalent to an event - a way, perhaps, of avoiding the specificity of the term 'exhibition'. There is something about the complexity of the Bloomberg space. Here, there are three spaces, all very different, where the walking around, through and into the different spaces has the potential to create a narrative in itself. Therefore, encountering the separate works and creating links between them is enough, a kind of protagonist in itself. There is something time-based about the process of setting up and installing works, and I have worked in this way for a long time, and it has always been the obvious, normal thing for me to do. The most vital quality of a location for me is my need to make it function in the present. It is about now, not then, or next so that also connects with performance and time, and to some extent my desire to not hang onto the work, to get rid of it once it has finished its performance, once the event is over.



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**Graham Gussin: Are there particular individuals, artists, writers, film makers that you might say have been a source for you in your thinking and practice?**

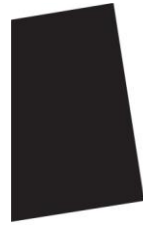
**PB:** The head of sculpture at Chelsea, George Fullard, when I was a student there (1960-1963) introduced me to the work of Germaine Richier and Dubuffet which transformed my idea of sculpture. Most importantly Picasso's *Glass of Absinthe* series. There is something about surface, using surface to reveal and deceive, in this and in Richier's touch on clay held in the bronze. She said of clay something like 'Don't touch clay too much, it is hysterical and reacts to every moment' Dubuffet's dust and debris sculptures transformed into stunted figurines, grotesque and ephemeral. Later on, Arte Povera, Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois. Process, dislocation, theatre, narrative, physicality, materiality, displacement. Film, for me reciprocates sculpture, Andrzej Wajda's trilogy, especially *Ashes and Diamonds*, all of Jean Luc Goddard, memorably *Band Apart*. Andre Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and absolutely at the top of them all Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* and *A Man Condemned* where the protagonist turns every object in his cell into a means for his escape (bedding becomes rope, bed frame becomes metal hooks, spoon becomes chisel) all about making from nothing. Alain Robbe-Grillet; that slow study of things, the absence of story but the emphasis of narrative, the form revealing subject.

**GG: Can you say more about what you mean by 'film reciprocating sculpture?'**

**PB:** It is the intervention of space, and how that space is manoeuvred and manipulated, which film and sculpture share and reciprocate. The camera is there by stealth, similar to the walking around which defines sculpture, whatever form it takes, as much as the object which is being walked around. The camera patrols the space, it is set up to film both as an object and as an observer: as an object it has to negotiate the space to stalk its subject, and as an observer it has to be aware of every point of view which reveals that subject - above, below, sideways, away, close, underneath, on top. Sculptural space demands such negotiations as well but where human stalking and observing substitute the camera.

**Sacha Craddock: Why would you find it necessary to protect, preserve, defend the notion of sculpture as a distinct and separate art form?**

**PB:** It's not so much sculpture that I see as a distinct and separate art form so much as the ideas, or more precisely, the phenomena, coming out of sculpture. Such qualities as sculptural space... a space where the object is dematerialised.... which identifies itself through time more than anything else, that is the process of moving through, around, up, down, into, out of a space where an object might or might not be. This experience of looking which requires the whole sentient self, not just vision, is, for me, particular to the notion of a sculptural language, something which spatial



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qualities demand; whether that be through projected images into a space, of video, film, etc., or through sound, smell, weight, height, depth, texture, temperature. These are qualities inherent to physicality and materiality and ask to be encountered not just through image (although that may be part of it) or visibility, but through a measuring up of oneself with being there with these spatial, sentient things which can be responded to the heightened awareness, or sense,

of one kind of body versus another demanding an awkward challenge to ourselves, our own physicality and materiality in relationship to the world around. I interpret this kind of looking as non-verbal in its primary state.

**SC: Is it possible, useful, to narrate the shift in the relationship between public, state institutions and sculpture over the last twenty years?**

**PB:** Sculpture has lost the identity (thank goodness) which art history constructed for it, as through, for example Anthony Caro, or David Smith, and then Minimalism of the early 1970s. As a result of this demise, sculpture, since the 1980s has become very acceptable, sort of easy: it lost its horrific, physical ponderousness, qualities I find very easy to empathise with. But they had to go, be challenged; they became didactic and dogmatic, like a fundamentalist belief system. So sculpture became pictorial and image-based, and incredibly successful at finding a public and being public. However, some interesting things have happened.... the huge, and the vast, (as associated with, say, Richard Serra) were subverted to some extent in the late 1980s and through the early 1990s with equally vast works - but which parodied their vastness with intimacy.

So, to try and answer the question, public institutions became enamoured of the pictorial object, the contained, glazed-over object, the vitrine, but less now than then. However, that infatuation does seem to have made things less risky, more careful, more self-conscious of not failing - whatever that means. The very real bonus of how the monumental has taken on intimacy has had the downside of those qualities being trapped in highly desirable, purchasable objects; endless executive toys at worst, and, at best, exotic magnificence of vast, unimaginable expense... Jeff Koons for example. But young artists know all this and are not prepared to accept the worn-out model handed down from the 1990s as if it is the only possibility for their futures. They are ready to make a new model, (or better still, lots of different models) for how to proceed, survive, and continue making work. There is a challenge being launched, however obliquely, against subject-led work. There is a burgeoning interest in content and form: to somehow reveal the subject rather than subject being the means to an end, this is not for everyone but what is interesting is that a different critical debate is emerging.

**David Risley: There is a strong sense of the performative in your work, not just in its process but also in its atmosphere, it is as if something were about to happen.**

**PB:** Things in the world have different categories: living, dead, dormant, useless, useful, nameless, obstructive, benign, unwanted the list is endless. I'm interested in the inability of things to be on their own, but to also be absolutely on their own that paradox. If a 'thing' has a particular category, like obstruction, I'm also interested in its opposite state, whatever that might be - fragility perhaps. I want those conflicting qualities to generate a subject for the work, as well as a tension. I can specify for each of these but I also question how real any of these actually are. The largeness of the structures *equals* the object in its own right; the insubstantial, low quality of the materials *equals* performative, as an obstructive prop, and historical in that the object/sculpture can be associated with certain modernist approaches to sculpture; the thickness, messiness of the paintwork *equals* performative, as in generating a false emotion, demanding to be

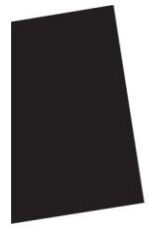


experienced as wounded, damaged and visceral; raw, basic materials *equal* the temporary state of the objects which generates, for me, 'the something is about to happen',

**DR:** To what extent are these works planned? Do you do much drawing before working on an installation?

**PB:** As well as drawing always being important in so much that it is a continuous activity, it is also how the practical side of the work begins - how can I make this thing, what will I need to make it, what size, what structure... But before the drawing there is the looking at things in the world. As well as referring to my work as fakes I also refer to it as bad copies. The starting point is often something seen out there; it is then drawn, quite diagrammatically in a sketch book, and the slippage, the translation, from the original to my bad copy begins. I want the bad copy to be a thing in its own right, as already mentioned, and part of that process is how its translation from its original, suggests materials. Huge structures become dwindled down to cheap lengths of sawn 2" x 1" timber, and vast facades become 8' x 4' sheets of thin ply, weight becomes polystyrene blocks, rubble becomes paint. The translation can lose all sight of the original which is sometimes exactly what I want and at other times not so at all. I have become very interested in how to accommodate failure, to be unafraid of it and allow it to become a part of the process towards remaking and rethinking. So contingency, as you put it, is important.

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