**Modelling lines of sculptural thought:**

**The use of a transcription project to interrogate, intervene and dialogue with a sculpture archive**

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The archive is the site where sculpture and sculptural thinking can be deliberated through the process of transcription. I believe that for the sculptor this is a pertinent research tool. It can carry over one form of inscription into another. In this example, this archival intervention operates as a mode of inscription that is sculptural, spatial, material, and psychological. It offers a form of retrieval for an archival project of this type and allows for the invention of a situation where both a spatial and psychological dimension to the reading of objects from the past are used to develop work in the present. Transcription is a form of modelling lines of sculptural thought and the archive is a space within which such modelling happens.

A transcription project typically is the taking of a master painting and then drawing from it in order to understand how it is made.  This is not copying; it is not an action of verbatim replication. Instead the artist is distilling the image, taking from it what she desires and leaving the rest behind. There are several examples of sculptors reading or transcribing art in the making of their own work. One example is Anthony Caro’s exhibition project in 1998 *Caro at the National Gallery: sculpture from painting*. In the catalogue he acknowledges a provenance citing Henry Moore’s transcription ‘Three Bathers – after Cezanne’ (1978). In ‘Pose Work for Plinths I’ (1971) Bruce Maclean used his own body to transcribe and parody the poses of Henry Moore's celebrated reclining figures. Sculpture, particularly in twentieth century Britain, has a history of reading objects from the past in order to develop work in the present.

In 2009 I was one of six artists invited to engage with and make new work in response to the collection at Huddersfield Art Gallery. Choosing which work from the collection to study was, for me, a no-brainer: it was easy because I had seen the 2007 exhibition *Beyond Appearances: The Sculpture of Carl Plackman 1943–2004*. The British sculptor Carl Plackman (1943-2004) exhibited both nationally and internationally throughout his lifetime, and I met him when he was a Visiting Lecturer at the Slade School of Fine Art in the 1980s when I was a student there. He was part of both my lived experience and the context within which I formed my own sculptural positioning. As I approached this project, I dismissed all opportunities to review the catalogue of this 2007 exhibition, or to explore the hegemonic or taxonomic structures that surround a gallery or civic collection. My decision was to simply get out of storage and view the pieces by Plackman in the collection. This culminated in my own response, a work titled ‘To the Table’.

Visiting his exhibition some eight years ago had returned my thought to the powerful sculpture polemic that was at play in London in the 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a shared problematic lived out by British sculptors through their performed practices. Writing of this period, the art historian Jon Wood describes this as ‘the complex space of sculpture in Britain’.[[1]](#endnote-1) I decided to focus in on one drawing by Plackman, ‘Civilisation as Barbarism’ [see Fig. 1], made in 1984 - the same year I made my first complex piece of sculpture. This, my postgraduate installation at the Slade School of Fine Art, was titled ‘A Philosophy of Generosity.’ It comprised two table based pieces positioned next to one another, installed in an immersive space where the walls and floor were hand washed with pigment and clay. At this time I was challenging in my practice the sculptural object, seeking to produce a discursive interactive involvement in the action of looking. There was a shared composition that resonated between Plackman’s drawing and my own sculpture: both consisted of a group of assembled objects placed on a wooden surface, framed within a rectangle. They operated with a similar visuality, but were made from different subjective positions that, I would argue, demonstrated what Jon Wood in the aforementioned essay regards as an ‘art historical narrative of inter-generational rivalry and succession.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Looking at Plackman’s drawing prompted a broader speculation for me, and it encouraged me to reflect on a key moment of my own development as a sculptor and return to thinking about what was at play between sculptors in 1984.

Drawing was taught as a distinct mode of sculptural thinking when I studied sculpture at art school. It is part of my pedagogical inheritance, and it taught me to think sculpturally as a student at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. Here students were encouraged to make observational drawings, sometimes for as long as two weeks. The nature of any drawing pedagogy can be defined by the particular genealogy of an art school. It is thus my own default position, as an alumnus of the Camberwell Sculpture Department, to make use of a drawing system to interrogate an observed subject. So, to select a drawing by Carl Plackman as an example of space, form and object relations was a comfortable action for me. It was one that made no distinction as to whether two or three dimensional rendering is the sculpture or not. In this way, drawing and sculpture could be perceived as a seamless activity.

To initiate my interrogation of Plackman’s work I began with a period of drawing. I consciously positioned myself as the enquirer in this process by implementing another inherited drawing pedagogy, transcription. This involved taking a conscious decision to evoke scientific research in order to ascertain truthful revelation. I began a period of rigorous and analytical drawing using the transformative system[[3]](#endnote-3) of axonometric projection, that is often used by architects. My intention was to employ a method that could strip away subject matter, meaning the process became the subject matter of my project. I asked questions in a way that only a sculptor could, without using words, using the particular kind of insight an artist possesses by being a practitioner, and reading the structural conventions within the drawing. The transcription method gave me spatial and three-dimensional data that was extrapolated from behind the ‘seen’ surface of the drawing, and I was able to step into, what I would like to call, the situation of Plackman’s *oeuvre*.

I want to add another dimension to the value of transcription for the sculptor. As the core process in this archival project, transcription enabled me to produce a collection of forms created by both my own and Plackman’s work. If read outside the aesthetic rubric, and within the context of Christopher Bollas’ psychoanalytical idea of ‘the shadow of the object’ in mind, it can be argued that these forms I created demonstrate a plastic manifestation of object relations.

Bollas’ book *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*,[[4]](#footnote-1) first published in 1987, is an important reference for me. He uses a set of terms common in the belief systems of both British sculpture and the British School of Psychoanalysis. The language of psychoanalysis and the language of sculpture both use the terms object, relations, material, transformation, and generation of discourse. My reading of sculpture through a dynamic play of object relations provides a context for reading the complex space of sculpture in Britain through an inter-generational narrative. Not only does my association of time, of place, and of the student / master relationship at the core of this transcription process sit within the rubric of object relations, the actual act of juxtaposing objects enacts Bollas’ ideas within a specific pedagogical context of British sculpture. Interpolating a transformative drawing system into an object of knowledge (the Plackman drawing - the archive in this instance) enabled my invention of a situation where minds (or the plastic representation of minds) may mingle through the interplay of artists’ objects.

To produce ‘To the Table’I set about making the objects in Plackman’s drawing from the data I had collected during transcription. I rendered three-dimensional versions on an invented large table top [see Fig. 2]. As Plackman’s still life composition came alive in my own hands I, literally, dug through my own personal archive of objects, casts, moulds and drawings. Using a transformation system allowed me to engage in the act of free association and, stepping into play, I engaged in imaginative pretence. In this way, I performed the roles of both analyst and analysand in the physical and imagined space of the sculpture. These object relations allowed me to recognise a commonality in sculptural thinking that I shared with Plackman. Bollas’ study of the psychoanalytical process involves engaging the deep subjectivity of its two participants. He describes that by ‘putting the self into the real through play, children are engaged in a kind of embodied dreaming that brings elements of inner life into the world’.[[5]](#endnote-4) Under these terms, the drawing ‘Civilisation as Barbarism’ became the transformational object that held within it the sculpture ideology in the complex space of sculpture in Britain [see Fig. 3].

1. Wood, Jon, ‘United Enemies: the problem of sculpture in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s’ in Henry Moore Institute, ed. *United Enemies: the problem of sculpture in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s*. Henry Moore Foundation, 2012, p.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dubery, Fred and Willats, John, Perspective and Other Drawing Systems, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc., 1972, p.7. In this text the authors collectively name drawing methods of notating form and space transformation systems [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bollas, Christopher, The Mystery of Things, London, Routledge, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
5. Bollas, Christopher, The Mystery of Things, London, Routledge, 1999, p.152 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)