

## ***New British Sculpture/Bristol 1968: a new engagement with public art***

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Before 1968, as Francis Greenacre notes in his introduction to the recent publication *Public Sculpture of Bristol* 'all sculpture in Bristol and almost all sculpture elsewhere in Britain was either architectural, in the sense of being applied or linked to a building, or it was a commemorative statue or monument, a fountain or a water source.'<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *New British Sculpture/Bristol* in 1968, organised by Arnolfini with the co-operation of the Bristol Corporation and the Bath Festival Society, was remarkable for the part it played in opening up civic sculpture in the UK to new possibilities, marking a move away from the more traditional, narrow perspective of public sculpture as either architectural decoration or as some kind of permanent monument dedicated to a specific individual or event.

From the 20<sup>th</sup> May to the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1968, *New British Sculpture/Bristol* temporarily sited twenty-five colourful and abstract pieces, typically made from welded metal and fibreglass, across the centre of Bristol. Writing in the catalogue for *New British Sculpture/Bristol*, art historian and Keeper of the Modern Collection at Tate Gallery Ronald Alley, noted that, 'the fact that many of the pieces are displayed on public sites in the most prominent parts of Bristol makes it altogether exceptional. Instead of having to enter a gallery, people can see examples of this new art form in everyday public settings.'<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was exceptional in that no previous British exhibition had taken such a risk in siting contemporary sculpture quite so publicly outdoors. In a series of *Sculpture in the Open Air* exhibitions, begun in London in 1948 and which continued until 1966, British modern sculpture, as epitomised by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, had begun to be shown outside of gallery spaces, but it was still confined to particular parks to which visitors were admitted. In contrast, the conspicuousness of the work in *New British Sculpture/Bristol* meant that anyone might happen upon it, day or night, and so exposed the work to new audiences who would not have otherwise encountered it. In this regard, *New British Sculpture/Bristol* followed the lead of the *Sculpture in the Environment* project that had opened in New York the previous year, and which included Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, sited in the Seagram Plaza. Other exhibitions, including the City of London Festival project *Sculpture in the City*, were to open later that year, but *New British Sculpture/Bristol* was the first in Britain to follow the American example.

Eschewing the sculptural norms of the pedestal or of a hand-worked, expressionistic surface in favour of harder-edged industrial materials - characteristics that typified the look of this new kind of work - the sculptors of *New British Sculpture/Bristol* first attracted widespread attention at the *New Generation* exhibition in London's Whitechapel gallery in 1965. Indeed, David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Anthony Caro, Justin Knowles, Francis Morland, Tim Scott, Isaac Witkin, and Derrick Woodham, artists in *New British Sculpture/Bristol*, had also had work shown as part of *New Generation*. This new style of British sculpture had been particularly influenced by the work and

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<sup>1</sup> Merritt, Douglas and Greenacre, Francis *Public Sculpture of Bristol* Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2010:xxxi

<sup>2</sup> Alley, Ronald *New British Sculpture/Bristol* Arnolfini, Bristol 1968

teaching of Anthony Caro at St. Martin's School of Art, where Annesley, Bolus, Scott, Tucker and Witkin had all been students. Caro, who had previously worked as an assistant to Henry Moore, first travelled to the USA in 1959 and again between 1963 and 1965 where he worked alongside a group of American artists closely associated with the 'high-modernism' of art critic Clement Greenberg at Bennington College, Vermont, including the sculptor David Smith and the painters Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland.<sup>3</sup> Whilst at Bennington Caro had been able to experiment and improvise with new welding techniques, introduced to him by David Smith, and much of the sculpture that Caro and Smith made during this period is recorded in photographs showing their work outdoors, rather than in a gallery or studio space. Some of these striking images are held in Arnolfini's archive, together with transparencies from the Sculpture in Battersea Park exhibition in 1966, and so may well have been a source of inspiration for Rees in deciding to stage his sculpture exhibition outside.

In his introduction to the catalogue for *Sculpture in Environment*, American art critic Irving Sandler had made the point that there 'are a number of attitudes that artists who work in the city will have to give up. The belief that art is precious is one, for much of public art will be expendable. There will be a problem of vandalism. Many of the sites will undoubtedly be destroyed in the future, for cities are rapidly changing... But ... the public (including artists) increasingly cares about the need to renew our cities and is becoming aware of the role that art can play in this.'<sup>4</sup> This move away from the traditionally serious and somewhat fastidious conventions of monumental public sculpture towards the possibility of a less reverential, impermanent and more playful display of contemporary public art was eagerly embraced by Arnolfini's founding director Jeremy Rees. Rees had an infectious enthusiasm for contemporary art, wanting it to be seen and enjoyed by as many people as possible. When the Arnolfini gallery opened in 1961 he had wanted to put a sign up above the entrance declaring, 'Enjoy Yourself!'<sup>5</sup> Rees had already developed the pioneering 'Picture Loan Scheme' at Arnolfini, which worked to get contemporary art out of the gallery and into the wider public realm. Operating like a private subscription library, members of the scheme could borrow works of art from

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg first visited St Martin's in 1963, declaring that the work made there was 'the strongest new sculpture done anywhere in the world at this moment'. " (See Clarrie Wallis *Making Tracks* in *Richard Long* Tate, London 2009:37). However, it is interesting to note, as an historical counterpoint to this and the work of the sculptors in *New British Sculpture/Bristol*, that Bristol in the 1960s was also quietly playing host to the emergence of a new kind of site specific art of international significance, marking a radical departure from the kind of work associated with the 'high-modernism' of Clement Greenberg, as Ashton Court Estate and Avon George, with Leigh Woods on one side and the Downs on the other, became the sites for some of the seminal early art works of artist Richard Long. These included *Snowball Track*, 1964, made on Bristol's Downs, and *England 1967*, at Ashton Court Estate, alongside work made for the curator Seth Sieglaub's conceptual exhibition *March 1969* and Paul Maenz's 1967 show *19:45 – 21:55* in Frankfurt, both of which Long was invited to participate in. For *19:45 – 21:45* Long 'posted a bundle of sticks that he had collected from Leigh Woods ... along with instructions.... He also made a complimentary object in Bristol with similar components and the same dimensions, but 'in an outdoor environment, without architecture, people or objects.' (Wallis 2009:53) Long, a Bristolian, was a student at St Martin's between 1966 and 1968, at the same time as the *New Generation* artists were becoming increasingly prominent. Enrolled on the Advanced Course at St Martin's, and studying alongside artists including Barry Flanagan and Hamish Fulton, Long was one of the students to take part in John Latham's infamous 'Still and Chew Event', which became a cause célèbre against the hegemony of Greenbergian aesthetics. Latham, a part-time tutor at St Martin's, invited students to participate in an event to chew Greenberg's seminal collection of essays *Art and Culture* to a pulp. Having 'dissolved the library copy ... Latham return[ed] it in a phial wittily labelled 'Essence of Greenberg'. (Robert Burstow *Aesthetics: forms and meanings in Sculpture in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain Volume One: Identity, Infrastructure, Aesthetics, Display, Reception* Henry Moore Institute, Leeds 2003:176

<sup>4</sup> See Rees, Jeremy *Public Sculpture* Studio International, London July/August 1972:13

<sup>5</sup> See Johnson, Phil *Arnolfini*, *Art Spaces* Scala, London 2005:29

the gallery for a small charge, and many works by artists such as Mary Fedden, Terry Frost, David Hockney and Howard Hodgkin were loaned to schools, businesses and individuals in the Bristol area. The prospect of being able to site contemporary sculpture within the everyday public spaces of Bristol would have been compelling for Rees.

With characteristic energy, Rees set about getting backing for his idea in the summer of 1967, co-opting support from the Bristol Corporation, the Bath Festival Society, Bristol Cathedral, and other businesses that were locally based, including the Bristol and West Building Society, Norwich Union Life Insurance Society, the Bank of England, who had a branch on the corner of Wine Street and High Street, and Bristol United Press Limited. The Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, who had sponsored the *New Generation* exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1965, provided money for the catalogue, and the Arts Minister, Jennie Lee, agreed to officially open the exhibition. In addition Bristol City Art Gallery organised a related, gallery-based exhibition *British Sculpture/Bristol* which, featuring works by earlier generations of sculptors, provided an historical context for *New British Sculpture/Bristol*. The whole project had required enormous determination from Arnolfini's director in bringing these various partners together, an achievement that didn't go unnoticed in the press. 'The exhibition represented collaboration between the private sector, local and central government and commerce – an ideal pattern of partnership', wrote Griffith Williams in the *Western Mail*.<sup>6</sup> Arnolfini's trustees also recorded their congratulations and admiration of Rees in their Council of Management minutes. Rees himself admitted that he had found it an 'exhausting experience', and expressed the wish that he would like to see the Arts Council take up the challenge of creating other exhibitions of sited, public sculpture in regional cities.

But, judging from the letters and articles in the local press, *New British Sculpture/Bristol* certainly did not meet with universal approval. Under the stark headline 'Appalled', the *Bristol Evening Post* published a letter from R. J. Babbington-Smythe, who expressed his outrage in no uncertain terms.

While visiting the city of Bristol last week I was appalled at the shocking display of sculpture in and around the city centre.

The contrast between the medieval cathedral and the modern Council House is very impressive but this beautiful scene is desecrated by these revolting pieces of modern 'art'. Please don't ruin such a fine city as Bristol by encouraging this sort of pseudo-artistry.<sup>7</sup>

Other responses to the exhibition included bewilderment and amusement. One newspaper reported how a 'joker ... stuck a pink-primed window frame with a piece sawn out of it on its side among the exhibits', complete with the title 'Car Park Ventilation', a couple of nights before the exhibition's official opening.<sup>8</sup> Somebody else anonymously wrote a poem about Bristol's sculpture, illustrating it with cartoon-like pen drawings –

Like them, hate them, can't ignore them.  
Agreed, they are most strange  
But, from Bristol's dreary statues  
They are at least, a change.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Griffith *Bristol Fashion* *Western Mail* May 25, 1968

<sup>7</sup> Babbington-Smythe, R. J. *Appalled* *Evening Post* May 23, 1968

<sup>8</sup> Little, Ray *A Frame-up in the Pink at College Green* *Evening Post* May 18, 1968

<sup>9</sup> Arnolfini Archive Press Cuttings 1966 – 1968, sender unknown

The national press, however, took Arnolfini's enterprise much more seriously, and the exhibition was widely covered in the broadsheets. The Daily Telegraph declared, "This siting of sculpture in public places is a wholly admirable venture. It brings new work into the context of everyday life."<sup>10</sup> And Bryn Richards in the Guardian thought, "Sculpture in this idiom is not necessarily an adjunct to architecture; because of its completeness and self-sufficiency it does not demand a specific environment and can be enjoyed anywhere.... [T]he siting of Francis Morland's trio of painted "Fibreglass" cylinders was particularly happy."<sup>11</sup>

But whilst the critics were in general agreement that *New British Sculpture/Bristol* was an 'admirable venture', they were also quick to point out that it was not without its flaws. In the Sunday Telegraph Edwin Mullins reflected that,

The Bristol experiment is brave, although nowhere approaching an unqualified triumph. ... [I]t was evident on the very first day that many of the pieces outside were made in unsuitably vulnerable materials... car exhausts and the English climate were already leaving their visiting-cards.

Just as the elements have shown that they can play rough with too immaculate a conception, so can the grandeur of a city square shrink into insignificance pieces that may have looked tough and positively monumental within the four hushed walls of a London gallery.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, writing in The Times, the critic Guy Brett declared

The Arnolfini has obviously worked hard to get these works out of gallery conditions and into public spaces, so that they could be seen by casual passers-by. At the same time there is a fatal gap between the spaces the sculptures were conceived for and the spaces found for them in Bristol..... This is not to say that the sculpture cannot be shown outside; only that the context has to be considered – not only considered, but necessary...<sup>13</sup>

Given limited means, Arnolfini was only able to borrow art works for temporary display, and as Rees himself was later to acknowledge, this meant that artists were asked to loan works which had 'not originally been conceived in terms of the scale and nature of the environment in which they were shown.' '[T]he major drawback was that ... [we] were not in a position to commission works and relied on existing works where scale and suitability of materials were limited by the sculptors' own financial resources.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Daily Telegraph, June 3, 1968

<sup>11</sup> Bryn Richards *British Sculpture at Bristol* The Guardian May 25, 1968. Incidentally, Arnolfini showed sculpture by Francis Morland again more recently, as part of Stuart Home's 2006 exhibition *Hallucination Generation: High Modernism in a Tripped Out World*. Home's project investigated the countercultural networks permeating the metropolitan literary and artistic world of the 1960s. Morland used the inside of his colourful fibreglass sculptures as vessels in which to traffic cannabis from Morocco to the America and was arrested for drug smuggling several times from the late 1960s onwards. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVMMOMSEuQs> and <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/sucked.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> Mullins, Edwin *Abstraction in the Open* The Sunday Telegraph May 26, 1968

<sup>13</sup> Brett, Guy *Bringing Sculpture into the open* The Times May 23, 1968

<sup>14</sup> Rees, Jeremy *City Sculpture* (catalogue) Arts Council, London 1972

However, in 1972, the Arts Council of Great Britain took up Rees' challenge to produce exhibitions of sited sculpture in regional cities, and, once again in collaboration with the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, Rees was given the opportunity to organise the *City Sculpture* project, which aimed to address these criticisms. Together with Anthony Stokes, Rees commissioned new public sculptures for specific sites in eight cities across England and Wales; Plymouth, Cardiff, Cambridge, Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sheffield, Southampton. Their plan enabled opportunities for 'a number of sculptors to make works in relation to the sites on which they were to be shown'. As Rees explained, the 'works will be sited for an initial period of six months, at the end of which the cities will have the opportunity to negotiate for their permanent retention.'<sup>15</sup> One measure of the success of the earlier *Sculpture in Environment* show in New York was that several of the works commissioned had been retained permanently by the City. If the places taking part in *City Sculpture* followed suit, then the project might create a longer lasting engagement with their urban environments. Promisingly, one of the works on display in *New British Sculpture/Bristol*, 'Steel With White' by Justin Knowles, had been bought anonymously following the end of the exhibition and given to the Friends of the Bristol City Art Gallery. Charles Hannam, chairman of the Friends at the time, was quoted in the Bristol Evening Post as saying, 'We're delighted with the gift. It's unique. ... We shall be keeping the sculpture on our books, but it will probably be displayed by the gallery.'<sup>16</sup> Two and a half years later Arnolfini News, Arnolfini's monthly newsletter, reported that 'Steel With White', 'is at the moment on loan to Bristol University and can be seen in the entrance hall of the University's Van Dyck Gallery in Park Row.'

However, it is evident from the fact that few, if any, of the works from *City Sculpture* remain in the sites for which they were originally intended that the municipal authorities involved did not take the opportunity of accepting work on a permanent basis. No trace can be seen in the meadow by the side of Cambridge's Mill Pond of Barry Flanagan's fibreglass trunk-like structures, or Garth Evans' enormous horizontal steel sculpture for The Hayes in Cardiff, for example. Even Nicholas Munro's giant figurative gorilla sculpture for the Manzoni Gardens, part of Birmingham's former 1960s Bull Ring shopping centre, quickly disappeared. (Although Munro's sculpture has continued to have an eventful afterlife; see <http://www.spaghettagazetti.com/2007/11/whatever-happened-to-ape.html> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/allybeag/2390878466/in/set-72157600202344218/>). As Irving Sandler foresaw, much of public art will be expendable. Nevertheless, *New British Sculpture/Bristol* and the subsequent *City Sculpture* project had played significant early roles in expanding the possibilities for commissioning and engaging with public art. Rees continued his involvement with public art throughout his career, most notably through his work in establishing the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail in 1986, and Bristol continues to act as a focus for the development of public art practice in Britain through, for example, the implementation of its Public Art Strategy or the work of Situations, a commissioning and research agency for art in the public realm.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Belsey, James *Bought for £450 by mystery man* Evening Post July 3, 1968