

## SCULPTURE IS ELSEWHERE

Michele Beevors

There is a scene in the original *Star Wars* movie which shows Princess Leia standing in front of a diagram of what can only be described now as a vastly expanding universe. The year that this movie exploded onto the screen was 1977.<sup>1</sup>

In 1977, hunched over a typewriter somewhere in New York, sat the art historian Rosalind Krauss, banging out a little essay called "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" for a new book on modernity that was eventually published in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Like the *Star Wars* diagram, the essay is an abstraction, and centres on a structuralist approach that systematically disassembles the thing that it chooses as its object. The essay has come to stand as an historic monument, probably the last in the field, a hurdle to be occupied and abandoned.

Krauss's paradigm lumps the history of all of representation together with the monument, for the most part repressing memories of Giacometti, Brancusi and Duchamp. Representation should be ignored in order to open up new terrain. In her diagram, sculpture lies lodged between the categories of not-architecture and not-landscape.

Since the 1980s, sculpture has expanded exponentially. Like a disease it consumed everything. With the voracious appetite of cancer, it consumed field after field, architectural space after space. The discursive spaces of science, medicine, anthropology and ecology have all fallen prey to sculpture's voracious appetites, not to mention the institutional structures of gallery and museum.<sup>3</sup> Finally, it expanded into the social sphere where sculptors were swamped with documentation and questionnaires, and were expected to interact and intervene, to offer our two cents' worth to honour this or that good cause.<sup>4</sup> Our offerings became indistinguishable from Avaaz campaigns and ethics approval forms. Our interventions were collated and our efforts were grouped together to paint a pretty picture of what we thought about our mothers.<sup>5</sup> The sculptors who were true to the figure (read humanism) were the only ones left standing, but they were doing anything but standing still.

Standing in 2015 at the end of the world sculpture seems unsustainable – and this is what I write in my report on sustainability for the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic year after year. According to Jarrod Diamond in his popular science book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, the choices that societies make determine their fate.<sup>6</sup> Diamond uses the fate of Easter Islanders as an extreme example of his theory. The Islanders chose their culture over their survival by chopping down the last tree on the island to build a conveyor belt to move their massive stone carvings into place. Who would do such a thing, I wonder ironically? So here we are ankle-deep in our own toxic waste, still making monuments to ourselves and teaching others how to do it.

Jeff Koons is the perfect foil to the earnestness of the expanded field. Think about that anodised aluminium blue "Balloon Swan," red "Balloon Monkey" and yellow "Balloon Rabbit": how beautifully, perfectly kitsch and reflective of their status as the supreme commodity items they are – and at what cost, one wonders?<sup>7</sup> Koons has always stayed true to the intricacies of the commodity, right up to the latest commodification of his family posing in front of his Romanesque-style sculptures from the series "Antiquity." Is it a publicity shot, or the cover of the latest Lady Gaga video? This image is a parody of a parody of a parody, and this is where sculpture sits which is not earnest in intent – in an extravagant wasteland of Disney plastics made "by the rich for the rich for the rich." In another lifetime, he probably was that Easter Islander wielding the axe that felled the last tree to roll his work into place.

Koons is constantly accused of 'cashing in' – which I believe he does with open abandon – and yet I remember the first time I saw that stainless steel "Rabbit" in a copy of *Flash Art* in 1987.<sup>8</sup> It has become the touchstone for much of my thinking about my own work, teaching and thinking around the necessity of sculpture. Figurative sculpture has filled the Venice Biennale for years now, and yet it still hasn't been discussed in any coherent fashion. It is often recycled in one form or another, and uses an awareness of material relations (commodity–material–form–content) to reach across and grab the attention of the audience, but not of critical inquiry. It embraces artists as diverse as Pawel Althamer regressing to history; Ricky Swallow to crafted skill, and Patricia Piccinini to science fantasy.

Sculpture is not dead, it has simply been repressed and replaced by stuff which is not sculpture but which stands in for sculpture. The figure haunts us. In 1971 figuration underwent a transformation under the influence of performance and feminism. The pedestal on which the monument used to stand was abandoned and then re-occupied immediately by performance. During the 1980s it was occupied either by the commodity or again by performance. It stalks us like a jilted lover. Like some behemoth created out of our own wasteful lives, it returns to occupy the plinth, pedestal, base of contemporary sculpture.

Artists' bodies started to occupy the terrain which had been abandoned by the monument. Marina and Ula stood naked in the doorway of a gallery in Bologna in 1977 to make sure that representation was well and truly dead; like sentries, they too had their hands outstretched. Again in 1977, Vito Acconci lay under the floor of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York; to make sure you knew what he was about, he recorded it. As early as 1971, Chris Burden was shot in the arm by a friend – so you would see his intentions were serious.

Suddenly every field was occupied. The art world was filling up with good intentions, but the gallery was empty. During the 1990s, installation as an option became too expensive to maintain and keep. Museums soon ran out of storage space and stopped buying large works. Do-Ho Suh was smart and returned to the object: a shimmery version of the object – perhaps an hallucination – and one that could be folded and put in a box, transported to this space or that.<sup>9</sup> These works temporarily seized the space in which they were housed before moving along, city to city. His houses, his objects, his installations were a hope chest, a shameless copy of a reality sewn by a seamstress.

These interventions changed the figurative; it could no longer resemble the carefully crafted. About ten years ago, a few artists began to lament what had been lost: the figure, the animal, and nature as well as religion – cultural debates had been replaced by global culture in the form of Nicolas Bourriaud, not an artist but a curator. Instantly, it seemed, everyone turned relational.<sup>10</sup>

Waste looks like waste wherever it is – rust and garbage like rust and garbage.

Google is a great tool if you know how to use it. If you type "cardboard sculpture," you get a whole range of objects from lawnmowers and motorcycles to figures sculpted with the upmost care and attention to detail. And yet because of this, these things are not sculpture in the contemporary sense, even though they are using a recycled and 'sustainable' material – cardboard. They describe the mechanisms of their own ingenuity and revolve around a little circle of material–form–technique. Closer to arguments for craft, they offer a hobbyist's approach to material. Using the 'sustainable material' crutch to add meaning, they don't add anything extra to the world; they don't offer a critical voice, they simply say "Look at what I can do with cardboard." There are more people making this kind of stuff than ever before. There is a plethora of cardboard lawnmowers and car-tyre animals – a notorious, noxious material that is difficult to work with. They are amazing for the skill employed and the manipulation of material, but they are not sculpture. Illustrative of a rampant materiality related to commodity through waste, they are memorable for their manipulation of stuff and their grossness, but they don't make any difference to the rhinoceros or the shark. They are the equivalent to two Balinese temple dogs ripped from their context of architecture and culture, and now adorning some Western interior. As sculpture, these works are neutered and empty. They represent a gross, indulgent materiality (minus critical appraisal) that threatens to engulf us all.

So here we are in 2015 with another new crop of students. The thing that has become apparent over the last 15 years that I have been teaching is that students often have 'other ideas,' and so what the reader will find in this series of essays is work by students with a desire to think through the implications of the expanded field – such as the phenomenological inquiry into sound in Sam Longmore's piece, "A World of Sounds and Spaces." Sarah Baird addresses the problem of the mannequin and media representations of female bodies. The question of the ethical treatment of animals is of paramount importance to Tara James in "Looking the other Way." The issue of global waste is at stake in both the film work of Phoebe Thompson and her in her essay "Material Trajectories in Film." Amy-Jo Jory considers her own subjectivity both in her performance work and in the essay "Reading Foucault with Dislocated Bones."

The writings included here are by the students themselves, with one exception. Carl A. Mears is an artist who has worked in various art schools throughout the United Kingdom and the United States; in his essay "The Chapel on the Hill" he examines the distinctions between art and life in the work of Kimberly Ann McAlevy.

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1. See <http://starwarsmodern.blogspot.co.nz/2010/06the-future-of-art-rosalind-krauss-is-a-jedi.html>.
2. Rosalind E Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in her *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988).
3. Miwon Kwon, "Genealogy of Site Specificity," ch. 1 of her *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002).
4. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).
5. See for example Yoko Ono's recent retrospective, "War is Over," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney. Of particular interest in this context was the work *My Mommy is Beautiful*; the audience was asked to stick a postnote message to their mothers on a nearby wall.
6. Jared Diamond, "Twilight at Easter," ch. 2 of his *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005).
7. Jeff Koons, "New Painting and Sculpture," Gagosian Gallery, New York, 9 May–3 July 2013; see <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/jeff-koons--may-11-2013>.
8. Giancarlo Politi, "Interview," *Flash Art*, February 1987, 71–6. For additional material, see <http://www.jeffkoons.com/bibliography-periodicals#sthash.jp423rgh.dpuf>.
9. Do-Ho Suh, "Seoul Home/L.A. Home," Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles, 1999.
10. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.