

# Tucker

Mass and Figure



Kosme de Barañano

**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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"But we were presumably sent here to try and enlarge infinity."

Lawrence Durrell, *Tunc*, 1968

William Tucker was born in 1935 to British parents in Cairo, Egypt. In 1957, when he was in his second year reading History at the University of Oxford, he saw the exhibition *Sculpture 1850 to 1950* in Holland Park, London. This experience prompted him to concentrate on sculpture and that same year to construct his own work, *Warrior*, a figure in clay standing 19.5 centimetres high that represents a warrior with his head bowed. After he took his degree (1954-58), Tucker enrolled in the Brighton School of Art, but not finding there the practical training he sought, he switched to the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, where he learned to weld in 1959. After attending a class taught by Anthony Caro, he transferred to St. Martin's School of Art. In 1961, he received the prestigious Lord Sainsbury Scholarship and, in 1965, the Peter Stuyvesant Travel Bursary.

Years later he went on to teach at St. Martin's as well as at Goldsmiths' College.<sup>1</sup> In 1968 he was elected Gregory Fellow in Sculpture at the University of Leeds, where he began to give his lectures on sculpture, which he subsequently published in the journals *Studio International* and *Art Journal* and later collected in his book, *The Language of Sculpture*, in 1974.<sup>2</sup> These texts comprise the artist's thoughts on the meaning, materials, and vocabulary of sculpture.

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1 Some accounts of Tucker's life confuse these three schools of fine arts, the Central School of Arts and Crafts, St. Martin's School of Art, and Goldsmiths' College. At the time they were all separate institutions. The Central School of Arts and Crafts, founded in 1896, and St. Martin's School of Arts, which opened its doors in 1854, were merged in 1989 into Central Saint Martins. Since 1986, both schools were part of the London Institute, created by the Inner London Education Authority in order to coordinate seven schools of art, engraving, design, fashion, and communications that currently operated in the city. The London Institute became a legal entity in 1988, began granting academic degrees in 1993, received university status in 2003, and was renamed University of the Arts London in 2004. The Goldsmiths' Technical and Recreative Institute was founded in 1891 and housed in the former Royal Naval School building in New Cross. It was devoted to "the promotion of technical skill, knowledge, health and general well-being among men and women of the industrial, working and artisan classes." In 1904, the Goldsmiths' Company turned the school over to the University of London, which renamed it Goldsmiths' College.

2 William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974); published in the United States as *Early Modern Sculpture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). The first essays were published in *Studio International*: "An essay on sculpture" (Jan. 1969), p. 13; "The Object" (April 1970); "Notes on Sculpture" (Jan. 1972); and "Gravity" (Oct. 1972). Subsequently he published "Modernism, Freedom, Sculpture" in *Art Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1977-78): 153-56.



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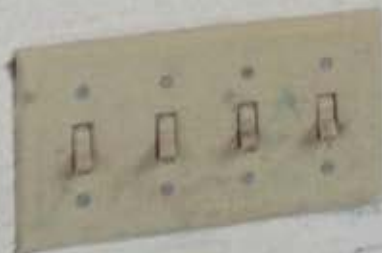
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In 1972, Tucker represented Great Britain in the Venice Biennale. He presented abstract sculptures that are like large drawings in the air, sketched in metal, such as the series *Cat's Cradle* and *Beulah*. His formal, thematic, and aesthetic interests were already clearly recognizable at that time. At that point he rejected the essence of narrative sculpture, figurative statuary. The following year, he became the first artist to hold a solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery (6-28 October), created shortly before by the Arts Council as a gallery of contemporary art in Kensington Gardens, Hyde Park. In 1975 the Arts Council commissioned him to curate the exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture* at the Hayward Gallery in London. This assignment allowed him to select works by artists who, like himself, "instead of regarding the physicality and visibility of sculpture as an inhibition, rather take it as a challenge."<sup>3</sup> The complete title of the exhibition was *The Condition of Sculpture: A Selection of Recent Sculpture by Younger British and Foreign Artists*. From March to September of the following year, with much ampler resources, the Whitney Museum in New York presented *200 Years of American Sculpture*, "a Bicentennial exhibition," curated by Tom Armstrong.

In her essay, "William Tucker: The Language of a Sculptor," Alison Sleeman points out that the three fundamental pillars of this artist's thought may be found in his texts from 1974 and 1975:

Taken together, the book *The Language of Sculpture*, the exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture*, and the series of magazine articles "What Sculpture is" represent the most coherent public statements and demonstrations of William Tucker's ideas on sculpture.<sup>4</sup>

In 1978 Tucker settled in New York, where he taught at the New York Studio School and Columbia University, remaining at that institution until 1982. There he received the Guggenheim Fellowship for Sculpture in 1981, and he embarked upon a new direction in his sculpture, based on the first principles of this art: verticality and modelling. Tucker, who was one of the pioneers of the minimalist movement in Great Britain, now represents the return to figurative sculpture, taking as his point of departure a vision of organic simplicity.

In 1986, Tucker received the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and became a US citizen. Beginning in 1993, he served as co-chair of the Art Program at Bard College in New York. In 2010 he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award, bestowed by the International Sculpture Center in the United States. Prominent pieces from all periods of his work may be found in the most important collections of the world: Tate Britain in London, the Guggenheim and MoMA in New York, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, among others.

Tucker's works are principally physical *presence*, volumes that convey a sense of enigmatic presence. The viewer begins to see how a variety of elements collude to create this powerful presence that at times reveals itself in an immediately recognizable manner and at other times in an allusive manner, with reference to the history of art—to prior sculpture and literary sources. Our gaze needs to be activated in order to find meaning in these objects, that is, in order to *give* them form.

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3 William Tucker, "Introduction," in *The Condition of Sculpture: A Selection of Recent Sculpture by Younger British and Foreign Artists*, exh. cat. (Glasgow: Learning and Teaching Scotland, 1975), p. 7

4 Alison Sleeman, "William Tucker: The Language of a Sculptor," *Arts Council Collection Spotlight*, 16 February 1995. The article was published on the occasion of the exhibition *William Tucker: Six Sculptures*, held at the Leeds Art Gallery (16 February-1 April 1995).

## Rationale and orientation of the exhibition

This exhibition aims to present Tucker's sculpture from 1985 to the present, a survey of the last thirty years of his work, as well as a survey of his drawings, in a dialectical relationship between the two ways of contemplating modelling and the sculptural sense of any surface. It is the first retrospective of this artist in Spain and the first time that so many of his drawings have been exhibited alongside his sculptures, precisely so that the viewer may understand the intellectual and formal keys to his oeuvre in its entirety.

It is not, however, the first time that Tucker's work has been exhibited in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao. In 1962, he participated in an exhibition organized by the Arts Council of Great Britain titled *Joven escultura inglesa* (*Young English Sculptors*), along with artists like Anthony Caro, John Latham, Brian Wall, and Phillip King. The show subsequently appeared in the Sala Santa Catalina exhibition hall at the Ateneo de Madrid. On the occasion a catalogue with text by Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño was commissioned by Carlos Arean, director of that institution.<sup>5</sup>

At that time, Tucker was exploring the possibilities afforded by fibreglass, and his sculptures had a constructivist character that gave priority to line over mass, geometry over organicism, and that tended to suggest volume more than to create it. What we are now exhibiting is the artist's return after 1983 to solid masses and to modelling the plaster by hand with the aim of exploring the human form, having previously established himself as one of the most solidly minimalist artists of that "New Generation."

What we are presenting here and now, then, is the Tucker who has returned to volume and mass—in other words, to sculpture's prehistoric sense. This artist, who, as I have remarked, was one of the pioneers of avant-garde sculpture in Great Britain, represents a return to figurative sculpture from the standpoint of a new vision of organic simplicity.

The exhibition brings together nearly fifty sculptures and a similar number of drawings from 1985 to the present. The sculptures include twelve large-scale pieces and twelve medium-sized ones (four heads, six horses, and various dancers and torsos). On display also are twenty-four models of monumental works distributed around the world; these models provide thematic contextualization for his entire output. The parallel presentation of fifty drawings, we feel, will also help the general public better understand this artist's preoccupations as a sculptor.

We begin the exhibition not so much in a chronological but rather a *manual* fashion, with the presentation in the lobby of three large isolated hands from a decade ago: *Night* (2004), which evokes Michelangelo's *Night* in the Medici Chapel in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence; *The Cave* (2005), with its clear reference to José Saramago's novel from 2000, *A caverna* (*The Cave*); and *The Void* (2005), which is related to Giacometti's *Hands Holding the Void*. These three bronzes are like three meteorites that have fallen from the very foundation of the history of Western sculpture—as *torsi* of hands taken from key sculptures by Michelangelo Buonarroti or as evocations of the fragmentary hand as an autonomous work in the oeuvre of Auguste Rodin.

Serving as a backdrop for this first display, on the other side of the rectangular space of the museum's BBK Room there is the bronze *Ouranos*, from 1985, a piece which would appear to be a gigantic foot, perhaps. Next there follow sculptures of heads, slightly larger than life-size, *Our Leader*, *Good Soldier*, *Persecutor*, *Sleeping Musician*, and *Homage to Rodin (Bibi)* (1997-99); the same subject emerges on a larger scale in pieces like *The Hero at Evening* (2000) and *Emperor* (2002). Several of these heads have been enlarged and cast in bronze or even in concrete as public monuments.

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5 *Joven escultura inglesa*, exh. cat., Cuadernos de Arte 9 (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1962). José Luis Tafur was director of the exhibition hall.

After this initial introduction to hands and heads, there is a temporal caesura, a hiatus that leads us to three pieces placed directly on the floor. They signify Tucker's return to mass and verticality, after twenty years of work as a minimalist sculptor or as a sculptor who reduced sculpture to the status of object. These three works from 1985 carry titles that evoke classical deities: *Tethys*, *Kronos*, and *Rhea*. Tucker titled these new forms with names taken from Greek mythology after he had executed them. For the artist, they were primordial forms—in some sense pre-Socratic, before they had become formalized in myth with particular attributes. That is to say, they are figurations of forces in their most general sense: time, the earth, the sea, and so forth. Tucker himself has indicated that he chose these names for these forms that are torsos, but that could also be fists or arms in addition to bodies, in the same way in which the Greeks named their primitive deities according to their essential character, the four elements. As he explains, it "is not necessarily a torso, or if it is a torso, it is also a fist, a tree bole, etc., etc.... There is no 'subject'" and "There were no traditional images, suggesting at once a connection with the Greek obsession with the body, but at its dark 'chthonic' source."<sup>6</sup>

Further along in the exhibition, there are three large, very recent pieces that the sculptor has not yet cast in bronze. They are three works in plaster of varying texture and colour: *Chimera* (2008), *Odalisque* (2008), and *Day* (2012). The perspective of these three workshop sculptures can offer the viewer a sense of Tucker's manner of working, not only with the plaster but also with the dimensions—the difficulty of modelling on a large scale and the later difficulty involved in casting these pieces.

After these works, and returning along the other side of the room, we go back in time in order to analyse his sense of scale, with various heads of horses, titled *Horses*, all of which are from 1986, as well as three models for Boston, *Greek Horse*, *Chinese Horse*, and *Day*, measuring barely ten centimetres. The exhibition continues with the model for *Maia* (1995-96), a sculpture he executed for the Abandoibarra district in Bilbao in 1997, a female torso that emerges from the earth like all primitive sculpture. *Maia*, like *Eve* before her (1991) or *Demeter* (1998), is a figure like a dense rock, a representation of the earth's inner potential for fertility.

Finally, two long pedestals have been installed in order to display maquettes and working models that the artist used between 1991 and 2011. And, like an overview, placed at times alongside each other like horizontal reliefs, there are his drawings, which correspond to the same overall time span of 1982 to 2015.

We are presenting a more open design for this exhibition than that of the German artist Markus Lüpertz held at the museum a year ago; as the curator of that exhibition, I endeavoured to arrange the series of paintings according to certain subjects in his sculptures. For this exhibition, in contrast, I have sought to establish a flow without insisting on a strict chronological order according to the artist's career. If we can regard the trajectory of his work as a river, I have not pursued its precise territoriality, so to speak, its geographical accidents; rather, my objective has been the stream that constitutes its inner being, what it carries with it in its strange, enigmatic waters.

All of these works present an ambiguity between what the surface of the mass informs us and what that dense mass, as scale, conveys, how it *conforms* our vision, our reading of the image, in the same way there is a *language* of sculpture. His oeuvre likewise signifies a review of the history of mythology and a review of the subjects of art history (horse's head, hands from Michelangelo to Rodin, etc.). For this reason, a journey through Tucker's sculpture is also a journey through the subjects and principles of sculpture from every epoch. This game of *re-reflection* or *con-fusion* was similarly present in his earliest sculptures, which also question the idea of representation and make one *re-think* the meaning of sculpture itself.

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6 Quoted in *Tate Gallery: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions, 1986-88* (London: Tate, 1996); catalogue entry reprinted in "William Tucker: *Kronos*, 1985," P11201, Art and Artists tab, Tate Collection website, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tucker-kronos-p11201/text-catalogue-entry>.

## 2

### The sculptor's first twenty years: 1957-1975

The exhibition *Sculpture 1850 to 1950*, presented in 1957 in Holland Park, London, was for Tucker, a young student of History at Oxford, the motive and the place to understand his vocation as a sculptor. On various occasions, the artist has recalled how the contents of that exhibition ranged from “forgettable mid-Victorian pieces” to others by Reg Butler, Kenneth Armitage, and Lynn Chadwick. Nevertheless, he was more interested in pieces like *Warrior* (1957), by Elisabeth Frink, or *Warrior with Shield* (1953-54) by Henry Moore—just as, not long after, the German sculptor Markus Lüpertz found an enormous interest in Moore’s *Falling Warrior* from 1956.

Great Britain was at this time recovering from the hardships of the Second World War, and British artists were achieving international success. In 1948, Henry Moore had won the International Sculpture Prize at the Venice Biennale, which would in turn go to Lynn Chadwick in 1956. In 1959, Barbara Hepworth won the prize at the São Paulo Biennial, and the young Anthony Caro won at the first Biennale des Jeunes held at the Musée d’Art de la Ville de Paris.

Influenced by the importance that the work of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth had taken on in the public space, and with the intellectual stimulus of Anthony Caro and Eduardo Paolozzi, professors at St. Martin’s School, a group of emerging artists developed in the late 1950s. In 1959, Caro and Frank Martin, chair of the sculpture department at St. Martin’s, organized a welding workshop, and they included sculpture and drawing in a single class, with a view “to understanding rather than copying the subject.”<sup>7</sup> Phillip King, David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Tim Scott, Isaac Witkin, and William Tucker introduced themselves to the public with the exhibition *New Generation Sculpture*, organized at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956.<sup>8</sup> Though they came up under Moore’s shadow (as did even Caro, who had worked with Moore in Much Hadham, Hertfordshire, from 1951 to 1953 before he left for New York, as well as King, who worked as Moore’s assistant beginning in 1958), all of them rejected organic forms and classical materials, likewise abandoning references to other elements of reality.<sup>9</sup>

Under Caro’s influence and reflecting confidence in sculpture as an intellectual discipline, the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery marked a style that became codified with regard to at least three aspects: the use of modern materials like fibreglass and plastic; the rejection of the personal and the emotional in carving or modelling (like the colour field painters); and the elimination of pedestals, in imitation of Caro. These were the beginnings of a kind of British minimalism or conceptualism.

In 1959, Tucker devoted himself to sculpture as *construction* with metal—metal as an alternative to modelling and carving. It was a reaction against narrative and against the symbolic content of sculpture, not Henry Moore’s but also Constantin Brâncuși’s. Playing with the modernist principle of constructive rationalism,

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7 Siri Fischer Hansen, “Biography,” AnthonyCaro.org, accessed 9 May 2015, <http://www.anthonycaro.org/frames-related/biography.htm>.

8 In an interview-conversation with Brian McAvera titled “Influence, Exchange, and Stimulus,” published in the journal *Sculpture* 21, no. 2 (March 2002), Anthony Caro refers to that group of young students, explorers led by Frank Martin in the following terms: “And those New Generation artists were absolutely not clones of me, they were good artists in their own right. There was a head of steam—both at St Martins and later in America. We were a group of explorers. I like this sort of relationship, indeed I initiated it, so it focused around me.”

9 In a posthumous book, Anthony Caro describes Henry Moore’s character and recognizes with gratitude his debt to the sculptor in an interesting statement: “After I left art school I spent two years working for Henry Moore. He introduced me to modern art, to Negro art and to a whole new world of non-academic art that I had not ever come into contact with before. When I left him I found myself looking at Picasso’s work.” See Caro, ed. Amanda Renshaw (London: Phaidon Press, 2014).





*Margin II*, 1963  
Painted aluminium, 133 x 157.5 x 56 cm  
Tate, London  
Inv. no. T01373

of “truth to materials,” Tucker explored the possibilities afforded by new industrial materials, given their highly durable surfaces that allowed them, weighing less, to support greater loads. Fibreglass began to be marketed as a commercial product in 1938, by the American company Owens-Corning. After the Second World War, its use extended throughout the United Kingdom and, beginning in 1956, it was sold in a certain pink colour. Tucker used this kind of fibreglass in his piece titled *Memphis* (1965), an arrangement of three abstract, curved or kidney-shaped elements. He also worked in aluminium in pieces like *Margin II* (1963) [fig.], which, like *Unfold* (1963) [fig.], possesses a certain illusionistic quality, achieved by the simple act of folding a flat, thin sheet of metal and painting in two clearly defined areas of colour. The form can be seen as a whole from numerous angles, like a believably flat drawing; at the same time, it creates the effect of a splitting into mirror images. Tucker thus reveals the type of modelling, a displaying or an *un-folding* as a *re-flection*, as a sculptural *action*.

The first important abstract works by Phillip King also reveal an interest in reflection. They emerged after a long voyage through Greece. *Window Piece* (1961) manifests his recent study of ancient architecture, and *Drift* (1962) articulates the primordial sculptural gesture of leaning one object against another. Like Tucker, King introduces humour and ambiguity; in the case of Tucker’s *37* (1960), through the treatment of numbers, which are recognizable despite their abstract form (as Jasper Johns had done with his painted *Numbers*, from 1958-59). They are sculptures freed from the requirement of a pedestal and not necessarily associated with any referent.

The works shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1965 are similar in form (and materials) to the work of minimalist artists from the same period in the United States. Unlike the American minimalists like Donald Judd, however, Tucker suggests an organic development of form and even makes allusions to narrative instead of presenting basic geometric forms that can be perceived in their entirety at almost a single glance. *Anabasis*



*Unfold*, 1963  
 Painted aluminium  
 71 x 117 x 134 cm  
 Tate, London  
 Inv. no. T01374

/(1964), included in that exhibition, is the progressive mutation of a simple cross shape, stacked in a series of three different volumes, the last of which is a simple, transparent sheet of Plexiglas. Fundamentally, Tucker gives priority to that third, more linear or planar element, to the geometric over the organic; with it, he suggests rather than actually creates volume.

In the 1970s, one of Tucker's objectives was to focus on the essential qualities of sculpture, as distinguished from any other art form—to examine its essence. He created works on a large scale, with tubes or rods that seem to draw in the air, creating a significant context with the metallic outlines. He created the series *Shuttler* (1970) as a response to a structure he discovered in his basement: a folded frame with hinges, evidently designed and built years earlier for some unknown purpose by the previous owner of the property, a carpenter by the name of Shuttler. The series titled *Beulah* (1971) [fig.] expresses its exuberance by means of lyrical curves in iron tubes, some of which appear straight when viewed from certain angles. The name of the series comes from a place that is at once specific and universal, in William Blake's epic poem *Milton*: "There is a place where Contraries are equally True/ This place is called Beulah, It is a pleasant lovely Shadow/ Where no dispute can come." The title of another piece from 1978, *Building a Wall in the Air*, also makes reference to Blake.

Tucker created works that combine apparent simplicity with a complexity that only reveals itself gradually. In the 1970s, his sculptures were described as "impossible objects," since they were very difficult to retain precisely in one's memory despite their simplicity. Such is the case with *Shuttler A*, now in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, or *Shuttler B*, a piece made of wood with hinges and creosote (a substance distilled from tar for preserving materials but whose use is now prohibited). Yet it is also the case with *Beulah I*, made of painted iron, and with the series *Cat's Cradle*, which fills the space with very



*Beulah I*, 1971  
Painted iron  
151 x 266 x 150 cm  
Tate, London  
Inv. no. T01818

little mass and whose title suggests a physical, participatory game. Viewers are made aware of their own perceptual effort to understand the form and structure of these works.

At this point, Tucker, as has already been mentioned, was selected to represent Great Britain in the Venice Biennale of 1972. In the catalogue for the British Pavilion, Andrew Forge describes *Cat's Cradle IV* (1971) as something that at first glance “looks like the framework of a small tent.”<sup>10</sup> Works such as this are difficult to “read” visually, despite their apparent simplicity. Like many minimalist objects, it is impossible to ascertain its structure taking only one look. It becomes necessary to walk around it in order to understand its form.

In the mid-1970s, Tucker's works became more frontal and architectural, like *Tunnel*, from 1975 (Tate, London) or *Angel*, commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council in 1976 for Livingston, one of the four new towns built in Scotland after the Second World War. When he moved to Brooklyn, New York, at the end of the decade, he continued to produce his constructions in wood or steel, like *An Ellipse* (Guggenheim Museum, New York), and *The House of the Hanged Man* (Museum of Modern Art, New York). Several of these works became public, like *The Rim*, in Atlanta, Georgia; others, like *Victory* (1981) found their place years later—in this case in the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, where it was installed in 1998. This piece, an open geometric form, is like the erection of a letter or sign, propped up on its own shadow or on its horizontal footprint. “Sculpture is subject to gravity and revealed by light. Here is the primary condition,” Tucker explains at the beginning of his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *The Condition of Sculpture*.<sup>11</sup>

10 Andrew Forge, Introduction to *William Tucker: British Pavilion, XXXVI Venice Biennale, 1972*, exh. cat. ([London: The British Council], 1972).

11 Tucker, “Introduction,” in *The Condition of Sculpture*, p. 7.

*Victory* would appear to condense and synthesize these ideas: the erection of a sign that is open to light and, before it, gravity and the footprint on which it was raised. The first version emerged as a wooden frame covered with cardboard in Tucker's studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. He executed three subsequent versions between 1981 and 1983, one in plywood and two others in plywood covered with plaster and a layer of fibre-reinforced resin, though the artist wished to make it in concrete. His works from this period are constructed in wood and suggest armatures and minimalist drawings in space. They are typical of the formalism that was frequent in abstract sculpture of that time.

Tucker's pieces from these first twenty years reject the sense of body, the academic concept, and instead pursue the physical immediacy that abstract expressionism had demanded of the *action of painting*, rather than simple abstract formalism. In these works there is a strong sense of frontality, as well as a predilection for open, linear structures, perhaps a reminiscence of the sense of interior space in architecture. Tucker began at this point in his career to *erect* his sculptures and to think about the space that they create. His source of influence is a figure from British art who was fundamental in those years, along with Moore and Hepworth, namely the painter Ben Nicholson, who went from figurative to abstract painting—or who sought interrelations between the two throughout his life. Since the 1930s, Nicholson had claimed that drawing need not refer to anything at all beyond the play of its own lines and that this concept is not a battle won by the avant-garde but rather something manifest already in prehistoric engravings and in the ancient standing stones that punctuate the landscape of Cornwall.

In Nicholson's drawings of French Gothic cathedrals or Italian Renaissance buildings, it seems as if the pen never lifted from the paper. With a few plain, very restrained and linear strokes from the pen, the author manages to create a space whose architecture is quite simple—a space that ceases to be a *re-presentation* of architecture, becoming magic and above all calligraphic rhythm. Its point of departure is the planimetric simultaneity of cubism, revealed not in volumetry but in the line's capacity for tension, a script that flows around on top of the light, lyric tones of his painting. In the 1940s, Nicholson returned to the landscape of St. Ives, blending it with still lifes or presenting views of it through the windscreen of his automobile. He thus creates *spatial sequences*, breaking with the idea of a continuous space in a unified representation. Nicholson's paintings are veritable sculptural reliefs, and this quality in them did not go unobserved by Caro or his young colleagues. These spaces, like parallel planes that nevertheless intersect and interfere with each other, floating amongst each other, produce a new order, a confluence of visual memories. It was Nicholson who spoke of using abstract means in order to create a "non-literary" space, "an actual space" in his reliefs.

In 1969, Tucker, the most intellectual of all the young members of the New Generation of 1965 at the White-chapel Gallery, did not seek to produce sculpture that was narrative or simply figurative. He sought to create an actual space, one that was simply sculptural. He defines his objectives as a sculptor in these terms: the exploration of sculpture as a search for "what is sculptural in sculpture."<sup>12</sup> Years later, Joy Sleeman, of the Slade School of Fine Art in London, would remark in her essay *The Sculpture of William Tucker* that "a sculpture about sculpture is not a sculpture but a tautology."<sup>13</sup>

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12 Tucker applied this phrase to the work of Anthony Caro in 1969, though at the time he felt unable to attain that ideal. Quoted in Tom Overton, "William Tucker (1935)," 2010, British Pavilion in Venice, British Council website, accessed 9 May 2015, <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/people/reference/william-tucker>.

13 Joy Sleeman, *The Sculpture of William Tucker* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2007).

But Tucker is in pursuit of what is most essential in his métier. He poses questions about the material that first strikes the viewer-reader's eye. If literature has a lexicon, then in sculpture we must also seek out the roots of *its* own language. The title of Tucker's collection of essays from 1974, *The Language of Sculpture*, suggests just that.

### 3 The language of sculpture

As has already been mentioned, in 1969 Tucker began to teach courses at the University of Leeds, and many of his ideas about avant-garde sculpture were published in journals like *Studio International* and *Art Journal*, to be anthologized subsequently in his book, *The Language of Sculpture* (1974). At that time he was one of the publicly open defenders of the new sculpture being created in Great Britain and the United States. Before he turned forty, he became the voice that reflected out loud regarding that discipline—as a sculptor himself at the level of production and as a critic and intellectual working as a writer, a compiler, and a curator of exhibitions. A review of his writings from this period enables us to understand his production as a young artist, a sculptor who broke with precedent, not only with academicism but also with the shadow of Moore. It also helps us understand Tucker's second period, represented in this exhibition.

After attending St. Martin's, the young Tucker had focussed on rethinking the essential qualities of sculpture in contrast to any other art form. He wanted to avoid sculpture's role as a monumentalization of the human figure, to escape representation and the implication that the subject was a work's *raison d'être*. Rodin had already expressed this critical attitude towards representation fifty years before when asked what the title of a work was—what its subject matter was. The liberties that Rodin took with mythological subjects and his interpretation of literary sources annoyed his contemporaries, but in an interview with Paul Gsell, Rodin replied laconically to the question about the work in plaster *Faune et nymphe*, called *Pygmalion* at the time: "One should not attribute too much importance to the subjects that are interpreted. Undoubtedly, they have their value, and they contribute to the public's sense of charm, but the artist's principal concern should be to fashion living musculatures. The rest matters little."<sup>14</sup>

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14 Auguste Rodin, *L'Art: Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1911), p. 217. I include the entire passage here because of its interest: "En somme, me dit-il, l'on ne doit pas attribuer trop d'importance aux thèmes que l'on interprète. Sans doute, ils ont leur prix et contribuent à charmer le public; mais le principal souci de l'artiste doit être de façonner des musculatures vivantes. Le reste importe peu. [...] Si je juge qu'un statuaire peut se borner à représenter de la chair qui palpète, sans se préoccuper d'aucun sujet, cela ne signifie pas que j'exclue la pensée de son travail; si je déclare qu'il peut se passer de chercher des symboles, cela ne signifie pas que je sois partisan d'un art dépourvu de sens spirituel. Mais, à vrai dire, tout est idée, tout est symbole. Ainsi, les formes et les attitudes d'un être humain révèlent nécessairement les émotions de son âme. Le corps exprime toujours l'esprit dont il est l'enveloppe. Et pour qui sait voir, la nudité offre la signification la plus riche. Dans le rythme majestueux des contours, un grand sculpteur, un Phidias reconnaît la sereine harmonie répandue sur toute la Nature par la Sagesse divine; un simple torse, calme, bien équilibré, radieux de force et de grâce, peut le faire songer à la toute-puissante raison qui gouverne le monde." (In sum, he said, one should not attribute too much importance to the subjects that are interpreted. Undoubtedly, they have their value, and they contribute to the public's sense of charm, but the artist's principal concern should be to fashion living musculatures. The rest matters little. [...] If I think that statuary can confine itself to the representation of living flesh, without concerning itself with any subject, this does not mean that I exclude thought from this work. If I declare that it can do without seeking symbols, this does not imply that I am in favour of an art devoid of spiritual meaning. For, indeed, everything is idea, everything is symbol. Thus, the forms and attitudes of a human being necessarily reveal the emotions of his or her soul. The body always expresses the spirit that it envelops. And for one who knows how to see, the nude offers the richest meaning. In the majestic rhythm of its contours, a great sculptor, a Phidias, recognizes the serene harmony that divine Wisdom has spread throughout Nature. A simple torso, calm, well balanced, radiant with strength and gracefulness, can make one consider the all-powerful reason that governs the world.)

Tucker himself explains the state of sculpture and what he sought as an artist:

The human image in sculpture had for me been contaminated by what I perceived as the facile and rhetorical posturing of the followers of Rodin in the post-war period, and I wanted no part of it. I wanted an art that would be pure, logical and distanced; its material would discourage touch, its evocation of the human would consist only in its location and its size—that it inhabited and articulated a space of human dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

Tucker was successful at creating works that are the opposite of images that narrate something; he insisted on abstraction, on his idea of “sculpture as thing in itself,” *not representing* anything else. At the time, he rejected the essence of narrative sculpture, of Epstein’s or Moore’s figurative statuary. In the attainment of this objective, his works foreground some of the constitutive principles of sculpture, in particular the materials (steel and solder) and the process (of construction). For Tucker, the essential quality of sculpture was its very “visibility”—or, in Nicholson’s words, its “actual space.” Tucker is, in this sense, a phenomenologist in the school of Edmund Husserl, whom he encountered perhaps in his reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (who paradoxically would write about Cézanne thinking of Giacometti): “the return to things themselves.”

The phenomenologist seeks truth “in perception,” *perceptual veracity*. The point of view of an individual is the position that he or she expresses regarding something. For example, in saying “The head is knocked over,” it means that someone has seen something, identifying it as a “head.” Independently of what type of head, its position has been examined, and the viewer has decided that it corresponds to an object that has fallen over; and, at the same time, it is said to be “knocked over” in order to describe the relationship between the head and its position. All of these perceptual decisions lead to the *idea* expressed. The natural point of view is frequently the result of one form of representation or another having been chosen, of a certain kind of figuration, and of the fact of deciding that all reality can be reproduced as a pictorial experience or as a sculptural experience. Cézanne did not aim to produce a photograph of the landscape with his paintings but rather to present it in the manner in which he was perceiving it.<sup>16</sup> This absorption of the exterior world into the subject itself—the “I”—enters into a contradictory relationship with that movement towards the world implied by seeing and perceiving. The double movement of the process of perception is, on the one hand, the limitation of perception and, on the other, an opening-up that offers no limits. The world is possessed by one who looks upon the world. It is in the gaze of the viewer, which crosses the motionless space between him or herself and the work, where we find resistance.

At this time, Tucker did not seek a form of sculpture that was *representation*, an allusion to things. He sought in sculpture *a presence in and of itself*. In a similar fashion, Merleau-Ponty has asked, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Whether vestiges or the body of another, the question is to know how an object in space can become the speaking trace of an existence and how, conversely, an intention, a thought, or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible outside of him, in his body and in the milieu that he constructs for himself.”<sup>17</sup> Tucker constructs pieces like *Beulah* or *Cat’s Cradle* not to narrate something but to erect a sculpture. Its meaning is its visibility.

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15 Quoted in *William Tucker: Recent Sculptures and Monotypes*, exh. cat. (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1987), p. 3.

16 The essay by Merleau-Ponty alluded to here is “Le Doute de Cézanne,” published in the journal *Fontaine* 8, no. 47 (Dec. 1945), pp. 82-91; reprinted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1966), pp. 13-33; and translated into English as “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in Leonard Lawlor and Ted Toadvine, eds., *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 69.

17 “Qu’il s’agisse des vestiges ou du corps d’autrui, la question est de savoir comment un objet dans l’espace peut devenir la trace parlante d’une existence, comment inversement une intention, une pensée, un projet peuvent se détacher du sujet personnel et devenir visibles hors de lui dans son corps, dans le milieu qu’il se construit.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 401.



William Tucker's studio in Ashfield, Massachusetts, September 2009 and April 2014

## Disintegration or deconstruction of sculpture

In the 1960s, a disintegration of sculpture began with what would come to be known as minimalism—owing to its pure literalism, as the critic Michael Fried put it, that is, *literalist art* because of the absolute “hyper-realism” that Donald Judd’s “specific objects” signify or what the young British artists sought to attain.<sup>18</sup> From different beginnings, it was nevertheless established that sculpture could take its subject, its structure, and its material from the world of things. It moved from the world *of the figure* to the world *of things*, just as philosophy had moved, with Edmund Husserl, *to the things themselves*, to phenomenology.

The minimalists sought to tear down sculpture from the standpoint of visibility, the conceptualists from that of the idea. It would seem that they fall within the line of thinking of the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Hegel, when he claims that art is “das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee” (the sensuous appearance of the Idea), a definition that implies a twofold phenomenality, tied on the one hand to a specific time or epoch and, on the other, to an atemporal idea. Hegel sought the spirit, whereas the principal weakness of sculptures is their closeness to nature. But nature is not spirit, according to Hegel. Tucker distances himself from nature, from the *physicality* of the figure, and also from the figure as representation, seeking the sensuality of ideas in the abstract. Yet he recognizes that those ideas can only be developed with his hands; he cannot have them be constructed, because they arise from that modelling. In this sense each mark, each stroke in his sculpture reveals the artist’s physical presence, his dense, energetic touch—like the almost animal mark of the charcoal on paper, that hard trace present in all of his drawings beginning in the 1980s.

<sup>18</sup> This is what the critic Rainer Metzger, in his *Buchstäblichkeit: Bild und Kunst in der Moderne* (Cologne: König, 2004), considers the principle of semantic deconstruction, or his own words, *Entsemantisierung* (“de-semanticizing”) or *Buchstäblichkeit und künstlerisches Medium* (“literalness and artistic medium”). The cubes made of metal or wood by Donald Judd have a single significance: to present themselves as such, in their nakedness, in their literalness, in their *avant la lettre*. In a certain sense, they follow the path opened up by Duchamp with his readymades or by Malevich with his *Black Square*. Both artists, Malevich and Duchamp, though they took different assumptions as their point of departure, are two examples of scepticism about the world of the image: the destruction of the history of images or of the history of art—history itself, essentially. The path to follow was Judd’s boxes that present themselves or Flavin’s fluorescent tubes, a reality found in the manifest evidence of itself.

But while the American minimalists emerged as a reaction to abstract expressionism (as did pop art and, later, conceptualism), the young British sculptors did not establish themselves as a rejection of precedent so much as a questioning of what, from a phenomenological perspective, sculpture strictly speaking is. It went without saying that they viewed art as a central experience of human beings, something specific that must be maintained and spread everywhere.

In this sense, Tucker points out the following in his book *The Language of Sculpture* (and we should recall that we are in the early 1970s):

If one word captures the aspirations of modernism from about 1870 to the Second World War, it is surely object. [...] The word came to denote an ideal condition of self-contained, self-generating apartness of the work of art, with its own rules, its own order, its own materials, independent of its maker, of its audience and of the world in general. It is essentially a classic and optimistic ideal, depending on a strong belief in the power and centrality of art in human experience.<sup>19</sup>

For Tucker, the foundations for twentieth-century sculpture are to be found on the one hand in Brâncuși—who applies simplicity to traditional materials and even takes up the fragment again (like the torso), but as a unified whole—and, on the other, in Picasso—who constructs through the medium of the collage, recomposing the parts into a different unified whole.

In his book, over the course of eight essays, Tucker expounds on his own historical contextualization of the achievements in sculpture by Rodin, Brâncuși, Picasso and Julio González, in addition to the sculptural works of two painters, Matisse and Degas. Two of his essays are essentially reflections written, in the author's words, "from the perspective of a sculptor, working now, rather than that of the historian, critic, or connoisseur." This remark was, as Albert Elsen, then a professor of History at Stanford, pointed out in a review of Tucker's book in 1975 in *Art Journal*,

No doubt a sincere disclaimer but nevertheless one systematically contradicted on every page. Is it purely as a sculptor and not as a critic that Tucker regards as "vulgar" Rodin's *John the Baptist* in comparison with *the Age of Bronze*, and that Boccioni is summarily dismissed as a "flashy and academic talent" or Giacometti's post-war figurative style is seen as demonstrating that his sensibility was always as a painter? In England, where his writings are better known, Tucker writes large drafts for his unsupported critical opinions. In this country those checks are returnable for insufficient funds.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Tucker, *Language*, p. 108.

20 *Art Journal* 35, no. 2. In addition to Elsen's, Tucker also received criticism from Rosalind Krauss, (who was the champion of Richard Serra, Michael Heizer, etc.), first in her essay "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post-60s Sculpture," in *Art Forum* (November 1973), and then in the last chapter, "Double Negative: A New Syntax of Sculpture," of *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 243-88. In contrast to Tucker's search for the meaning of sculpture in the Venus of Willendorf, the *con-formation* of a figure as a sculptural object, the American critic opted for what she calls "sculpture in the expanded field," a concept that derives from an article that Krauss included in her book, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modern Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 277-90, though it was originally published in the journal *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44. The exhibition by Susan Ferleger Brades, *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture, 1965-1975*, produced by The Arts Council/South Bank Centre with the collaboration of The Henry Moore Foundation and held at the Hayward Gallery in London (21 January-14 March 1993), took Tucker's reflections from the 1970s as its point of departure, as the catalogue reveals (pp. 35-37), though the artist himself was not represented in the show.



After Rodin and Brâncuși, new possibilities of signification open up for marble and wood, previously confined to the traditional, regulated poetics of sculpture. Both artists' efforts revealed processes that, before them, had remained submerged or ended up being erased—for example, the meaning of the pedestal. Meanwhile, Picasso altered the meaning of materials and his way of constructing volume, that is, of constructing space, welding it together, which is to *solidify* it in another fashion.<sup>21</sup>

Tucker also stresses the idea of the cut in metal as a graphic element, the rotundity of the plane creating volumes, the technique of welding as a form of analysis and expression, and so forth, in the work of Julio González. He admires González's manner of constructing, his way of drawing directly in space while at the same time leaving the traces of his own tools. I shall quote Tucker's evaluation of González at length:

"Drawing in space" is the conventional summary of Gonzalez's contribution to modern sculpture; and usually connotes the assembly in three dimensions of linear elements, as for example in the *Large Maternity* or the *Woman Combing Her Hair*, the transposition of line drawing into sculpture. In this particular area the obvious precursor is Picasso, notably in the *Construction in Wire* of 1928-30. What is peculiar to González, and the index of his unique position in modern sculpture, is the identification of drawing with making. The seed of Picasso's original Cubist constructions in wood bore fruit in steel in the hands of González: not only the assembly part by part, but the previous and separate shaping of parts as bar forged, drawn or bent, steel rolled, cut or folded, volumes made by the enclosure of the void: the components thus made, joined at points or edges, and situated in relation to gravity in ways inaccessible to the traditional materials of sculpture. The action of the sculptor's tools becomes the form of the end material: the tensile potential of steel "as it comes"—i.e., in varieties of bar or sheet—is turned, in the sculptor's hands, to sheer invention.<sup>22</sup>

Julio González's manner of welding, his sculpture in space, is a construction that recalls the poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé, to whom he was probably introduced by the sculptor Paco Durrio. Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de dés (A Throw of the Dice)*, presents written language within a multiplicity of codes that expands its complex meaning. Mallarmé demonstrates that written language, which is also capable of being heard, not only possesses semantic and musical possibilities but also visual and spatial ones. It is not uncommon to encounter people whose visual memory makes their first contact with a written text an experience marked by that text's visual appearance: its typography or its placement. Since Mallarmé, written language should not be understood merely from the standpoint of signification but also from that of visuality and orality. He violates the limits of signification to place the letters and texts on the page. Brâncuși situates the work and the pedestal in a new interrelationship. Julio González deconstructs the human figure and rearticulates it in a space that gathers it together. His "throw of his dice"—dice made of stone or, above all, iron—connects visual signs in an ungrammatical order. He escapes from the rules of sculptural grammar as they stood previously. If the stanzas of Mallarmé's poems are placed in a particular fashion, one that is not by chance, it is because they are the product of the poet's effort to obtain a kind of signification that orthography and the syntactical function of words cannot achieve. Rather, it is obtained through their position in space—and in time, when read: space and time that the empty, defiant sheet of paper makes possible. The place of the sculptural body in Julio González's work takes on renewed importance, an importance that is not functional as in traditional, academic grammar but semantic, denotative, like the movement and placement of the stanzas on the whiteness of the paper in Mallarmé's poems.

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21 [In Spanish, the word *soldar*, etymologically related to *sólido* ("solid"), as in English, means "to weld," "to solder," and, metaphorically, "to join." Since Picasso's sculptures are *welded*, regrettably the play on words in Spanish, *soldar-solidificar* ("to solidify") cannot be captured in the English. —Trans.]

22 Tucker, *Language*, p. 76.

## A command of signs, visibility, and language

Tucker understands that the material that first strikes the reader of a poem or a novel is its lexicon. “Aimer la littérature, c’est être amant de lexiques,” the French would say: To love literature is to be a lover of vocabulary. Likewise, it is absurd to wish to make music without first having learned the rules of harmony, as it is to wish to read well without understanding the syntactical structures inherent to the text. Once one has a command of the lexicon and of syntax, other tools will come into play that will shape one’s understanding of the text and of the style. After that, there is the fact that every reading is tangential and provisional. Tucker’s reflections take literature as their point of departure in order to discover visibility and what is proper to sculpture *as language*.

For this purpose, he takes into account the observations of Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) from 1916, which laid the foundations of modern linguistics with the introduction of several basic concepts, such as the notions of *sign*, *signifier* and *signified*, and in particular the idea of the arbitrariness of the sign.

Saussure distinguishes between concept, or what is signified (*signifié*), and “acoustic image,” or what signifies (*signifiant*). The construction of the relationship between the real, observed object (the referent) and its signified—that is, the conceptual image formed in the mind of the observer—is mediated by a conceptual artefact in the form of a signifier, whether that be an acoustic image (the spoken word, its phonemes) or a written one (a word represented with letters or ideograms). Contrary to popular belief, language is not a repertory of words that reflect existing things or concepts, applied like labels. If this were the case, the words and syntactical categories of a given language would find an exact correspondence in any other language. Words are the collective product of social interaction, essential instruments with which human beings constitute and articulate their world. According to Saussure, a language is arbitrary insofar as the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.

In his work, Tucker moves between those two poles of sculptural language. He presents us his speech, but his signs advance in the current of time. This literary or linguistic relationship with the sculptural is also suggested by the title of his book, *The Language of Sculpture*. That book also presents two poles: the paradigmatic or metaphorical versus the syntagmatic or metonymic. One corresponds to speech as a synchronic phenomenon (language as it is manifested at a given moment) and the other to the diachronic phenomenon of language through time. There is a complex meaning to be found within anyone who searches inside him or herself—in any part of the history of art, whether recent or ancient, whether Rodin or the megaliths of one’s ancestors—and it pertains to being alive. History is, therefore, an essential part of Tucker’s praxis.

He concludes *The Language of Sculpture* by extolling in the sculptural work of Degas “a pathos and heroism in this supposedly unemotional artist that outdoes all the histrionics of romantic art, Rodin included.” He pays particular attention to the *Danseuse regardant la plante de son pied droit* (*Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot*), one of the hundred and fifty figures in wax or clay that the painter left at his death in 1917. Specifically, Tucker focusses on her strange pose, which, like Rodin’s *Iris* and the Hellenistic bronze *Spinario* or *Boy with Thorn*, constitutes an example of a form or posture that is not habitual in the history of sculpture. Degas’s dancer bends clumsily, out of balance, in order to carry out an action that is not very natural, defying gravity. Degas does not freeze a sublime figure in time (like, for example, a leap by the dancer Nijinsky); rather, he freezes the moment of an imbalance. There are forces of energy directed away from the body—as in her extended arm—as well as inwardly, towards the body—in the head that focusses on the foot and in the hand that holds the foot up. In order to return to a vertical position, the dancer must find her

inner centre. Her energy flows from that centre of the body, not from her feet, or, in Tucker's words, "from the pelvis outward, in every direction, thrusting and probing with volumes and axes until a balance is achieved."

Tucker finds something similar in the sculpture of David Smith, who "stretches steel, stresses its junctions, takes balance to its limits, just as Degas stretched and stressed the human body in attitudes that were in themselves structures before work on the sculpture was started."

Forty years after writing these lines about Degas, Tucker himself produced his own *Dancer* (2002-5), a large work—more than a metre in any direction—inspired in that dancer by the French artist, in her strange position of imbalance articulated in the internal energy of her muscles. This position that Degas experiments with in his work is the same that leads Tucker not to the challenge of representing the dancer in the space of a stage, to the struggle against gravity and the beauty of movement, but to the struggle between what one feels in disequilibrium and what one perceives. The form Tucker encountered is, consciously or not, a perfect metaphor for the aesthetics of his entire oeuvre—as well as that of Degas or Matisse.

## Herder's sculptural object

Let us review Tucker's ideas as he himself has formulated them. The title of the exhibition from 1975, *Conditions of Sculpture*, as well as the title of his book from 1974 both emphasize the two fields of analysis that his sculptural investigations deal with: first, the sculpture's conditions of possibility, that is, how the sculptural object is possible; and, second, the language proper to it, how it is internally articulated, its various ways of being embodied.

Both questions have been formulated by German philosophical idealism, on the one hand, by Friedrich Hegel and, on the other, in a sense closer to our concerns here, the literary criticism of Johann Gottfried von Herder, one of the most important German philosophers of the eighteenth century and who exercised enormous influence on later thinkers like Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Nietzsche. Many of Herder's ideas appear in the development of linguistics, hermeneutics, and anthropology, and to this day they remain vital and relevant. His work, *Plastik (Sculpture)*, from 1778, reflects the conditions under which classical sculpture was appraised and understood during the last third of that century.<sup>23</sup>

Herder's book is a rehabilitation of the sense of touch, a defence of its peculiarities in contrast to the sense of sight. Despite the evident fact that sculpture differs from the other arts in that it extends into three dimensions, occupying its own physical space, Herder finds that these characteristics and their consequences have not been fully analysed and believes that, when we see a sculpture, we err in understanding it to be a series of perspectives apprehended by the gaze and not a whole that presents itself before us, a complete

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23 Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Plastik: Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildenden Träume* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1778). I quote here according to the original edition, which can be consulted online: Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Plastik...*, Heidelberger historische Bestände-digital, Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg, <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/herder1778>: "Die Bildneri arbeitet in einander, ein lebendes, ein Werk voll Seele, das da sei und daure. [...] Bildneri schafft schöne Formen, sie drängt in einander und stellt dar; nothwendig muss sie also schaffen, was ihre Darstellung verdient, und was für sich da steht" (pp. 26-27); "Eben das ist das so ungemein Sichere und Veste bei einer Bildsäule, dass, weil sie Mensch und ganz durchlebter Körper ist, sie als That, zu uns spricht, uns vesthält und durchdringend unser Wesen, das ganze Saitenspiel Menschlicher Mitempfindung weckt" (p. 97). The English edition "codifies" many of the terms in Herder's thought, though it does not falsify them. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, ed. and trans. Jason Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): "Sculpture creates in *depth*. It creates *one* living thing, an animate *work* that *stands there* and endures. [...] Sculpture creates *beautiful forms*. It forms *shapes in depth* and *places* the object *there before* us. Of necessity, it must create that which merits such presentation and which possesses *independent existence*" (p. 44); "for what is so uncommonly *certain* and *definite* in a sculpture is that, because it presents a *human being*, a fully *animated body*, it speaks to us as an *act*; it seizes hold of us and penetrates our very being, awakening the full range of responsive human feeling" (p. 80).

totality. In the same way, one's body is not the sum of a series of articulations but rather is the sense and expression of a life all its own, an inner life.

For the German philosopher, a sculpture speaks *through its body*, but we do not understand it; instead, we understand and appraise the deep meaning of its sculptural form. In this sense, Tucker writes,

As I continued to work in clay and plaster, I felt I could let go of the remaining architectural framework, and allow the substance and volume of the material itself to determine the image in relation to my body as the sculpture came into being. I wanted these sculptures to be sensed internally by the onlooker, through the body, rather than interpreted by the eyes and mind. Yet I felt that each had an identity, and needed to declare itself separate from the others, and from naturally occurring rock forms, meteorites, etc.<sup>24</sup>

Herder also suggests that light connects our external and internal sense of space and that it surpasses the compass of the eye penetrating the skin and provoking a profound imaginative contact between the self and the world. This positioning of the surface, tied to sight, implies that what one touches is something beyond the literal surface. For Herder, regarding the art object, the object that one sees with sculpture differs in ontological terms from that of painting insofar as it may be touched or it is directed also towards the sense of touch.

Thus, the German philosopher carries out two preliminary comparisons: On the one hand, he quotes several lines of verse by the Anacreontic poet Johann Peter Uz; and, on the other, he recreates a situation in which the historian J. J. Winckelmann observes the *Apollo Belvedere* in the Vatican Museums. The verses by Uz, excerpted from a poem written in 1754, read, "And beautiful proportion is not lacking, nor that smooth softness/ which the light hand of ancient Greeks,/ guided by the Graces, joined to hard stone."<sup>25</sup> Not far removed from Uz's assessment is one that Rainer Maria Rilke would make many years later in his second *Duino Elegy*, upon describing an "Attic stele," a funeral stone that he saw in the Naples Museum and that represents Eurydice bidding farewell to Orpheus:

[...] Was not love and leave-taking  
laid so lightly on those shoulders, as if it were made of a different  
substance than what is found among us here? Recall the hands,  
how they rest without pressing [...].<sup>26</sup>

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24 From a statement by Tucker for an exhibition curated by John Galt and Paul Sattler at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York.

25 "Und weder schönes Maaß, noch jenes Weiche fehlet,/ Das alter Griechen leichte Hand,/ Von Grazien geführt, mit hartem Stein verband."  
Johann Peter Uz, "An Herrn Hofrath C." [1754], in *Lyrische und andere Gedichte: Neue und um die Hälfte vermehrte Auflage* (Ansbach: Jacob Christoph Posch, 1755; Deutsches Textarchiv, 2011), p. 236, accessed 9 May 2015, [http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/uz\\_gedichte\\_1755](http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/uz_gedichte_1755).

26 Rainer Maria Rilke. "Die zweite Elegie," in *Duineser Elegien* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1923), p. 12, ll. 67-70. He is referring to a famous Roman copy of a Greek bas-relief that represents the moment at which the two lovers bid each other farewell, precisely when Orpheus loses Eurydice for a second time by not fulfilling the promise he made to the god Hades that he would not look back to see if she was following him before they had both re-emerged from the underworld. The passage, in fuller form, reads, "Erstaunte euch nicht auf attischen Stelen die Vorsicht/ menschlicher Geste? war nicht Liebe und Abschied/ so leicht auf die Schultern gelegt, als wär es aus andern/ Stoffe gemacht als bei uns? Gedenkt euch der Hände,/ wie sie drucklos beruhen, obwohl in den Torsen die Kraft steht./ Diese Beherrschten wußten damit: so weit sind wirs,/ dieses ist unser, uns so zu berühren; stärker/ stemmen die Götter uns an. Doch dies ist Sache der Götter." (Were you not astonished by the circumspection, on Attic steles,/ of human gestures? Was not love and leave-taking/ laid so lightly on those shoulders, as if it were made of a different/ substance than what is found among us here? Recall the hands,/ how, without pressing, they rest, although the torsos show their strength./ These restrained figures thus knew: "We've come this far;/ this is ours: to touch each other so. Harder/ do the gods press us. But that's a matter for the gods.")

In a text Herder wrote before *Plastik*, titled *Kritische Wälder* (*Critical Woods*), he relates how Winckelmann does not look on passively, remaining simply at the surface, but rather his eye serves to constitute the sculptural object, for his gaze is charged with knowledge and sensitivity: “The eye that gathered [these experiences] was no longer an eye that took in a picture on a surface: It became a hand, the sunbeam became a finger, the power of imagination became a kind of unmediated touching. The properties observed are pure sensations.”<sup>27</sup>

## Sculpture as thing: Rilke’s object without a roof

Tucker began *The Language of Sculpture* with a quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke’s book from 1903 devoted to Auguste Rodin and that clarifies enormously his thinking about the plastic arts, above all in his following period. For Tucker, Rilke is a “language-sculptor” in addition to being a poet interested in the unique qualities of sculpture. Rilke had written that sculpture, like easel painting, was a singular thing that does not even require a wall, in the same way a painting does not need a roof.

Tucker read Rilke’s book in the translation by the American writer Jessie Lemont and her husband Hans Trausil, published in 1919 by Sunwise Turn in New York—though the edition Tucker used was London, 1949. Lemont visited Rodin in the summer of 1908. In his studio she met Rilke, for whom she would become a faithful translator in subsequent years.<sup>28</sup>

Rilke’s text on Rodin begins with two quotations: one from the humanist Pomponio Gaurico and the other from Ralph Waldo Emerson. The passage from Gaurico, who was a writer, a *grammaticus*, more than a sculptor (his devotion to bronze was that of an aficionado), is taken from his book *De sculptura* (*On Sculpture*), from 1504, a dialogue in Latin.<sup>29</sup> As it is quoted in the translation of Rilke’s book that Tucker consulted, it reads, “Writers work through words—Sculptors through matter.” The original Latin (quoted more fully) is “Illi quidem agunt uerbis, at uero hi rebus; illi narrant, hi uero exprimunt, explicant,” a more precise translation of which would be, “Indeed, the former [i.e., writers] perform with words, whereas the latter [i.e., sculptors], assuredly, do so with things. The former narrate; but the latter in fact portray: they display.”<sup>30</sup>

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27 “Das Auge, das sie sammelte, war nicht Auge mehr, das Schilderung auf einer Fläche bekam: es ward Hand, der Sonnenstrahl ward Finger, die Einbildungskraft ward unmittelbare Betastung: die bemerkten Eigenschaften sind lauter Gefühle.” Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kritische Wälder: Viertes Wäldchen* (1769), in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, vol. 4 (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1878), p. 66. A suitable English translation of this text may be found in Johann G. Herder, *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

28 In the summer of 1902, Rilke visited Rodin’s studio in Paris because he wanted to write a monograph on the sculptor for the University of Breslau. Rodin showed him his studio-residence on 1 September 1902 and asserted that his only source of inspiration was work itself. Under his influence, Rilke wrote two books: *Neue Gedichte* (*New Poems*, 1907) and *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (*New Poems: The Other Part*, 1908). For the writer, reality is guaranteed by the voice and vision of the poet; it is his period of *Dinggedichte*, or “thing-poems”—just as sculpture is a thing in the first paragraphs of his book on Rodin. Rilke was twenty-seven; the sculptor, sixty-two. Years later, Rilke would serve as Rodin’s secretary for a time, and their friendship lasted until the sculptor’s death. Rilke finished his monograph in December 1902 and published it in Berlin in March 1903.

29 First edition, Florence: Filippo Giunta, 1504. There is a modern, annotated French translation of *De sculptura*, ed. and trans. André Chastel and Robert Klein (Geneva: Droz, 1969).

30 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, trans. Jessie Lemont and Hans Trausil (New York: Sunwise Turn, 1919), p. 13. As the quotation appears in Rilke’s original, it reads, “Die Schriftsteller wirken durch Worte... Die Bildhauer aber durch Taten” (Writers work by means of words... But sculptors by means of deeds). Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* [1903] (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1920), p. 6. For Gaurico’s Latin, I quote from a later edition, Florence [i.e., Nuremberg]: [Johannes Petreius], 1542, p. 5. It is available online: Pomponio Gaurico, *De Sculptura*, Y 16 003, Bibliothèque numérique patrimoniale, Université de Strasbourg, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://docnum.u-strasbg.fr/cdm/ref/collection/coll15/id/1343>.

The other passage that opens Rilke's book on Rodin, from *The Conduct of Life* (1860) by the philosopher and poet Emerson, reads, "The hero is he who is immovably centred."<sup>31</sup> Both quotations are together relevant not only to the work of the French sculptor, as Rilke certainly believed, but also to Tucker's visual thought.

The basic ideas that Rilke conveys, according to what he viewed as Rodin's discoveries for the history of sculpture, are the following:<sup>32</sup>

1. Sculpture, as a work, is first of all a thing (an object).
2. It is an independent entity that signifies on its own and requires no wall—nor a roof (like painting)
3. Rodin's art lies not only in a command of the representation of the body but also in the fact that he makes the surface speak of the interior of the body; he particularizes that interior to the degree that the light's encounter with the material and the external expression's encounter with the soul of the body take place always on the surface. Here there is no *void* but rather *transparency*, as Jacques Lipchitz would put it.

Rilke points out that the *Bildwerk*, the statue, is a thing, an object: *das Ding*. (It is a concept that in Martin Heidegger in turn presents two aspects that deserve consideration: *Erde*, "earth," its primordial material, and *Welt*, "world"—the world that it installs.) Sculpture is a "sacrosanct" thing, not owing to what it represents or connotes but rather because of its simple existence ("aus seinem einfachen Dasein"),<sup>33</sup> its simple *being-there*. Lemont's English translation is free here, and elaborates on the German: "its harmonious adjustment to its environment."<sup>34</sup> These are the words that Tucker read. He may well have thought of Barbara Hepworth's "old haunts," that is, the presence-in-themselves of those ancient rocks—menhirs or standing stones—that have marked the presence of human beings erecting images in the open expanses of land since time immemorial.

In the following paragraph, however, and before he has concluded where the essence of Rodin's style lies, Rilke will point out that sculpture is attained through the work of modelling, in the encounter between the sculptor's hands and material, seeking that light on the surface; in the end, "there was no void"—"Es gab keine Leere."<sup>35</sup> The work is constituted as a spatial totality in Rilke's original, while Lemont's translation is again free, reinterpreting the idea of *Leere*, or empty space. In Lemont's version, in the encounters between the sculptor's hand and the earth as he models it, "there was no point at which there was not life and movement."<sup>36</sup>

Tucker also is in line with Rodin at every point up to this one, but when Rilke (*selon* Lemont) arrives at the essence of Rodin's art, he does not view it as completeness but as "life and movement." For this reason, in contrast to what Constantin Brâncuși or Aristide Bourdelle sought after, simplicity of form or architectural form, what Tucker sees is *surface*. And he sees it at two different junctures in his life, when he began as a New Generation sculptor working with aseptic materials, and when he rejected that phase and returned to working the surface with his hands.

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31 The line appears at the end of the essay titled "Considerations by the Way," Chapter 7 in *The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), p. 244.

32 In the following section, I include words and lines from Rilke's original, alongside the English from Lemont and Trausil's translation. In the footnotes, *Rilke* refers to the original text; *Lemont* to the translation.

33 Rilke, p. 16.

34 Lemont, pp. 22-23.

35 Rilke, p. 17.

36 Lemont, p. 23.



William Tucker  
Illustrations for the book *Sonnets to Orpheus*, by Rainer Maria Rilke  
(London: R. Alistair McAlpine, 1971)  
Pencil on paper, 67.3 x 77.5 cm  
The British Council

## 4

### Going back to the roots

After twenty years of sounding out the language of sculpture in his investigations, Tucker arrived at his late style, his own vocabulary and syntax, his most individual work—as had happened previously with Alberto Giacometti, who does not come out well in *The Language of Sculpture*. Tucker's book has successfully passed the test of time, as its numerous reprints in Great Britain and the United States testify. Nevertheless, the figure of Giacometti is not treated with the importance he deserves in the context of twentieth-century sculpture, especially if one takes into account Giacometti's paradigm shift, which predated Tucker's own. The trajectory of both artists' work is, however, similar. Both are excellent in every period of their oeuvre, but both took two decades to find their *voice*. Tucker would not manifest a positive assessment of Giacometti's work until many years later. Specifically, he did so on the occasion of the 2001 exhibition titled *Alberto Giacometti* at MoMA in New York, in a public roundtable with other artists, "Alberto Giacometti: An Artists' Panel" on November 19.

In 1983, Tucker returned to solid masses and hand-modelling with plaster, with the aim of exploring the human figure, though in an abstract fashion. That is, he returned to volume and mass, to the conditions and the language that are proper to prehistoric sculpture. His work also undergoes a change in materials. He left industrial materials to return to plaster, on a large scale. He first constructed powerful armatures over which he went about composing more organic forms, though they did not recognizably correspond to the human figure—nor even to that topos of art history, the torso.

This change began to come about after the exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture*, with which Tucker first presented himself in the United States and Canada. The piece that best synthesizes this period is the sculpture *Turning* (1976) [fig.], installed at the Griffiss International Sculpture Garden in Rome, New York. *Turning* is one of the many pieces from that period that explore the idea of a central void surrounded by a geometric frame, in this case a triangle with curved sides. Tucker, who that year was a resident artist at Sculpture Space in nearby Utica, defined this period in the following terms:

Whenever I could find the time I would head up to Utica... The sense of community and dedication among the artists, the lack of distractions in the area, and the resources of the Boiler Works all contributed to make the experience of Sculpture Space one of the most fruitful periods of my career.<sup>37</sup>

Tucker's work, *Building a Wall in the Air* (1978) is in the same vein as *Turning*. The title, as I have indicated, refers to William Blake. It is a simple piece composed of ten segments joined together in an orderly fashion to produce an enigmatic figure in the air. Also representative of this period is *Victory* (1981) [fig.], which was cast in concrete and installed in the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires.

Following these experiments with pieces that frame space, in the early 1980s Tucker began a series he titled *Guardian*, four sculptures completed in 1983 in bronze. The texture of the surface is that of roughly modelled bronze, with dark brown patination. Only single copies were cast of this series, though in 1984 the artist created editions of the maquettes in sets of six. They are four monolithic structures comprised of a vertical section supported on a more or less square foot or base, creating an imposing presence.

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<sup>37</sup> The Griffiss International Sculpture Garden is a stable public art project, a park situated in the town of Rome, New York. It currently contains nineteen sculptures and is open and free to the public throughout the year. Sculpture Space, which is based in Utica, manages the park and is in charge of curating the collection. That organization also offers residencies to professional sculptors, during which they are provided with working spaces, resources, and technical training for the development of their work. Tucker's sculpture *Turning* was cast and installed at Griffiss International Sculpture Garden in 2008.





William Tucker next to his sculpture *Turning*, 1976  
Griffiss International Sculpture Garden, Rome, New York



*Victory*, 1998-2001  
Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires

*Guardian* marks a turning point in Tucker's practice, both in terms of technique and in his choice of subject. The pieces, with their title and their verticality, advance like sentinels in a new period of the sculptor's output.

The ambiguity of form is, for Tucker, a positive consequence of this new process of modelling in clay or plaster. The artist himself has explained,

There is something about the actual continuity of touch, of handling the material, that is very primitive. [...] There is a basic element of *not knowing* that comes about through using opaque and in itself formless materials. [...] What is intrinsic in the material is the suggestion of images. That the forms that are given to it by your working on it, inevitably starts suggesting things, or not so much things, as bodies, or parts of bodies, rocks, trees, waves, clouds or whatever. The occurrence of images is absolutely at one with the handling of the material.<sup>38</sup>

Tucker returns to the roots, like the title of the double album by an English musician who is almost Tucker's exact contemporary, John Mayall. Produced in 1971, the cover, created by Mayall himself, shows a photograph of the musician covered in mud and emerging out of the roots of a tree. The recording sessions took place in California and London between 15 November and 25 November 1970, and several former members of Mayall's band were invited for the occasion, in particular the guitarists Eric Clapton and Mick Taylor. Ma-

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Dore Ashton, *William Tucker*, exh. cat., Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami (Miami: The Museum, 1988), pp. 21-22.

yall wrote of the experience, “During all these sessions I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who felt a sense of history being revisited and, though we all have our natural quota of rough edges and goofs here and there, I think that the feeling of spontaneity and the pooling of creative ideas was well captured on this album.”<sup>39</sup>

In this album Mayall confronts social issues and people’s daily cares. What traveller could not relate to the “Prisons on the Road,” the title of the opening track, in the same way that Tucker related to the conditions and prisons of sculpture from the years when he was studying? Seven years later, in his album *Peddlin’ Music on the Side*, Lamont Dozier included the song “Going Back to My Roots,” which Richie Havens popularized in 1980 and whose first stanza is,

Zippin’ up my boots, goin’ back to my roots,  
To the place of my birth, back down to earth.  
Not talkin’ ‘bout the roots in the land;  
I’m talkin’ ‘bout the roots in the man.

These lyrics clarify in some sense both Mayall’s vision of music, with his band’s new electric guitars searching for deep blues, like the New Generation from St. Martin’s, who attempted to configure their own sculptural language with fibreglass or steel. There is a repudiation of old harmonies and framing that leads to a new return to the roots of individual feeling.

## The primordial gods

At this point, in Tucker we find a repudiation of the sculptural tradition of modelling and, at the same time, a return to it, insofar as he reaffirms the intrinsic, tectonic power of the material in these pieces as the first register of sculpture. The work of art is a thing that creates a world, in Heidegger’s words.

In 1984, *Guardians* became a series of large sculptures with names of gods. The artist worked by covering geometric armatures with a heavy plaster and then with more solid layers, made with slow-setting plaster. The figures of gods return sculpture to the concept of mass and, what’s more, to the history of sculpture.

Tucker titled these works once he had finished them, giving them names of pre-Olympian deities. According to the artist, “There were no traditional images, suggesting at once a connection with the Greek obsession with the body, but at its dark ‘chthonic’ source.”<sup>40</sup> They are primordial masses on the boundaries of figuration, abstractions like great meteorites fallen to earth.

We present four pieces here: *Tethys*, *Rhea*, *Ouranos*, and *Kronos*. Tethys is the sister of Rhea, who in turn is the wife of Kronos and the mother of the Olympian gods. Rhea represents the powers of what flows—blood, milk—or, in other words, of fertility, of maternity. Kronos (time), like Oceanus (the sea) and Uranus (the sky) are the *protogenoi*, or primordial deities, the very components of the universe. These chthonic deities (from the Greek *Χθόνιοι θεοί*, *khthonioi theoi*), who correspond to the earth and to telluric forces, represent the gods of the subterranean world who symbolize death, the return to the earth, but also life, that is, fertility and birth.

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39 John Mayall, liner notes, *Back to the Roots*, Polydor 25-3200, 1971, 33 1/3 rpm. In 1963, in order to further his musical career, Mayall moved to London, but he never abandoned his craft as a designer at Manchester College of Art, for he created the covers for many of his own albums.

40 Quoted in *Tate Gallery: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions, 1986-88* (London: Tate, 1996); catalogue entry reprinted in “William Tucker: *Kronos*, 1985,” P11201, Art and Artists tab, Tate Collection website, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tucker-kronos-p11201/text-catalogue-entry>.

Every piece is an enormous vertical formation, a mass that composes an ambiguous image, perhaps a torso somewhat lacking in form but that is suggestive nonetheless. The ambiguity is constructed in the working process itself, in the modelling with clay on large pieces in which the artist's gestures do not quite shape, or forge, an image in its entirety.

After Tucker's early sculpture, which is fundamentally geometric and lineal—one might say "pre-geometric"—there follows a period in which he returns to plaster. This is a return not only to the classical material that Mesopotamian and Greek mythology both situated at the origin of every sculptor, clay, but also formless earth, masses of mud with strange forms that are unrecognizable except as monumental presences.

In the exhibition catalogue that the Tate devoted to Tucker in 1987, Dore Ashton explains that "in their ancient titles, in their very shape, [these sculptures] tell of Tucker's will to pull up full-bodied presences from a consecrated clay that offers timeless resistance."<sup>41</sup> For Ashton, the sculptures "embody movement. They express movement, but they are visibly immovable."<sup>42</sup> Regarding *Kronos*, he writes, "When Tucker gives a few crucial visual directions, as he does in 'Kronos' where a fold near the base prompts associations with the torsion of flesh, a complex being (or becoming?) is conjured."<sup>43</sup> That is to say, Tucker undertakes a kind of figuration in the style of Joyce in *Ulysses*. On the one hand, he recovers mythology and, on the other, distance. The perspective of the narrator in Joyce coincides with the function of a Homer outside of time, a Homer that is both author and witness of the fictional adventures, like Tucker. The sculptures' names also refer to a past, as if the ruins of temples, the stones, have returned to being a thing among things.

Homer is the founder of literary tradition but also the repository of a series of myths. Tucker returns to the gods, and he returns to the earth, to sculpture as manual work: on the one hand, the reference to chthonic gods and to what is primordial in the symbolic narration about the forces of the cosmos; on the other, the consideration of that which is tectonic, of clay and plaster, of the surfaces that we shape with our hands. *Tectonics* (from Late Latin *tectonicus*, in turn from Greek *τεκτονικός*, "pertaining to building") is the branch of geology that studies the large structures in the surface of the earth created through the deformation of its crust, the forms that mountains take on in their evolution through time, as well as the processes that give rise to mountain-building (or erosion) and how the materials that compose them come to be arranged in certain ways (geomorphology). Every material point of the earth's crust is subjected to a field of directional forces that will vary according to the horizontal forces at play and in which gravity always intervenes.

In a few brief lines from his essay, "Noces à Tipasa" ("Nuptials at Tipaza"), from 1939, Albert Camus speaks of temples in ruins, of that sacred space that has returned to being a thing among things. The ancient city of Tipasa in Algeria, or what remains of it, continues to be a city inhabited by the gods, and the gods speak in the sun and in the odours given off by the plants: "The many years have returned the ruins to their mother's house. Today, at last, their past leaves them, and nothing distracts them from *this profound force that returns them to the centre of things that fall*. [...] Here the gods serve as beds or landmarks in the journey of the days."<sup>44</sup>

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41 Ashton, *William Tucker*, p. 8

42 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

44 "Beaucoup d'années ont ramené les ruines à la maison de leur mère. Aujourd'hui enfin leur passé les quitte, et rien ne les distrait de *cette force profonde qui les ramène au centre des choses qui tombent*. [...] Ici, les dieux servent de lits ou de repères dans la course des journées" (my italics). Albert Camus, "Noces," *suivi de "L'Éte"* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 13, 15.

## The Palace at 4am

In the early 1980s, as I have noted, Tucker abandoned the ideas of construction in order to return to mass and surface tension, at the centre of things that fall. For Tucker,

Gravity unites sculpture and spectator in a common dependence on the resistance to the pull of the earth. Materials and structure, volume and space, the unity and proportions of sculpture, do not speak for themselves but articulate a complex and profound sense of our own being in the world. Because the object is fixed and still, its "life" consists in the evocation, remaking even, of our freedom to move, within the given terms of its own structure. A sense of gravity is the factor which mediates our visual perception of sculpture with our conceptual knowledge of its "real form." The life of sculpture has in fact always subsisted in this gap between the known and the perceived.<sup>45</sup>

Significantly, that move from almost transparent and unsteady construction to work in plaster, in which the hand *sculpts* the wet earth much more so than modelling it, also appears in a similar fashion, and earlier, in Giacometti. A piece from this sculptor's first period (or from one of the periods before his style marked by slender figures), titled *Le Palais à quatre heures du matin* [fig.], from 1932, is constructed as an empty architecture of wooden scaffolding. It undoes the conventional ideas of sculptural mass. There exist two drawings of the work, a painting, and a piece built out of wires, string, and plaster that Man Ray photographed with the models Kiki de Montparnasse and Thérèse Treize [fig.]. Giacometti himself remarked in a letter to Matisse in 1948, "This provided me with a certain part of the vision of reality; but I missed what I felt for the whole, a structure, a sharp side that I also saw there, a kind of skeleton in space. For me, the figures were never a compact mass but like a transparent construction."<sup>46</sup>

In Giacometti's *La Palais à quatre heures du matin*, he extended that vision in order to design an oneiric building like a disquieting stage. It is a delicate reliquary of sorrow, whispers, forms, and air, apparently as thin as the wires of the cage that confine it: a structure that collects the solid substance of a strange imagination like Giacometti's. The structure of the skeleton in *Palais* allowed the writer William Maxwell, in his novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980), to see through the walls of his memories, to re-examine his losses and sorrows.

Maxwell's novel brings together, in a construction whose scaffolding is not unlike that of *Palais*, at least two stories: that of the author's own sorrow at the loss of his mother during his childhood and that of Cletus Smith, whose life was destroyed by a murder committed by the boy's father, Clarence.<sup>47</sup> Shortly after his mother's death, the writer's father began building a new house. This leads Maxwell to the theme of construction, not unlike the little oneiric theatre in Giacometti's sculpture, but here it is the scaffolding of narrative.

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45 Tucker, *Language*, p. 145.

46 "Ceci donnait pour moi une certaine partie de la vision de la réalité; mais il me manquait ce que je ressentais pour l'ensemble, une structure, un côté aigu que j'y voyais aussi, une espèce de squelette dans l'espace. Les figures n'étaient jamais pour moi une masse compacte, mais une comme une construction transparente." Alberto Giacometti, *Écrits*, ed. Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin (Paris: Hermann, 1990), p. 37. On Giacometti, see *Alberto Giacometti*, vol. 1, *Dibujo, escultura, pintura*, ed. Kosme de Barañano, Madrid, exh. cat., Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (Madrid: Lunwerg, 1990). For other interpretations of this work, see the story by Donald Barthelme, "The Palace at 4 a.m.," *The New Yorker*, 17 October 1983, p. 46; and Jerry Talmer, "Spooked by Giacometti's Palace all these years," *Downtown Express*, 16-22 June 2006, accessed 8 May 2015, [http://www.downtownexpress.com/de\\_162/spookedbygiacomettis.html](http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_162/spookedbygiacomettis.html).

47 *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, was first published in two instalments in *The New Yorker*, 1 October 1979, p. 34-102, and 8 October 1979, pp. 40-99. It appeared in book form a year later (New York: Knopf, 1980). The story begins with a murder in a farmhouse in the author's hometown, Lincoln, Illinois, in 1921. Fifty years later, the narrator attempts to reconstruct the events that led up to the crime and to analyse the sense of guilt caused by his failure to support his dear friend Cletus, the murderer's son. Another novel by Maxwell, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), deals with the death of the author's mother, a victim of the Spanish flu.



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Alberto Giacometti  
*The Palace at 4 a.m.*, 1932–33  
 Wood, glass, wire, and string. 63.5 x 71.8 x 40 cm  
 Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 Inv. no. 90.1936



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Man Ray  
 Kiki de Montparnasse and Thérèse Treize behind Alberto  
 Giacometti's sculpture *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, 1932  
 Gelatine silver print, modern copy, 27.4 x 19.7 cm  
 Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur, Switzerland  
 Inv. no. 1001.33.006

The two boys who are the novel's protagonists wander through the spaces of the house under construction, in which the walls are opened by memory and in which memories wobble like the rafters themselves. They are tightrope walkers of memory, both the characters and the construction.

In the novel, Maxwell extensively cites Giacometti, who explained the origins of the sculpture in these terms:

It is related without any doubt to a period in my life that had come to an end a year before, when for six months hour after hour was passed in the company of a woman who, concentrating all life in herself, magically transformed my every moment. We used to construct a fantastic palace at night—days and nights had the same colour, as if everything happened just before daybreak; throughout the whole time I never saw the sun—a very fragile palace of matchsticks. At the slightest false move a whole section of this tiny construction would collapse. We would always begin it over again.<sup>48</sup>

Maxwell describes the sculpture in great detail, focussing on the four pieces that inhabit the structure: the strange bird-like creature, the spinal column of an animal, a strange object in the centre and, standing on the platform, an "imposing female figure."<sup>49</sup> A colour drawing of this wooden construction [fig.] places the curious central figure on a red slab and, hanging in front of it, a glass "ceiling." In a text that appeared in the surrealist journal *Minotaure*, Giacometti wrote the following about this strange object: "I can say nothing about the object on a board that is red; I identify with it."<sup>50</sup>

In the house of Giacometti's *Palais*, the figures inhabit the spaces, but at the same time the statuary isolates the forms, these enigmatic objects. The enigma of their connection is (up) in the air—in the even greater transparency than the hanging piece of glass, the air that is the principal medium of this sculpture. Two subjects will contribute to a change in Giacometti's output a few years later, and they will lead to his slender, threadlike figures: on the one hand, the notion that bodies were never a compact mass and, on the other, the need for a "skeleton" in space, a structure that serves to gather together and measure—at the same time as it annuls—the human body.

Tucker would seem to have followed a similar path when, after executing sculptures conceived as constructions, like *Beulah* or *Cat's Cradle*, he moved on to another activity, mixing his hands with plaster again and returning to figuration. It is a figuration, however, unlike Giacometti's anorexic works but fertile like the prehistoric Venuses. It does not recall the rocky profiles of the mountains of Maloja, like Giacometti's *Têtes de Diego*, but voluptuous and rotund rocks, like meteorites fallen from the sky. This is the case with the heads titled *Homage to Rodin (Bibi)* and *Emperor*.

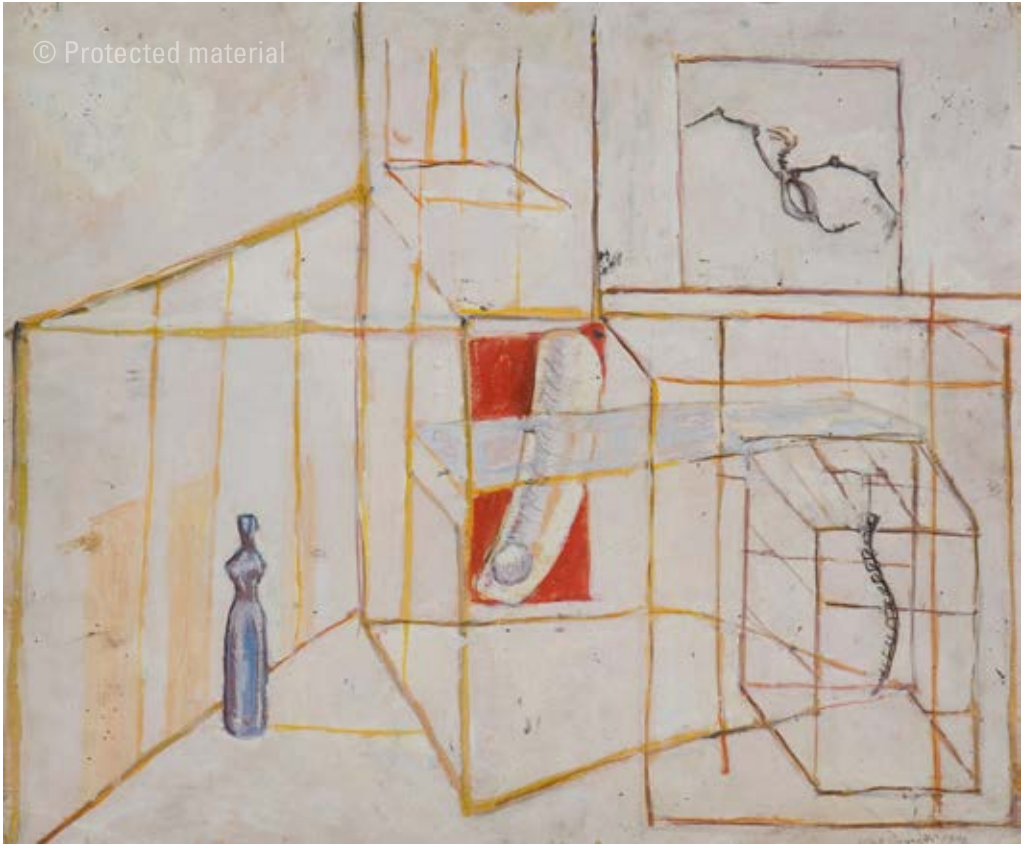
In his novel of memories, or evocations, Maxwell explores the enigmatic gravity of the past that obliges us to keep explaining ourselves or to lie to ourselves or to blur memory itself. He relates his stories skirtingly, testing them, in a narrative that seems to describe the surface of the facts as a way of reaching the inner reasons behind the past. In the prologue to the 1997 edition of another of his novels, *They Came Like Swallows*, Maxwell points out that

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48 Quoted in Maxwell, "So Long, See You Tomorrow, Part One," *The New Yorker*, 1 October 1979, p. 43.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

50 "Je ne puis rien dire de l'objet sur une planchette qui est rouge; je m'identifie avec lui." Reprinted in Giacometti, *Écrits*, p. 19.



Alberto Giacometti  
*The Palace at 4 a.m.*, 1932  
Oil and pencil on cardboard, 49.3 x 55.1 cm  
Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris  
Inv. no. 1994-0575

If you toss a small stone into a pond, it will create a ripple that expands outward, wider and wider. And if you then toss a second stone, it will again produce a widening circle inside the first one. And with the third stone there will be three expanding concentric circles before the pond recovers its stillness through the force of gravity. That is what I wanted my novel to be like. No directions came with this idea.<sup>51</sup>

Tucker, an attentive observer of the currents of attitudes issuing from past ages, guided the modelling of his works like someone who feels the waves of the waters flowing over the surface. The shifting perspectives give the viewer a more complete vision of the piece and its meaning. On the surface, we observe the construction, and at the same time the liberation, of the tension of those stories, those histories, that come from the language of sculpture itself.

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51 William Maxwell, *They Came Like Swallows* (New York: Vintage International, 1997).



William Stukeley

*A peice [sic] of the great circle, or View at the South Entrance into the temple at Avebury, Aug. 1722*

Printed in *Avebury: A Temple of the British Druids* (London, 1743), tab. XII, p. 22

## Prehistory as back to the roots

If I began this chapter pointing out how, after twenty years of constructivist sculpture, Tucker returned like certain musicians from his generation to the harmonic roots of the folk, we see now that in the case of his craft, sculpture, he found those roots not in the archaic or pre-Socratic world of ancient Greece, not in Mesopotamia or Egypt, but directly in prehistory—in the twofold aspect of prehistoric sculpture. That is, Tucker found two key motifs of the meaning of sculpture throughout the ages on the one hand in megaliths, monumental standing stones, and, on the other, in the small female figurines that fit in one's hand.

The cromlechs, dolmens, and menhirs are the "old haunts" that speak of the existence of peoples and of artists who raised those stones, positioning them and placing them in a certain manner. They gave the rock-thing, the material, the quality of something to be contemplated—of sculpture, or whatever we might call it. Ben Nicholson emphasized how these installations defined the English countryside and that of Brittany. His wife, Barbara Hepworth, recovered the meaning of sculpture in landscape, the return to territory, as Brâncuși did in his design for the sculptural ensemble at Târgu Jiu, Romania (1935-38).

The landscape of St. Ives in Cornwall, with its dolmens and rocky hills, or that of Avebury, in Wiltshire, with its stone circles, like the menhirs and cromlechs of Locmariaquer and Carnac or the stones of Ploumanac'h, Dinard, and other places in Brittany, are key for whoever should wish to relive the sense of the landscape in the eyes of the first abstract artists in Europe. Barbara Hepworth thus *precipitates* her vision of the landscape in Cornwall, of the monumentality of the standing stones that become figures, totemic sculptures, both spiritually and physically.





Henge monument of Avebury, Wiltshire, United Kingdom



*Tethys*, 1995  
Ward Pound Ridge Reservation, Cross River, New York

As Tucker puts it regarding the word *statue*, “inherent in the word is the idea of standing. To set a stone upright in a cleared space can be seen as the first sculptural act. Standing implies consciousness. The upright stone acquires a meaning which separates it from other stones before it is shaped into an image, a statue.”<sup>52</sup>

The sense of sculptural monumentality of certain natural formations on the coastlines of these regions appears first in the drawing notebooks of Pablo Picasso and, more or less at the same time, in the small sculptures of Jacques Lipchitz. Picasso had spent a summer with Olga Khokhlova in Dinard in 1922 and 1928. His notebooks from that time reflect the magnetism of the rocks and the special way they are set in the landscape. Lipchitz had visited Lower Brittany in a trip to Ploumanac’h in the summer of 1923 with his first wife, Berthe. In a letter to the collector Alfred Barnes from August 1923, the artist remarks,

This summer in Ploumanac’h, a land with strange rock formations, I have reflected a lot when contemplating the curious way those rocks are balanced. And I think about applying this result to outdoor statues. Garden statues, mainly, to which I intend to devote the greatest part of my activity. It is an enthralling problem to which modern sculpture should contribute a new note.<sup>53</sup>

In Ploumanac’h, Lipchitz discovered monumentality, the need to abandon conceptual sculpture in maquettes in order to undertake large works, the need for the physicality of work on a large scale. The ideas of mass and equilibrium, balance and empty space, reappear in his new pieces, which put his earlier reliefs and pedestals into a new, unstable dynamic. Thus, the sculptor composed a *Figure* with three parts: two pedestals, one stacked on the other, and a relief with what appear to be bathers. He took this approach in designing works for Coco Chanel’s gardens, which included Brâncuși’s idea of incorporating the pedestal as part of the sculpture.

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52 William Tucker, “Artist Statement,” *The Mythic Figure*, exh. website, Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, accessed 9 May 2015, [http://www.skidmore.edu/schick/artists/william\\_tucker\\_2013.php](http://www.skidmore.edu/schick/artists/william_tucker_2013.php).

53 “Cet été à Ploumanach, pays des rochers étranges, en contemplant ces rochers avec leur curieux équilibre j’ai beaucoup réfléchi. Et ce résultat, je songe à l’appliquer aux statues en plein air. Statues de jardins principalement, à quoi je pense donner la plus grande part de mon activité. C’est un problème passionnant où la sculpture moderne doit apporter une note nouvelle.” See Jacques Lipchitz’s correspondence edited by Anne-Marie Zucchelli and Brigitte Léal in *Jacques Lipchitz: Collections du Centre Pompidou*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2004), pp. 121-64.



Front and back covers of the journal *First*, no. 2 (1961)

In 1933, Paul Nash made photographs of the stones of Avebury and titled one of them *Avebury Sentinel*. Perhaps we can speak of the meaning that prehistoric art has in the work of Tucker beginning in the 1980s as a “sentinel,” but its influence is already present in his student years.

A photograph of Tucker’s hand cupping a reproduction of the *Venus of Willendorf* appeared on the cover and (with the photo flipped) on the back cover of *First* [fig.], a journal produced by the sculpture students at St. Martin’s. Tucker was the editor for the publication, of which only two issues appeared, in 1961, with commentaries and photographs by colleagues like Phillip King and older artists like Gabriel Kohn. This particular photograph was taken by Sean Hudson, who had graduated from the Guildford School of Art and was at the time enrolled at the London School of Film and Technique. Hudson created a lovely twenty-five-minute documentary about Brâncuși titled *The Rumanian Brâncuși* (1976), produced by the Arts Council and narrated by Daniel Massey, and for which Tucker is cited as the instigator of the idea.<sup>54</sup> The same photograph appears on the cover of the book by Ruth Butler, *Western Sculpture: Definitions of Man* (1975), another of the publications from those years that reflected on the history of sculpture.<sup>55</sup>

54 The credits indicate that the film was “from an idea by William Tucker.” Sean Hudson, dir., *The Rumanian Brancusi*, Film ID ACE057, Arts Council England Film Collection, Arts on Film Archive, University of Westminster, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/films.php?a=view&recid=56>.

55 The title of her book is inspired in a quote from Joseph Beuys, who remarked in 1969 that “Man hasn’t thought much until now about sculpture. The fact that sculpture is a complex creation has been neglected. What interests me is the fact that sculpture supplies a definition of man”; quoted in Ruth Butler, *Western Sculpture: Definitions of Man* (New York: New York Graphics, 1975), p. v. Years later, the title of her book received criticism from feminists.

Tucker's idea to hold the sculpture in his hand is not a functional act, simply to photograph the piece. It is an act of reflection on at least three notions:

- to hold the piece in a niche, the bowl of the hand, that is, to install it in its exhibition, to give it an “architectural” frame;
- to hold the piece within the touch of the hand, that is, to focus on its tactile qualities, its surface and its weight;
- to hold it in his hand in order to give it scale, that is, to emphasize its dimensions, which continue to be monumental.

These pieces, like Alberto Giacometti's figurines, reveal to us that scale is not simply a matter of mathematical, acoustic, or visual measurements; it is fundamentally a *matter of touch*. Is not touch, in the very archaeology of the skin, the key regulator of our contact with reality, whether that be everyday reality or the reality of the mind?

How to limit space? How does a figure become enclosed within other limits that are not its own? The question Giacometti poses—or, rather, his sculptural responses to this question—is in any case not in a conceptual vein but a vital one. For that reason, the change in scale does not take monumentality away from small figures. Giacometti's question is aimed at the essence of being in this *hic et nunc* of its existence: he has no choice in reducing the human figure to a shadow but to *iconize* it. His *Femmes* offer a first impression of frontality, but when one has the strength to contemplate them for a long while, one enters into a unique world of form, space, and meaning. One discovers that the least arresting work can be enormous in its profundity, its extension, and its meaning. Real size and potential scale combine in one's memory, and in the memory of the vision they become defined or delimited as their own universe of forms and ideas.

Giacometti himself pointed out, as Eduardo Chillida recalls, that he made small figures “because what matters is space.” What Giacometti seeks, the sacred “Fear us!” of the Greek temples, is the space that surrounds figures. We can observe this perfectly in the Capitoline Hill or in the façade of El Escorial. When these spaces are solitary, the people—of whatever size or volume—are like sculptures by Giacometti. The human being in his or her solitude before the framed, built space is, for a pessimistic gaze, still just a melancholy shadow. With these small formats, Giacometti achieves a particular intensification of the human relationship with space; he makes one aware of spatial distances and reaffirms the sculptural elements as such, despite their reduced size. These little figures only require an eye, like the needle of a record player, to *amplify* them in one's conscience. What is monumental does not depend on scale but on its own energy.

There is something else, however, in the gaze directed at megaliths, vertical stones, and fertility figurines. Tucker puts it in the following terms:

To project an inner sense of the wholeness of the body has been the task of sculpture from the makers of Avebury and the Willendorf Venus to Degas and Rodin, and it still can be, in our time. Once I grasped this possibility some time ago I have been discarding, year by year, fragments of the visual and conceptual framework on which I once felt my sculpture depended—its frontality and geometric clarity, its linear and planar structure, every element of drawing, and distancing—until all that is left is the massive core.<sup>56</sup>

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56 William Tucker: *Recent Sculptures and Monotypes*, p. 3.



© Protected material

*Victory*, 2000  
Drawing and plaster sculpture  
William Tucker's studio in Ashfield, Massachusetts



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*Victory*, 2001  
Bronze sculpture  
Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden, Wuppertal, Germany



*Emperor*, 2002

Tucker's work has nothing to do with other giant stones like *Levitated Mass* (2012) by Michael Heizer, which, in its entirety, speaks of the enormous extension of the history of art, from the prehistoric tradition of creating megaliths to the modern forms of abstract geometries and the successes of avant-garde engineering. This work is composed of a 139-metre trench carved into the grounds of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, above which a large granite stone weighing 340 tonnes straddles the walkway below. That walkway under the stone descends gradually until it is five metres deep.<sup>57</sup> Similar to other works by this artist, like *Double Negative* (1969), the monumental negative space is key to experiencing the work.

With his figurative pieces beginning in the 1980s, Tucker reconnected with the sense of verticality and of being firmly set on the earth that is proper to prehistoric megaliths. He also reconnected with the meaning of female figurines, that incipient poetry of archetypal forms that have been carefully thought out and articulated, as if within these primordial images there were magical properties that could connect us to the forces of the earth.

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<sup>57</sup> Heizer conceived of the work in 1969, but he did not find an adequate rock until decades later, in Riverside County, California. The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin house a drawing of this work. The rock is one of the components of the work; the other is the 139-metre passageway underneath it, which serves as the rock's surrounding context.



© Protected material

*The Cave*, 2005

The large-scale pieces also have the weight and abstraction of the monoliths of Avebury. Some of the stones at Avebury weigh more than sixty tonnes. The quest for weight, mass, and attraction to the earth led Tucker to return to working in plaster, on both those scales: to what fits in the hand and to what cannot be encircled with the arms. In this way, Tucker returned to the concepts of space, extension, and solidity. In this sense, he is an empiricist like George Berkeley, who, in his *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, from 1709, establishes the fact that we only acquire a sense of space through orientation. That orientation comes from our body. Thus, it is only by means of touch that we can develop a knowledge of the spatial characteristics of objects.

The sculpture titled *Secret*, which might seem to be a meteor, represents a hand. (In fact, it is derived from the photograph of Tucker's own hand showing the *Venus of Willendorf*.) All of the pieces from this period seem at first glance to be abstract, but if one gazes at them attentively, they prove to be heads of people and horses, torsos, feet, and so on. The conception of the human face or the details of a foot or a hand or an animal varies across cultures and across time—not only the conception, but the vision of the human body. Bruno Snell, in *Die Entdeckung des Geistes (The Discovery of the Mind)*, from 1946, explains how in the Greek of Homer's time there was not yet a single term for the living human body, only one for a cadaver. In the Homeric Greek lexicon the body did not constitute a single unit but rather was a compendium of individual parts.<sup>58</sup> In the Homeric poems various words related to the body appear, like the limbs insofar as they are provided with movement by means of joints or the skin, not as a material but as a substratum of colour, as a surface. The bodies of athletes on Greek vases also reflect this conception that underlies the lexicon employed.

There also was no single term for vision. The deep gaze was of "the eyes of the *nous*." The *nous* was the part of the soul that could carry out the act of mental perception, not a simple looking-on or -at but rather something that goes beyond visual activity to encompass a kind of inner knowledge, the understanding of forms. Vision can refer, furthermore, to the form (descriptive anatomy), the structure, the function.

In Mesopotamian art, the interest in the physical forms of humans and animals reveals a love of fantasy and abstract ornaments. The human face was normally represented as a general type, with a massive, simplified anatomy: large, deeply set eyes and prominent nose, and almost never with individual features.

Contrastingly, the figuration of A. R. Penck is schematic, like prehistoric cave art, almost turning the world of realist figuration on its head. Tucker's approach to figuration, following in the footsteps of Medardo Rosso and Auguste Rodin after having served as a cornerstone of the minimalist movement in Great Britain, is of interest for two reasons: for the way in which it represents a *reversal* of minimalism and for the way in which it *revises* an approach to modelling that was characteristic of the early twentieth century.

Raising stones, erecting them against gravity, creating figures out of the mud that we can squeeze in a fist, gazing at the immense sky, contemplating a miniscule image: all of these acts make us feel our smallness (we are figurines in the immensity of the firmament) at the same time as our greatness (we are capable of erecting and shaping objects). But there are no similarities between the multiple celestial forms and the intricate network of our feelings. Nor is there any commitment from the stars to our own truth. As the poet Vicente Valero puts it, "there where outward and inward end up proving to be the same, in an extraordinary unity, abstraction and figuration are identical."

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58 "Of course the Homeric man had a body exactly like the later Greeks, but he did not know it qua body, but merely as the sum total of the limbs." Bruno Snell, "Homer's View of Man," in *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 8; translation of Snell, "Die Auffassung des Menschen bei Homer," in *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen* (Hamburg: Claassen und Goverts, 1946).





William Tucker's studio in Ashfield, Massachusetts, August 2009  
On the left, *Vishnu* (1995); in the centre, *Atreus* (1987)

## 5 Surface and visibility

Already in 1973, Tucker said that the essential quality of sculpture is its visibility. He was not referring to the sculptural object's ability to be seen but rather that it should actively seek to "meet, attract, and hold our sight" without that attraction's deriving from the subject represented.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to note that what Tucker takes from Rilke's book on Rodin is what led him to the second stage of his career, which is more rooted in the French sculptor's visual thought: work on the surface, sculpture as visibility.

Rilke points out in his book that the essence, the basic element, of style, Rodin's *subject matter*, is work on the surface, his technical ability, his craft. For the writer, beauty emerges *here*, in the "minute, conscientious realization" ("kleine gewissenhafte Verwirklichung") and not so much in the general idea or subject. With a refinement only comparable with his sonnet on the torso of Apollo, "Archaischer Apolos Torso" ("Archaic Torso of Apollo"), Rilke reveals that beauty emerges at the end of that trajectory of style, from the struggle with the medium.<sup>60</sup> The result is the experience of the hand working again and again on the surface: something much greater than any of the figurative details. What Rilke's succession of metaphors opens up is an image. They give a meaning to the torso that previously *we could not see* in its enigmatic surface. A poem is not a message to be read, it is an emotion to be felt. It is the key to entering into language and to going more deeply into the deepest thoughts in order to swim under the surface, in the power and mystery of language and words. In them, in the words of the poem, in its abyssal depths, in the depths of its sea, in its lack of light, in its corals, there appears (though not to every reader) a new depth: sensations and space there to be discovered and delighted in.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in "William Tucker: *Beulah I*, 1971," T01818, Art and Artists tab, Tate Collection website, accessed 9 May 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tucker-beulah-i-t01818>.

<sup>60</sup> "Archaischer Apolos Torso," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1908). Bilingual German-English edition in Rilke, *New Poems*, trans. Joseph Cadora (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2014).



William Tucker's studio in Ashfield, Massachusetts, April 2014  
Several *Horses* and *The Void* (2005)

In his sonnet to the torso—that is, a poetic form that is predetermined and compact, in this case about something that is broken—Rilke describes how the object suggests the whole, the work in its entirety. The form of the fragment, in its various modulations, gives rise to its own figurative implications. Metaphor in Rilke is an act of investigation, like the hands of Rodin modelling clay and plaster.

The enigmatic surfaces in Tucker's work do not seek equivocal readings of the representation of the body. Rather, they respond to the *surface tension* like that of liquids. This surface tension is a manifestation of the intermolecular forces produced in liquids and with solid surfaces that come into contact with them or, in the case of sculpture, between the surface of the piece and our visual solidity, which allows for the capillarity—the visibility—of the image. Or, they respond to the muscular and nervous tension of the artist in erecting his work, to the conflict present before, for example, in Giacometti's existentialism between representation and being, *being-there*.

When the piece happens, like when the night comes to an end, "nothing paralyzes you in the forest, and the animals come out to drink." That minute, conscientious realization is what, beginning in 1985, Tucker sought in the patient modelling of his pieces in plaster. He was feeling, probing, in order to describe what was before him. He was attempting to name this power, which is palpable, real, but essentially ineffable. He turned to plaster again and again, recognizing that it is one of the only ways to arrive at the nature of reality, to wander around in it, by means of the construction of these metaphorical architectures, as Rilke does in his examination of the essence of Rodin's style. Tucker himself defines modelling as "the most direct way of understanding the human body, but not from outside... but from within, from the consciousness of *being* in one's own body."<sup>61</sup>

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61 Quoted in *William Tucker: Recent Sculptures and Monotypes*, p. 4.

Tucker's works, as I have already mentioned at the beginning of this essay, are difficult to "read" visually, despite their apparent simplicity. It is impossible to ascertain their structure at a single glance. We must move around them physically in order to understand their form. They are not narrative images but poetic illuminations, like Rilke's sonnet. And, as I have already indicated, Tucker himself remarks in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue for *The Condition of Sculpture* that "Sculpture is subject to gravity and revealed by light. Here is the primary condition."<sup>62</sup>

What unites the viewer of a sculpture with a sculpture is only the force of gravity. One and the other are submerged in it. Afterwards, the sculpture appears in the light, it becomes visible. The viewer can move around to observe the sculpture, but in Tucker's analysis, movement continues to be the prerogative of the viewer and not of the sculpture. And for it to exist as a sculpture, it must be seen as such, as a sculpture. In this sense, his recent work also responds to his ideas about the concept of sculpture in his first period: a primordial sense of *erection*—that what constitutes a piece is not volume and mass but a challenge. This is its challenge to sight, its verticality, its struggle against gravity.

For Tucker, its physical qualities are what allow a sculpture to express "man's imaginative relation with the physical world" in "continually new terms."<sup>63</sup> He constructs torsos reinterpreting history, whether that be a hand from Michelangelo's *Night* or Matisse's *Odalisque*, in order to speak of the fragmentation of form, rethinking the totality and entirety of a new sculpture ("on what is sculptural in sculpture"). It communicates the ineffable, just as the viewer of the torso of Apollo gathers up the impressions that the fragment communicates—and the message that the fragment conveys is, in the striking swerve of the last verse of Rilke's sonnet, "Du mußt dein Leben ändern" ("You must change your life"). In each work, Tucker communicates that same swerve, which is, in sculptural terms: We must change how we see.

One of the texts that best clarifies Tucker's work as fundamentally poetic, especially in comparison with the work of Goya, is by Wayne L. Roosa; it appeared on the occasion of the exhibition *Tucker: The Sleep of Reason*, at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota (in 2000), and is titled "William Tucker's Poetry of Form." Roosa points out,

Having thus positioned our own presences in resonance with the presences of Tucker's works, other levels of meaning begin to open. There are, for example, the titles of these pieces: *Our Leader*, *The Good Soldier*, and *The Persecutor*. There is *Icarus*, *A Poet for Our Time*, and the *Sleeping Musician*. Or there is *Little Jeanne* and *Maria Luisa*. There seem to be universal types, emblematic of society's political figures and oppressors, its self-destructing mythic heroes, its creative artists, and its women. They are gathered here under the rubric of the exhibition title chosen by Tucker, *The Sleep of Reason*. This title, too, feels universal in appeal. But it is also inescapably linked to the Spanish artist, Francisco Goya, who was the visual poet of his time from the 1790s until his death in 1828. Goya was Court Painter of Spain and knew these "types" first-hand. [...] In his portfolio of etchings called *Caprichos*, Goya ruthlessly satirized social corruption and human folly. *Capricho #43* (originally intended as the frontispiece) bears the title, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*). In it, we see a young male intellectual fallen into a troubled sleep, dreaming at his writing desk. His sleep (or dream) looms up out of the darkness behind him. In that darkness, owls of wisdom emanate from his head, only to metamorphose into bats of evil. The subtlety of Goya's word choice is as rich as his image, for *sueño* translates both as "sleep" and as "dream," thereby giving ambiguity to reason and the producing of social monsters. [...] Goya knew the fruits of reason to be both sweet and bitter. He knew the ambiguity of human nature and its ability to corrupt reason as a force by blending it with irrational passions.

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62 Tucker, "Introduction," p. 7.

63 Quoted in Overton, "William Tucker," <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/people/reference/william-tucker>.

It is this same brooding complexity that I think William Tucker explores. As an artist, Goya was working within a representational and narrative tradition. Yet he was one of the first artists seeking to reveal the interior human condition more directly. His imaginative invention of portraying a man's dreams allowed him a more abstract and more irrational kind of imagery by which to explore the intensely subjective forces within the heart and mind of human beings. Tucker continues that exploration. But as an artist, Tucker is working within an abstract modern tradition. One of the great achievements of modern art is its capacity to gain access directly into the sheer immediacy of our interior condition. It does so by way of skirting literal narrative and representation. The best modern art only minimally references naturalistic narrative and appearances (giving just enough to moor the viewer in external reality), while honing in on the more abstract pith of feeling, idea, emotion, and state of mind. This makes possible a thorough-going fusion of image and ideas and emotion, folding these into the very processes and nature of materials, until unified expressive objects emerge, such as these pieces by Tucker.<sup>64</sup>

The object created by Tucker is not a story, not a reproduction. Like the poem by Rilke or a piece of music, his modelling is an irresistible explosion of a mode of being or a feeling; it is a figure that does not represent but rather presents itself in its inward silence. In that silence, the object is not only immediacy but a reconsideration of the sense of the image of sculpture. His work is not a simple interior monologue: It is a deliberative monologue, inductive like one of the three parts of classical *elocutio*, affecting the appropriate way of verbally expressing the materials of the *inventio*, arranged according to their *dispositio*. It is through two aspects that *elocutio* is manifested: qualities and register. It is what we would now call *style*. But what is the sense of sculptural *elocutio*?

## Sculpture's sense

From the very beginning of his activity as an artist, Tucker has discussed the role of sculpture and what we understand it to mean. His perhaps most forceful manifesto is to be found in his essay published in 1977, in *Art Journal*, with the title "Modernism, Freedom, Sculpture." In it, he raises the following issues:

I am not here to present a case for the defence of sculpture—some sculpture—now. This article has to do with criticism, not with making apologies or justifications for this or that kind of work. But the persistence and renewal of activity within sculpture, against the grain of history—this phenomenon clearly offends many observers. The question they ask—"What's it all for?" is a plain one, and an honest one. It demands an honest answer. The artist is asked, not "What are you doing?" which implies that the questioner is in ignorance and wants an explanation, and further that there is already an understanding between questioner and artist that what he is doing is worthwhile and merely needs interpretation. No, the sculptor is asked "What is what he has already done for?" Here the questioner no longer pretends ignorance: The thing is finished, already done, the questioner "knows" it, has seen such things before. There is no room for interpretation. So the questioner, his conventional role elided, asks "What is it for?" that is, "What is its use?"<sup>65</sup>

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64 Wayne Roosa, "William Tucker's Poetry of Form," essay for the exhibition *William Tucker: The Sleep of Reason*, The Olson Gallery, Bethel College, Minnesota (21 March-28 May 2000), author's personal website, accessed 9 May 2015, [http://wayneroosa.com/?page\\_id=104](http://wayneroosa.com/?page_id=104).

65 William Tucker, "Modernism, Freedom, Sculpture," *Art Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1977-78): 153-56.

At a time of minimalisms, conceptualisms, etcetera—as Eftychia Sofiali indicates, quoting passages from this same essay by Tucker—the word *sculpture* does not denote the work's standing and the way it is; rather, it signifies the process of the artist, the way that the artist brings about the being of the work. It reflects, for Tucker, not the technique of the artist of modernity but his freedom of creation and his attention to the artificial and physical form of the work, sculpture as “the making and the thing made.” The word *sculpture* became a universal term to include modern sculpture “even when the kind of making—carving—had no relation [to] the actual process implied by the word.” What sculpture is as a procedure is completed by the process of experiencing the work, which “can and must be identified in terms of human experience.”<sup>66</sup>

Tucker's sculpture is a dialectic between figuration and abstraction. There is an emotional gesture within a solid mass and an ambiguity in that mass, which presents itself as formless and, at the same time, as evocative of something with which we are familiar or which we can recognize. It confounds our expectations regarding the fiction—in the act of *reading* sculpture, that is, of understanding or recognizing it qua sculpture.

On the one hand, the work by Tucker we are now presenting here manifests that authority of classical sculpture, a roundly solid form, a stony presence with an *aere perennis*; on the other hand, it manifests a kind of stream of consciousness, that narrative mode that is characteristic of James Joyce, especially in his novel, *Ulysses*, from 1922.

### Stream of consciousness and surface tension

The term *stream of consciousness* comes from literary criticism. It refers to a text (or a narrative mode) that depicts a character's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and reflections as they flow in the human consciousness. It implies the abandonment of strict linear time in favour of the internal workings of the character's mind. It goes beyond a mere internal monologue that recreates thoughts, for without any apparent intervention from the narrator, without any governing logic, it presents a character's reflections blended together with his or her impressions and perceptions. The “stream” necessarily violates the norms of grammar and may be considered a form of “personal narrative radicalization,” since the inner world of the character is presented without commentary, and the narrator appears to withdraw from the event.

Joyce took the realism of stream of consciousness to an extreme, and his experimentation became an instrument of naturalistic representation. The stream of consciousness is a different matter for each character. In Stephen Dedalus's case, for example, it is a complex fabric of poetic images and memories of things read that does not exist for Leopold Bloom. In any case, it is a matter of freely representing thoughts precisely as they emerge in the mind before they are reorganized logically in sentences. Often, nouns, pronouns, or verbs are dropped from the sentence; sometimes, articles, prepositions, or conjunctions. This is what Tucker does in “carving” his surfaces. They are not modelled according to a traditional grammar of anatomy; rather, they are a flow of the sensations of the constructive and figurative process itself.

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66 Eftychia Sofiali, “The Modern Object Sculpture Understood as a Work of Art,” PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2011, p. 20, accessed 9 May 2015, [http://orca.cf.ac.uk/23861/1/EFTYCHIA\\_SOFIALI\\_THESIS\\_final\\_version.pdf](http://orca.cf.ac.uk/23861/1/EFTYCHIA_SOFIALI_THESIS_final_version.pdf). Quoted passages are from Tucker, “Modernism,” p. 156.



William Tucker exhibition at the McKee Gallery, New York, 2012  
On the left, *The Contract* (1978); in the centre, *Day* (2012)



William Tucker exhibition at the Buchmann Galerie, 2013  
On the left, *Vishnu* (1995); on the right, *Prow* (2010)

The difference between stream of consciousness and direct discourse lies in the *con-figuration* of the sentence. In the construction of the syntactical sentence, there are no quotation marks, no commas, no verbs. There is no narrative register, just flow. In the same way, there is no anatomical representation in Tucker's pieces; instead, there is what we might call "surface tension." Tension and surface simultaneously register the perception, reflection, and feelings of the sculptor himself.

Another stylistic feature of Tucker's work is the saving of information through psychological and syntactic reduction, something that was a feature of his first sculptures as well. The idea is that the modelling should follow "the immediate life of the consciousness" as close as possible, but Tucker questions the authenticity of the process, insinuating that the format of a sculptor is not that of a narrator who wishes to describe. A sculptor does not describe but carves, opening a direct dialogue with the material—one that is detailed and simple yet not without artifice, because fundamentally it condenses a whole series of memories of perceptions and knowledge.

Following his return to figuration, Tucker concludes with a monologue, with its continuous flow. Rewriting the surface over and over again, he manifests forms of freedom of direct and indirect expression, the transformation of this passage as "interior monologue" (immediate discourse) that reveals the opening-up of "thought" by eliminating the presence of the narrator. The narrative report (in Tucker's case, the modelling) only has the function of situating the figure and its interior monologue within the external world, thereby creating a sculptural framework that does not consist in reproducing the figure but simply in producing it. External features are important as an incentive that triggers internal processes: matters that also *com-pose* the figure as such—the piece—perhaps because the sculptor does not distance himself but rather comes closer, working it close-up, like with a drawing, and it must be reconstructed by the reader him- or herself.

Despite this shift in the early 1980s with which Tucker abandoned the "construction" of sculptural objects for modelling with his hands, he continued to pose the question of sculpture's ontological status: What is sculpture? —that is, sculpture that, as an object (whether in Rodin's plasters or in Rilke's interpretation), is not necessarily identified with the subject but that is an object in need of no wall or ceiling. In Tucker's mature work after 1983, sculpture that *is an object in and of itself*, with its *visibility*, presents these characteristics of surface tension and flow of consciousness that reflect (if we are to make a literary comparison) not so much the contents of Joyce's works as the sense of the poem in Rilke's oeuvre.

The image that these masses communicate to us takes shape or *appears* to us slowly. It takes us time to register it, for they are directed more towards a sensation than towards the anatomical reference of the human body. For this reason, our gaze is slow to phenomenalyze them, to give them corporeality, to give them—beyond gravity—a sense, a meaning. They are monumental and, at the same time, they are nevertheless fragments, torsos.

On occasion they are immediately recognizable—horses' heads, hands, human heads...; at other times, they emerge in our gaze slowly. Generally they are related to classical statuary. Their *erection* also implies muscular effort, an internal and unconscious effort, a vital effort, one that responds to an attitude. They are not static pieces, abandoned masses. Rather, they challenge gravity in order to signify, like the "old haunts."

## 6

### Physical intensity and abstract visuality

Tucker's ideas regarding the history of art and, specifically, the history of sculpture are founded on his own working experience in his studio, that is, in the practice of sculpture itself.

His works, whether in plaster or bronze, share several characteristics in common: the fluidity of the mass, the lack of precision in the modelling, their heavy quality conveying a sense of what is *non-finito*, incompleteness, images lying somewhere between the unformed and the deformed, on the border between form and formlessness. Tucker adapts the gestural intensity of abstract expressionism to the creation of practically undefinable objects. At times these masses are recognizable as fragments of the human body: a foot (*Messenger*, 2001), a hand (*The Cave*, 2005, or *The Sculptor*, 2012), or legs and a torso (*Dancer*, 2002-5). In all of these cases, however, the play between figuration and abstraction fluctuates: between gesture and sign, between the structuralists' *signifiant* and *signifié*, as I have indicated before.

*Messenger*, from 2001, is a foot in movement or, rather, on the point of moving. In the same way that archaic Greek statuary presents one foot advancing, here it is the heel that moves forward toward the progress of something that it not seen but intuited, toward change. *Day* (2012) is the giant head of a horse whose aura of grandeur vanishes in the gesture.<sup>67</sup> There is also a sense of disequilibrium in works like *Dancer*, in which the centre of gravity defies the gravitational force, and it does so thanks to its weight.

*Sleeping Musician* is a head resting on its side, slightly larger than life-size. The human form is not initially apparent, but one begins to make out a nose, cheeks, eyebrows. As the Tate indicates in its description of this piece,

It is one of a group of crudely depicted heads [Tucker] began making during his move from New York to Williamsburg, Massachusetts, in 1998. While his new studio was being constructed, he started to model small heads in plaster, something he had not done since his student days in the 1950s in Oxford. He has commented that Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (1909-10) was "a constant touchstone" during this period.<sup>68</sup>

Other heads, especially those on a larger scale—*Bibi* (1999), *The Hero at Evening* (2000), and *Emperor* (2002)—refer to Rodin, not to his portraits but in particular to *Head of Iris* (1890-91) [fig.], the only copy cast of this work, a work he presented in 1908 and which he donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1914.

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67 In a review published in *The Guardian* regarding Tucker's 2001 exhibition in Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, Robert Clark points out that "Bronze blobs that look like animals are something of a modernist cliché. Bronze blobs that look like something the animal left behind are something else. William Tucker presents both at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. In the small Bothy Gallery, a series of folded and truncated forms suggests horse heads. Indeed, the titles tell you that's what they are, just in case you thought you were looking at bugs or grubs or casts of bent dough." Robert Clark, "The Sculpture Animals Leave Behind: William Tucker, Yorkshire Sculpture Park," *The Guardian*, 28 March 2001, accessed 9 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2001/mar/28/art.artsfeatures1>.

68 "William Tucker: *Sleeping Musician*, 1998," T07821, Art and Artists tab, Tate Collection website, accessed 9 May 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tucker-sleeping-musician-t07821>.





Auguste Rodin  
*Head of Iris*, ca. 1905  
Bronze, 58.4 cm (height)  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
Inv. no. A.41-1914

This head by Rodin is of interest because of its size, its rough modelling, and the absence of a conventional surface finish. The blocky form and the seam lines left by the plaster mould can be seen in the piece cast in bronze, which runs contrary to the conventional ideas at the time regarding beauty, form, and a “finished” sculpture. Tucker is not interested in portraiture but in freeing sculpture from the demands and expectations of verisimilitude. His heads are not true portraits nor a flattering idealization but pure sculptural substance, the sculptor’s *inventio*. They are the translation of an inner feeling.

Alongside his sculptures, Tucker made drawings that are closely related to the bronzes, both in terms of the human form and in terms of the physical act of doing the work of executing them. Matisse drew without looking at the paper, only observing his model so as not to disturb or interfere with his sensations in their plenitude or purity.<sup>69</sup> Tucker draws his heads not on a horizontal support but vertically, on the wall, as if he were brushing up against them. He believes, like the psychologist Jean Piaget, that our concepts of space, number, and scale are based on our innate reflections, in our first actions in the real world in real, active exploration, in our tactile contact with the space and the objects that surround us. It is touch, rather than sight, that allows Tucker to grasp form before formulating it. Like Matisse, he speaks of sculpture as something that is self-referential; in other words, it should not express anything beyond its own substance. Sculpture is an object in space whose eloquence is only a function of its materiality.

Tucker’s works are aimed not only at our sight but our touch. Their iconographic shaping and their modelling not only demand that our perception be sharpened in order to grasp the image, as if it were emerging from the stone like Michelangelo’s Neoplatonic philosophy; they also address our hands, our corporeality, as if they were inviting us to touch them. The force of gravity, that relationship with the ground, is a consubstantial element of perception and cannot be separated from our experience of viewing sculpture. That tactile experience is fundamental for the artist *in his making of sculptures*. Tucker does not model from a distance; rather, he involves himself with his entire body. In some manner, his sculptures communicate that experience to the viewer.

### Sense of touch, inner feeling

Before the young Tucker was photographed with the *Venus of Willendorf*, the elderly Rodin had already worked on his small figures of dancers as objects that dance and shape themselves in his hands. Tucker emphasizes this in his book from 1974:

The small size of the figures suggests they were made wholly in the sculptor’s hand, and they enjoy the freedom of orientation, the identification of the handling of the soft material with structure, that this process allows. It is no longer anatomy but the action of the hand in clay that determines the form of the figure. The idea of “making” could not be more directly fulfilled.<sup>70</sup>

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69 In 1899, Matisse bought two works from the dealer Ambroise Vollard: a painting of bathers by Paul Cézanne and a plaster bust of the journalist Enrique Rochefort that Rodin had sculpted in 1884. He visited Rodin’s workshop that same year to show him some of his drawings, but the sculptor was unable to appreciate Matisse’s work. Nevertheless, Matisse learned all he could from exhibitions and photographs of Rodin’s oeuvre. Matisse liked to compare the human body with a tree, in that both are hostages of the earth’s gravity. His ideas about sculpture may be found in the text, “Notes d’un peintre,” published in 1908 in *La Grande Revue*, and in notes taken by Sarah Stein at the artist’s academy. The American collector wrote, “C’est le sculpteur qui, chez Matisse, a découvert la statuaire africaine, non le peintre” (It is the sculptor who, in Matisse’s work, discovered African statuary, not the painter). See Henri Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l’art* (Paris: Hermann, 1974).

70 Tucker, *Language*, p. 40.

Tucker's piece *The Cave* (2005) is a reference to the Portuguese novelist José Saramago, who expresses similar ideas in his novel, *A caverna*, published in 2000. Translated into English as *The Cave*, is the work Saramago was writing when he received the Nobel Prize in 1998. In it, he revisits the myth of Plato's cave—the myth of ideal forms—in the story of an old potter named Cipriano Algor and his daughter Marta, who make figurines in clay that they refuse to mass produce. Saramago refers to the brain of one's fingers in the shaping of a sculpture:

Indeed, very few people are aware that in each of our fingers, located somewhere between the first phalange, the mesophalange, and the metaphalange, there is a tiny brain. The fact is that the other organ which we call the brain, the one with which we came into the world, the one which we transport around in our head and which transports us so that we can transport it, has only ever had very general, vague, diffuse and, above all, unimaginative ideas about what the hands and fingers should do. For example, if the brain-in-our-head suddenly gets an idea for a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music or literature, or a clay figurine, it simply sends a signal to that effect and then waits to see what will happen.<sup>71</sup>

For Tucker, touch is not only the sense that marks the sculptor's work, it is above all the sense of inquiry, which marks an investigation, more so than the brain. Like Saramago, he understands that the beginning of a work is not a point or a simple line, but a slow process, something that the hands mould without knowing exactly where they are going. Tucker probes that mass like a blind man, and in that manual perception the work and its meaning begin to emerge. Saramago adds,

That is why the fingers have always excelled at uncovering what is concealed. Anything in the brain-in-our-head that appears to have an instinctive, magical, or supernatural quality—whatever that may mean—is taught to it by the small brains in our fingers. In order for the brain-in-the-head to know what a stone is, the fingers first have to touch it, to feel its rough surface, its weight and density, to cut themselves on it.<sup>72</sup>

Matisse had already recognized the importance of touch for Rodin; the younger artist indicated that he often touched his models in order to soak up their form before transcribing the sensation into clay or plaster. Matisse would make a first version from life in front of the model and then would execute variations of the same version for which he no longer needed the model, for they emerged from an "inner need" (*nécessité intérieure*) with the aim of manifesting his inner feeling. That sense of touch is also what Michelangelo, in a certain way, leaves behind in what is *non-finito*, the very traces of the tools with which he works: sculpture as a process more than a representation.

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71 José Saramago, *The Cave* (New York: Harcourt, 2002), pp. 66-67. "Na verdade, são poucos os que sabem da existência de um pequeno cérebro em cada um dos dedos da mão, algures entre a falange, a falanginha e a falangeta. Aquele outro órgão a que chamamos cérebro, esse com que viemos ao mundo, esse que transportamos dentro do crânio e que nos transporta a nós para que o transportemos a ele, nunca conseguiu produzir senão intenções vagas, gerais, difusas, e sobretudo pouco variadas, acerca do que as mãos e os dedos deverão fazer. Por exemplo, se ao cérebro da cabeça lhe ocorreu a ideia de uma pintura, ou música, ou escultura, ou literatura, ou boneco de barro, o que ele faz é manifestar o desejo e ficar depois à espera, a ver o que acontece"; José Saramago, *A caverna* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2000), p. 82.

72 Saramago, *The Cave*, p. 67. "Por isso o que os dedos sempre souberam fazer de melhor foi precisamente revelar o oculto. O que no cérebro possa ser percebido como conhecimento infuso, mágico ou sobrenatural, seja o que for que signifiquem sobrenatural, mágico e infuso, foram os dedos e os seus pequenos cérebros que lho ensinaram. Para que o cérebro da cabeça soubesse o que era a pedra, foi preciso primeiro que os dedos a tocassem, lhe sentissem a aspereza, o peso e a densidade, foi preciso que se ferissem nela"; Saramago, *A caverna*, p. 83.



Michelangelo Buonarroti  
*St. Matthew*, 1505  
Marble, 2.6 m (height)  
Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence  
Detail

Let us consider the upper portion, the head, of Michelangelo's *St. Matthew* [fig.]. The artist was around thirty years old and was in the process of sculpting two round bas-reliefs, the Pitti Tondo and the Taddei Tondo, as well as four statues of saints for the Cathedral of Siena. On 24 April 1503, the Arte della Lana, or wool guild, in Florence commissioned twelve statues representing the apostles, measuring four and a half *braccia* (270 cm), to adorn the interior of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. He only produced this marble block, which helps us understand the meaning of *non-finito*, to study the great sculptor's original conception.

Michelangelo sculpted the frontal view of the saint in one side of the block. Vasari compared his technique with the effect of a model submerged in a cistern of water, climbing to the surface and exposing, little by little, one limb after the other. The block leaves only a vision of what the artist is freeing from the material. It is a statue, a male figure that struggles to emerge from the material while the artist carves the front plane of the block deeply. That plane falls further and further back while gradually more parts of the image become visible in the marble. The artist *un-blocks* the figure: he allows it to emerge.

Michelangelo's technical and stylistic approach responds, on the one hand, to the Neoplatonic idea that the figure carved in marble is a prisoner enclosed within the marble block. On the other, it responds to the need for removing excess material—an operation that is at once intellectual and physical—in order to obtain the sculptural object. This artist disdained the traditional preparatory steps in creating sculptures (drawings and sketches) and instead preferred to work on the marble directly. Artistic creation conceived as a struggle, not merely representation as a product of craft, is what led Michelangelo to present the *non-finito* aspect as the essence of his work.

To the sensation of *non-finito*, Tucker will add the concepts of torso (fragmentation) and gravity (what *is felt in disequilibrium* and what is perceived). I have mentioned the piece titled *Dancer*, from 2002-5, but I might just as well have mentioned *Chimera* or *Odalisque*, both works from 2008. The three works in plaster presented in this exhibition—*Chimera* and *Odalisque*, weighing nearly 500 kilogrammes, and *Day* (2012), weighing 780 kilos—show us how Tucker must work the plaster from the point of view of construction and from the point of view of the modelling of the surfaces, like someone scaling a mountain or sliding through a terrain.



Michelangelo Buonarroti  
*Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici: Allegory of Day*, 1520-33  
 Medici Chapel, Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence  
 Details



Michelangelo Buonarroti  
*Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici: Allegory of Night*, 1520-33  
 Medici Chapel, Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence  
 Detail

The first of these works, according to the artist, is inspired in a photograph of a work in plaster by Brâncuși from 1907, *Study of Renée*, since destroyed.<sup>73</sup> We might perceive a greater echo of Rodin's *Faune et nymphe*, in which the artist portrays himself as a faun and Camille Claudel as a nymph.<sup>74</sup> A bearded faun seated on a rock clasps a young, beautiful from behind, while she tries to escape with all her might. Rodin encodes the nymph's movement in two diagonals that grow abruptly. The apparently unequivocal work does not have a clear title, or rather it has a good number of them: *Faune et nymphe*, *Jupiter Taurus*, *Minotaure...*, just as Tucker's work makes multiple references.

<sup>73</sup> Reproduced in Sidney Geist, *Brâncuși: A Study of the Sculpture* (London: Studio Vista, 1968), p. 33.

<sup>74</sup> *Le Minotaure (Faune et nymphe)*, 1885-86, marble, 57.5 x 46 x 39 cm. Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany. Inv. P 59.

Around the 1880s and 1890s, Rodin executed two fragmentary sculptural figures: *Iris, messagère des dieux* (*Iris, Messenger of the Gods*), and *Figure volante* (*Flying Figure*). The former, which is larger (around 83 centimetres tall), lacks a head and a left arm, while *Figure volante*, measuring about half that, is also missing the left leg and the right foot. *Iris*, messenger of the Olympian deities, the female counterpart of the wing-footed Hermes, was originally intended for the *Monument à Victor Hugo* in the Pantheon in Paris, and the model comes from *La Porte de l'Enfer* (*The Gates of Hell*), where it appears lying prone. As was habitual in his artistic practice, Rodin separated *Iris* from the group and varied the orientation of the fragment until he found the pose with the greatest expressive impulse, with greater tension in the arc of the legs in that acrobatic nude, an image of absolute physicality despite the intentional amputation of its limbs. The two pieces are full of energy, not only in their unusual, contorted postures but also in the frenzied treatment of the surface of the bronze, a reflection of the original model in clay as well as of the sculptor's capacity for spontaneity and freedom of expression. In this sense, Saramago's words in the novel quoted above prove particularly vivid, when he points out that masterworks are born not only out of suffering and doubt but also out of the material's resistance to the artist, that clay that refuses to surrender to the artist's hands:

All archaeology of matter is an archaeology of humanity. What this clay hides and shows is the passage of a being through time and space, the marks left by fingers, the scratches left by fingernails, the ashes and the charred logs of burned-out bonfires, our bones and those of others, the endlessly bifurcating paths disappearing off into the distance and merging with each other. This grain on the surface is a memory, this depression the mark left by a recumbent body. The brain asked a question and made a request, the hand answered and acted.<sup>75</sup>

## Space and equilibrium in Indian dance

The influence of the physicality observable in *Iris* can be followed through other figures from twentieth-century art. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London houses the most extensive collection of works by Rodin in Great Britain, including eighteen sculptures donated to the museum by the artist himself in 1914. We have indications that Francis Bacon frequently visited the museum to view these works, and in the 1960s Bacon was also a regular visitor of the Musée Rodin in Paris, where he had the opportunity to familiarize himself closely with various sculptures of which his friend Lucian Freud had requested loans, including the three versions of *Iris*. The painter was deeply interested in Rodin, who was an extreme realist and chronicler of the human condition, to the extent that works by Bacon like *Lying Figure No. 1*, from 1959 (New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester), and *Reclining Woman*, from 1961 (Tate Britain, London), emerge under the evocation of the figure of the French sculptor.<sup>76</sup>

As is the case with the dancer by Degas mentioned above, with Rodin's *Figure volante* and with Matisse's *Odalisque*, Tucker's works reflect his interest in position. All of these artists pay attention to the energy that arises from unbalance, condensing or congealing it. They do not focus on the leap but rather on finding the

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75 Saramago, *The Cave*, p. 68. "Toda a arqueologia de materiais é uma arqueologia humana. O que este barro esconde e mostra é o trânsito do ser no tempo e a sua passagem pelos espaços, os sinais dos dedos, as raspaduras das unhas, as cinzas e os tições das fogueiras apagadas, os ossos próprios e alheios, os caminhos que eternamente se bifurcam e se vão distanciando e perdendo uns dos outros. Este grão que aflora à superfície é uma memória, esta depressão marca que ficou de um corpo deitado. O cérebro perguntou e pediu, a mão respondeu e fez"; Saramago, *A caverna*, p. 84.

76 *Movement and Gravity: Bacon and Rodin in Dialogue* was the first exhibition devoted to exploring the connections between Francis Bacon and Auguste Rodin. It was held at the Ordovas Gallery in London between 8 February and 6 April 2013. The exhibition catalogue includes an essay by Martin Harrison: *Movement and Gravity: Bacon and Rodin in Dialogue*, exh. cat. (London: Ordovas, 2013).

inner centre. What Tucker aims for is not the jugglery of a leap but equilibrium, which, in addition to being a relation of weight and gravity, is an *attitude*, as when one rides a horse. He works the plaster like a dancer working with his or her partner or a rider with his or her mount: both know that, in addition to technique and the distribution of weight, a certain attitude is necessary—and, above all, chemistry. The dancer dances *with* and *for* the other person, intertwined *in* the dancer's equilibriums. The tension between bodies in the organization of forms in movement goes beyond poses in sculpture, insofar as here, in addition to mass, gravity, and bodily tension, there is a flow. In dance there is movement and rhythm; there is an interplay of everything that in sculpture is static. It does not only address touch but all the senses of the body.

Ballet is constructed with moments, with instants or steps marked by connection, trust. A pair of dancers, a duet, is an essential part of the recounting of stories in the staging of ballets, the steps that create emotional moments, steps that suggest the implications of human beings and not fairies or swans. The male dancer allows the ballerina to rise, he creates the impression of freedom, of transcending gravity and the laws of nature. The endless practicing serves to make muscle memories permanent, so that what is only work and discipline can seem natural. There is no risk involved in the steps, the lifts, or the leaps. It is a negotiated exercise, a simple, smooth execution that combines time, strength, and skill in the two performers, a sense of balance, and a sense of impetus. Dance is perhaps the plastic expression that, throughout time and space, has best reflected the being of humanity. Dance is a human effort made at the demand of a new, higher need that is neither entirely free (like sports) nor obligatory (like work). It is voluntary movements that are an end in themselves, movements considered as a whole, a communicative whole (appellative, referential-symbolic, expressive), whether in a solo dance or a collective one. Tucker dances with and for that mass of plaster; he intertwines himself with it in a negotiated exercise in order to relate a story to us, a movement in an object that is considered as a whole. But he knows that there is something more than chemistry in the *pas de deux* between the sculptor and the material, between the charcoal and the paper.

European ballet is an attempt at conquering space and mastering the geometric possibilities of the stage. Dance in India, meanwhile, is not the flight of Icarus; rather, it makes the ground and stasis the principal part of its movement. The body of the Western dancer is a crucible of energies, of struggle against gravity. In Indian dance, the body is an instrument for the formation of gestures and symbols. Shiva Nataraja, the lord of dance, created the world by dancing. Tucker does not seek the *élévation*, the leap, of classical European ballet. His sense of rhythm, as we shall see in his drawings, is closer to the practices of classical Indian dance, subject to the ground. In Indian culture, sculpture is interpreted as the frozen movements of a dance. Tucker presents, as in the classical *kathak* dance, that emotional content, his thought or inner need, with movements (the modelling) that are abstract (*kathak nritta*, the "pure" form of that dance), instead of with facial expressions or gestures of the hands (*abhinaya*, figurative expression with the face and limbs). He works with the grammar of tradition (*parampar*, the transmission of knowledge through generations of teachers and disciples, as in *kathak* dance), and he flows in the aesthetics of the contemporary world (*pravah*, "flow, flux, current"). He thus achieves a performance in these pieces from recent years, as he did before with *Unfold* and similar sculptures from his abstract period: a sharing with the viewer that obliges him or her to observe and perceive the language of sculpture and its conditions with a new attitude.

Tucker's work has given rise to a series of sculptures that, curiously, are more abstract than is evident in their form. Both in his early period and in his late style, the artist poses fundamental questions about what sculpture is and what it can or should be. He returns to things themselves: verticality, visuality, tactility. His sculpture, static rocks that are bodies that archive and reactivate the living, mysterious past in the present, has returned to its origins—to *expanding the infinite*.

## 7

### Expanding the infinite

I have spoken above of the relationship that twentieth-century sculpture has with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which holds that our relationship with the world is established through the primacy of the sensorial, the experience of the body, over reflection. In the words of the German philosopher, *die Sachen selbst*, "things themselves." The artist most closely tied to this line of visual thought—indeed, he anticipates it—is not the sculptor Auguste Rodin but the painter Paul Cézanne.

In Cézanne's work, the impressionists' *plein air* approach becomes pure vision, which is what Husserl demands of reflection. The French artist established a new relationship between vision and painting: Painting does not rest on the support of nature, through its observation, but rather *is made with it*. There is no representation, only intention, involvement, *pictorial experience*. From his earliest years, Tucker has insisted on his idea of *sculpture as a thing in itself that does not represent anything else*.

With his brushes and palette knives, Cézanne dissolved or abolished corporeality and volumetry, in order to make a poetics of space based on planes, based on "coloured sensations."<sup>77</sup> The painter's approach does not contain or limit forms but rather suggests them or makes them manifest: it *phenomenalizes* them, as Husserl would put it. Cézanne does not work on outlines but on planes of colour. He seeks "vibrant edges," the intentionality of the gaze, insofar as it is the eye that closes and completes the painter's brushstrokes. Despite their figurative references, Tucker's sculptures are not immediately decipherable or nameable. They do not refer to a simple form that is clearly interpretable as human or gestural. On the contrary, the sculptures open up a broad swath of possible associations, thereby achieving their physical intensity and their abstract visibility.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarks in his magisterial essay on Cézanne from 1945 that "The painter"—we could replace that with "the sculptor" in Tucker's case—recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual rebirth of experience.<sup>78</sup>

Tucker, like Cézanne, is an artist in search of a primeval, chthonic world, a primordial experience. The deformations of the habitual types of representation that we can observe give us the impression of an order being born, an object at the moment it emerges from its deep, dark gestation. The painter and the sculptor both carry out an immersion in that experience and then present us with the flotsam that remains of it. The work of the artist in Cézanne and in Tucker is that of Sisyphus, whom the gods condemned to endlessly pushing a boulder to the top of a mountain for it only to tumble down again under its own weight, in the belief that there is no worse punishment than fruitless work offering no hope. The two have decided to live out their

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77 "Peindre c'est enregistrer les sensations colorées" (Painting is recording coloured sensations). Émile Bernard, "Paul Cézanne," *L'Occident*, no. 32 (July 1904): 17-30.

78 "Le peintre reprend et convertit justement en objet visible ce qui sans lui reste enfermé dans la vie séparée de chaque conscience: la vibration des apparences qui est le berceau des choses. Pour ce peintre-là, une seule émotion est possible: le sentiment d'étrangeté, un seul lyrisme: celui de l'existence toujours recommencée." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Doute de Cézanne," in *Sens et non-sens*, 13-33 (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 23. The essay was originally published in *Fontaine* 8, no. 47 (December 1945): 88-100, and first reprinted in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, [1948]). English translation: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, 9-25 (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 17-18.





*Messenger*, 2001

sentence, in all conscience. They live the destiny they have chosen: though condemned to rolling the rock up the hill, they have chosen to do so and for that reason are the masters of their own destinies.

We can apply this passage from “Le Doute de Cézanne” to Tucker’s work: The sculptor converts the assessment of appearances into visible objects. Merleau-Ponty evokes verses from the first stanza of Paul Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin* (*The Graveyard by the Sea*, 1920): “La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée/ Ô récompense après une pensée/ Qu’un long regard sur le calme des dieux!” (The sea, the sea, forever beginning again:/ Oh, how rewarding, after a thought,/ to contemplate at length the calm of the gods!)

In Tucker’s works in plaster and bronze, with each viewing, a new existence begins again. His search for beauty, beginning with his studies in History at Oxford and his encounter with that exhibition from 1957, remind me of the first pages of Yukio Mishima’s *Kinkaku-ji* (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*), from 1956. The novel begins with a memory from childhood. Mizoguchi’s father always spoke to him of the Temple of the Golden Pavilion. Mizoguchi is the son of a Buddhist priest at a lesser temple, which makes him destined to fulfil the same role as his father. At a very early age, he leaves his home to begin his training, but only one thought occupies his mind: the story that his father told him about the fishing pavilion of Sosei. There was nothing in the world that could compete with its beauty:

It is no exaggeration to say that the first real problem I faced in my life was that of beauty. My father was only a simple country priest, deficient in vocabulary, and he taught me that “there is nothing on this earth so beautiful as the Golden Temple.” At the thought that beauty should already have come into this world unknown to me, I could not help feeling a certain uneasiness and irritation. If beauty really did exist there, it meant that my own existence was a thing estranged from beauty.<sup>79</sup>

The Golden Pavilion became engraved in the youngster’s mind, through the simple sound of the words of its name, as an idea, as something he could touch that would always be there, reflected in his pupils. The image would change in scale; at times it was enormous and at others it could fit in the palm of one’s hand:

There were times when I thought of the Golden Temple as being like a small, delicate piece of workmanship that I could put in my hands; there were times, also, when I thought of it as a huge, monstrous cathedral that soared up endlessly into the sky. Being a young boy, I could not think of beauty as being neither small nor large, but a thing of moderation.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, Tucker identifies his work as a sculptor with the photograph alluded to above, in which he holds the *Venus of Willendorf* in the palm of his hand.

But Tucker goes a step further, compared to the young Mizoguchi. His images are executed with his hands, and his objects can indeed become sculpture, whose essence lies in the limits of what we know and perceive, as in the works of Cézanne. For Tucker, there is play of mass and light with gravity—not only in Husserl’s phenomenological perception, of which I have already spoken, but also in the wake of the ideas of Einstein, which were widely divulged in Great Britain by Arthur Stanley Eddington.

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79 Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 21.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

When Einstein formulated his general theory of relativity in 1915, he transformed gravity into geometry. This was only one of the major concepts of relativity. In the following decades, it occurred to a good number of physicists (Eddington among them) that if gravitation could be assimilated into geometry, perhaps the same could be accomplished with the electromagnetic force. Einstein's general theory of relativity claims that gravitation is the result of a distortion of space-time by massive objects. Not even light can escape this revised understanding of space. Thus, the theory predicted that rays of light from distant stars should bend slightly as those rays pass near the sun. Since direct observation of the internal processes of stars is not possible, Eddington proposed an understanding of these processes that was based on the pillars of observable evidence: mass or gravitation and luminosity or the emission of radiation. His point of departure was what is observable, for both the mass and the luminosity of a star can be calculated from the data observed.<sup>81</sup>

Along these lines, Ben Nicholson was wont to remark that one of the key modes with which he judged "whether a picture was alive or not was by the amount of light it gave off"—that is, by what a work radiates from a purely visual standpoint or by the excitation that the imagery creates.

For Nicholson, pictorial representation did not signify making geometric or notarial adjustments to the subject but rather it meant making one *feel* ("memory is a sense"). Memory, mother of the Muses, does not attempt to accumulate but to *com-prehend*. For this reason, explanation is not the same thing as comprehension. One can comprehend and feel a work of art without needing to explain it. Similarly, in the works of Tucker, the "sculptural experience" does not depend solely on the content nor on the graphic mechanism that makes its message explicit; rather, it is based on the depth of feeling, of a gaze forever projected into memory, like overlapping instants.

Beginning with the reliefs from late 1933, Nicholson employed very hard woods in which scratches and lines blended, questioning the delicate primer on which they seek out their existence. Beginning in 1983, in the permanent caress of the modelling in large masses of plaster, Tucker sought out the emergence of that distortion in space-time. His focus is relativist insofar as he sees no contradiction in the distinction between figuration and abstraction. Every sculpture is a figure in a certain sense, if it is read as a whole, as a unity.

Tucker's work reveals to us, on the one hand, that dense masses are not static but pulsating; he makes evident the extraordinary tension between the heaviness of volume and configuration, or what alludes to mass. And, on the other hand, he reveals the fact that they are elusive objects like primitive rocks, abstract masses, in which the physical qualities of form are another kind of presence. His pieces never "represent" things like heads; rather, they are first and foremost *presence*.

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81 Arthur Stanley Eddington, *Space, Time, and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

I began this essay with a quotation from Lawrence Durrell: "But we were presumably sent here to try and enlarge infinity."<sup>82</sup> The novel *Tunc* is from 1968, the year in which Tucker was creating his *Series A No. 1*, a pair of forms based on cylinders, displayed in an apparently haphazard manner, coupled and one on top of the other. In their articulation, they establish a space. The overall form emerges from the contrast sought between the simple form and its display, the fusion or articulation of simple forms. At the moment in which those simple, almost industrial forms appear as a sculpture, they lose their own geometric character, that of a cylindrical torso. Durrell begins his novel with reflections on Greek temples, their sepulchres and their sculptures, a stroll around those ruins, torsos, and stones that we admire: "The scale of his vision, however much it might include past, present and future, had to remain human. The fruit of this struggle, and this dilemma, you can see partly resolved here in this stone cartoon." Faced with all that, faced with the passage of time, he poses a puzzle several lines later:

How to restore the wonder to human geometry—that is the crux of the matter.

The response to that question is what Tucker has been providing us with during these last thirty years, represented by this exhibition. His work is here to expand the infinite for us.

I conclude with this personal note. In these last months, as I prepared the exhibition, I visited the artist in his American Aix-en-Provence, in his solitude, selecting works. I was able to speak with Tucker about his views regarding sculpture, about his constant work, about his daily struggles (the daily grind, aches and pains, procrastination), about the eternally current tradition of all living art (classical, Gothic, Baroque, Indian, prehistoric). Tucker has no qualms about not meddling in his *Zeitgeist* or even to show indifference to it. He has the courage to be out-of-date, that is, to evade the general flow of things, to become—despite having settled in New York—an outsider. In that remote corner of Ashfield, Massachusetts, the words of Rodin regarding the three conditions of sculpture resonate and seem to me to be *alive*: freedom (its only law), one's own pleasure (its only guide), and the truth of the work (which is not precision but simplicity).

Therein lies the true greatness of William Tucker's sculptural language.



William Tucker in his studio in Ashfield, Massachusetts, 2014

## 8

### A sculptor's drawings

Sculptors' graphiology is easily recognizable for its clear intention always to mark out volumes, to emphasize *how* the subject of a work occupies a space or is *positioned in* a space. Sculptors do so with the strength of the crossed line, with heavy shadowing, or simply with a touch of watercolour to create volume, light, or movement at least—from Rodin to Kolbe, from Maillol to Moore. This is not the case with David Smith or Eduardo Chillida, however. Their drawings, though conceptually parallel to their sculptures, are not always or not in principle the basis for their sculptural work or sketches for sculptures. William Tucker's are likewise not the typical drawings of a sculptor.

Tucker's graphic oeuvre, that is, his work expressed in only two dimensions, covers two techniques and a variety of media: monotypes and charcoal drawings.

### Monotypes

Tucker's drawings are not drawings *for* his sculpture but processes of investigation that run in parallel to his sculpture, not linked to it for the purpose of a preparatory support. His monotypes, that is, prints produced in unique copies—printed only once, sometimes from a glass matrix—are also not graphic works that can be included in the genre of the print, for they are experiments with approaches to modelling, light, and shadow. Tucker has pointed out that his monotypes are not studies for any sculpture and that the titles were given to

them by the printer Garner Tullis.<sup>83</sup> They were executed after he made the first plaster models for the 1985 pieces bearing the names of deities from Greek mythology. When he completed the set, the monotypes were divided between the artist and the printer. Tucker made a second group of monotypes with Tullis in 1987, of which one print is now housed at Tate Britain in London (P11213). In a letter from 1993 sent to the compiler of the records of works acquired by that museum in previous years, the sculptor explained how these monotypes emerged:

I had an idea, some small clay models, but no drawings. I wanted to make sculptures that could not be drawn in advance, would have no front or back, no “good” views. The monotypes were an opportunity to test these ideas, quickly, intuitively, and at a larger scale in relation to my body.<sup>84</sup>

Tucker considers these images to be “mostly torsos, much smaller and denser images [which] use colour (of a kind).”<sup>85</sup>

The entry that the Tate wrote for the monotype *Kronos* (1985) points out that

According to Tucker, printmaking is marginal to his work, although he said he enjoyed the opportunity “to work large, and fast, with no editing or revision, which always seemed to be an issue with etching or litho.” Monotype printmaking, he explained, represented “as direct and physical an experience as working in plaster; a connection with the body, rather than the eyes.”<sup>86</sup>

In order to create a visual language, the artist must understand how viewers will perceive his or her statement. And Tucker realizes that it must be founded on knowledge in order to carry on. It must be developed in various scales, and the play of marks and smudges in monotypes, with their characteristically light printing in a unique copy, allows him to see the sense and the movement of the smudge. We cannot therefore consider these monotypes to be prints as such but rather experiments on paper, like any drawing.

## Charcoal drawings

Alongside his monotypes, Tucker has also produced drawings in pencil, charcoal or black chalk, and ink. From the artist’s early period few drawings survive; those that do have a mechanical quality to them, as if they were templates. In fact, Tucker, like Julio González, was at the time creating a kind of sculpture that was like a three-dimensional drawing. Furthermore, there are two types of drawings in his output: drawings that the artist made in order to document what he saw, for example, at an exhibition or to record something of interest to him, and those that I have chosen for this exhibition, which reveal a very different practice, in that they are not drawings made *for* some end, for a sculpture, but very personal experiments, a new way of approaching the tradition of drawing. In the interview included in this catalogue, Tucker acknowledges having drawn some sculptures on the occasion of the exhibition at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

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82 Lawrence Durrell, *Tunc* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 73.

83 Garner Tullis (b. 1939) founded the International Institute of Experimental Printmaking in 1972 in Santa Cruz, California; in 1976, it became the Experimental Workshop in San Francisco. In 1987, Tullis created the Tullis Workshop in New York near the World Trade Center, but, after having experienced the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, he moved to Italy.

84 William Tucker to the Tate Gallery, 27 April 1993. Quoted in *Tate Gallery: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions, 1986-88* (London: Tate, 1996); catalogue entry reprinted in “William Tucker: *Kronos*, 1985,” P11201, Art and Artists tab, Tate Collection website, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tucker-kronos-p11201/text-catalogue-entry>.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.



Selection of drawings of *Victory* (2000) in William Tucker's studio, Ashfield, Massachusetts, November 2008

devoted to Rodin in 2000 and after visiting an exhibition of the Riace bronzes (ancient Greek sculptures of warriors), as a souvenir or as documents of a certain way of seeing. They are drawings in notebooks, executed with the notebook lying on a horizontal surface or held in his own hand. I have chosen, in contrast, fifty examples of the other type of drawings, experiments in which the artist works standing before a sheet of paper hanging on the wall.

In highlighting the enormously personal value of these drawings, it is most helpful to compare them with others by David Smith or Eduardo Chillida—which, as I have pointed out, are also not typical sculptor's drawings. Smith *draws in space* using line as a basic expressive element. Its essential characteristics compete between the heterogeneity of the media utilized, which dialogue among each other while mutually transferring energy, and the versatility and associations among the subjects. His first drawings from the 1930s, in pencil or ink, are almost sketches of paintings that in turn seek to transcend two-dimensionality. Afterward, from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, Smith completed more than forty notebooks of drawings containing the seeds of future sculptures. In the late 1950s, he divorced drawing from sculpture. He made them independent of each other in order to exchange ideas, processes, and techniques. His drawings are produced with the immediacy and spontaneity characteristic of painters of his generation, and they are completely dissociated from any role as preliminary sketches. We can group Smith's drawings into three large sets. Each of them reflects a unique period in his varied output: line drawings, ink flows, and drawings with diffuse aerosol paint (his so-called "think pieces").

In many of Smith's drawings we find the latent traces of various creations beating in unison—that work-in-progress that the artist referred to as his "work stream" and which is merely a reaffirmation of his artistic individuality. As he remarked in a lecture he gave in Portland, Oregon, on 23 March 1953,

These drawings are studies for sculpture, sometimes what sculpture is, sometimes what sculpture can never be. Sometimes they are atmospheres from which sculptural form is unconsciously selected during the labor process of producing form. Then again they may be amorphous floating direct statements in which I am the subject, and the drawing is the act. They are all statements of my identity and come from the constant work stream.<sup>87</sup>

In this effort, economy of time is primordial, for it provides the essential structure of the progress and evolution of his work. As a sculptor, his method was slow, while “drawing is the fast-moving search, which keeps physical labor in balance,” as Smith argued in a lecture at Sophie Newcomb College, Tulane University, in New Orleans on 21 March 1955, on the occasion of a course organized by George Rickey.<sup>88</sup> There is something similar in Tucker’s approach to drawing, in that the process *marks* what is achieved in the end. In fact, Tucker might well subscribe to the American sculptor’s words at another lecture given at Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio, on 17 April 1959: “If I have a strong feeling about its start, I do not need to know its end; the battle for the solution is the most important.”<sup>89</sup>

In contrast, Chillida’s drawings are a dialogue of signs, of black and white forms that *interpenetrate* each other more so than opposing each other, collectively establishing a dynamic space, a new geometry, a new plastic equilibrium; they play with the idea of limits. On the rectangle of paper, this special alchemy of line, form, colour, and composition condenses the force of a lightning bolt or the vibration of steel. Chillida’s drawings are cold, as is his sculptural work, even when it has been forged in fire. It is a reasoned kind of drawing, subjected to the discipline of synthesis and concision in the pursuit, by means of the greatest simplicity of line, of a visual moment in its plenitude.

Tucker’s drawings are not the typical drawings of a sculptor that emphasize the spatial condition of a figure, nor do they fall within the expressionist vein of David Smith’s drawings nor the autonomous vibration of Chillida’s calligraphies. When drawing, Tucker faces papers hung on the wall like canvases, and, without standing back, using thick charcoals he attempts to capture an image that is subject to the architectural frame, like a niche, which is the paper itself. In other words, what he gives rise to on the paper (the figure or the object) emerges as if constrained by the verticality characteristic of sculpture and by gravity, insofar as the limit is the artist’s own arm, an extension of himself. This limitation in drawings made while standing is compensated for by the energy that the artist’s body transfers to that surface, like the energy that a dancer releases onto the horizontal floor.

In Tucker’s frontal drawings, there is no perspective or horizon of a pose; there is presence, which comes to the surface when our gaze comes to rest and at the same time disappears into the depths of that sea of strokes and lines. The image emerges out of that sea of smudges, and it sinks again into the abstraction of its rhythms, like a figure in a Rorschach test. Our gaze, increasingly refined, delving deeper and more intelligently, begins to understand the modelling, which is not totally abstract. A human torso or a head or a hand appears on the paper, as if they were diffuse structures on the point of dispersing and yet at the same time coherent: that is, forms that reveal other “real” aspects, like the light and its (tactile-epidermal) impact

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87 The principal ideas in David Smith’s thought are gathered together in Garnett McCoy, ed., *David Smith* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

88 Ibid.

89 David Smith, “Tradicion and Identity,” *Statements by David Smith: Writings and Lectures*, DavidSmithEstate.org, accessed 8 May 2015, <http://www.davidsmithestate.org/statements.html>.



on the form. Tucker's drawings are drawings *in and of* themselves. They are not sketches or studies for a sculpture or souvenir drawings of sculptures that have already been executed. The imagery is simple and limited, and his technique is almost reduced to the use of dense charcoal. But his way of drawing is special, as was Giacometti's, though the Swiss artist used a sharp graphite pencil, generating clearly defined forms that seem almost engraved. Tucker, in contrast, smudges and diffuses the charcoal. Tucker's drawings are not investigations of form but investigations of concept. They loom up like Goya's *Colossus*, out of nothing, out of the void of the paper.

I emphasize the two-dimensionality of Tucker's drawings, that is, the radical limitation intrinsic to the medium and its signification. But their intimate characteristics distinguish them from the traditional drawings by sculptors, whether those of Rodin, Brâncuși, Calder, or Serra. The organization of space in these artists' drawings is clear and strong; the corrections, the *pentimenti*, are not concealed but utilized, like tints in engravings, in order to create atmospheres, to sculpt or model, depending on the tendency of each artist. If we think of the drawings by Henry Moore from 1943 titled *Arrangements of Figures*, also known by the title *Shelter*, we see how they reflect much of his later sculptural work. Executed with a complex play of lines in order to generate the figures, there is always a small touch of colour in them. Moore, however, is not interested in colour as such, but in creating an atmosphere and a space around the forms, for he situates the figures in the drawing like sculptures are set in their place. Moore includes strokes on the surface of the paper, in parallel lines or in swirls, like he does in the patina of his sculptures in order to control the reflection of light.

Tucker's smudges, meanwhile, are much more closely related to the sense of space in drawings by Pierre Bonnard. They convey the viewer beyond representation and emotion; they cause the viewer to reflect in silence on his or her awareness of seeing; they make the viewer bounce back into the self, as if into a silence. Tucker's drawings are also nothing like Matisse's. The French artist's representations of women, however, do not have as their final objective the representation of the female nude; rather, it is a pretext, and the form does not seek to create volume but an arabesque. Tucker does not pursue, for example in the portraits, the gaze or the gesture but an intimate vision of form.

## Drawings of presence, not of representation

Almost all of Tucker's drawings are figurative. They present a figure, whether that be a portrait, a skull, or a sculpture or part of one. But they are not descriptive or informative drawings. More than making an image evident from outside, more that *re-presenting*, they are simple presence, like sculpture: The figure leaves us with the artist's state of mind. They share the following characteristics:

- They are large drawings, worked on with the paper placed vertically on a wall, and executed from a standing position.
- They are frontal drawings, but they are not icons, but figures that confront our gaze, in some kind of posture or movement.
- Every mark, every stroke, reveals the physical presence of the artist, his dense, energetic touch, the almost animalistic trace of the charcoal on the paper, a hard trace. His energy and his breath are still there.
- Aside from the portraits and skulls, they are figures of sculptures, from the future or from the past, but they *are not sketches*; they are not representations but states of mind, as if the changing light on an odalisque or on a torso dissolved its solidity, transforming it into rhythm or breathing.

In Tucker's drawings, there are not bodies—in the first stages of our perception—but masses that dissolve. They are marks that do not materialize *in* a space, in the space of the paper; rather, they themselves generate a space with the paper. He does not draw with lines but with smudges. The flow of the broad strokes, in dense charcoal, smudges the flat surface spatially in a creation of densities, as a relationship between those smudges—which only later are seen as bodies.

Tucker's technical lesson has a double meaning, not only insofar as he controls the (so to speak) mechanical technique—that is, a command of the instrument and the material, in this case the charcoal pencil grasped with the hand—but also insofar as he controls a more transcendent technique, with which he arrives at his plastic world, with the *tempo* (in its double aspect, internal and external) that corresponds to his artistic investigation, to his *moving before* the paper hanging vertically, like someone dancing on his feet before the image that he is seeking. Tucker glides before the paper like a pianist who, interpreting a composer's work, not only makes use of a technical command of the instrument, of virtuosity, but also must demonstrate a more spiritual ability, that of knowing how to “discover” and “immerse oneself” in the sonorous world of its creator, in the tempo of the music. In Tucker's drawings of skulls, his interest is not directed at the skull in itself nor at an expression that materializes in it as *vanitas*, but only at the possibilities that that bone (like a mountain) offers for a plastic modulation.

Tucker's manner of treating the paper, of communicating his vision, likewise has nothing to do with traditional sculptor's drawings. In his drawings, as the image becomes manifest, the figure leaves us the presence of the artist, his breath. In a certain sense, they are trance drawings, like classical Indian dance, in which the rhythm is not imposed by the leaps of legs or the arabesques of arms but by stasis, by gesture, and by inward concentration.

Tucker's practice of drawing while standing reminds me, in contrast, of the dancer Min Tanaka's experiments with his body lying on the ground. As director of the Body Weather Farm in Tokyo, Tanaka developed these experiments around the same time as Tucker was abandoning minimalism. Tanaka presented his *Butai Dance Event* series in 1975-77, in which he questioned the functional possibilities of the human body; his series *Hyperdance* and *Drive* in 1977-81, which reveal the inner life of nature and the human being; and *Emotion* in 1982, a study of the evolution of the human being. In his spectacles, the artist dances nude in an open space, though the true space is the space of the body. It is a static dance, or rather a dance of the skin or the surface of the body. Beyond choreography, Tanaka works and interrogates his body like the pure expression of an inner consciousness that one must not let escape or fossilize. The American writer Norman Mailer has said of this dance, “If I were a sculptor, I might say that watching Min Tanaka dance taught me a great deal about sculpture.”<sup>90</sup> The creative forces of the movements of the body, of people, of animals, or of insects, are revealed to the writer through this artist's dance.

The foetal, ovoid postures that Min Tanaka adopts recall the series of oval heads titled *Newborn* by Brâncuși or Georges Vantongerloo's ball-like constructions or his objects made of Plexiglas like *Un Fini dans l'infini* (*A Finite within the Infinite*), from 1951, or *Système planétaire* (*Planetary System*), from 1961, which convey that ductus of the oviform object, roundness in itself, of the human body closing in around itself. But similar to the way in which we experience dance with our body, there is also in sculpture a space that one perceives

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90 The complete quotation is “If I were a sculptor, I might say that watching Min Tanaka dance taught me a great deal about sculpture. Since I am a writer, I will propose that I learned an amazing amount in a short time about the movements of insects, of plants and animals, was introduced to the inner life of a baby beginning to walk and saw flights of pterodactyls, and the sleep of the dead.”

or feels through touch. All of Brâncuși's work is directed at touch, as is even Calder's. In dance, the material is the human body that determines the action, but it is also the gaze. Dance is, first and foremost, a medium in which, like primary elements, space and the placement of an event operate—the time of the event and its materials, especially the human body. Tucker seeks this exploration of the body not in the impossibilities of the human body in space but in *its surface*. The limits of sculpture, of observation, and of scale are also measured with the emotional, sensitive charge of the body's skin, of its light and shadows, of its *vibration* before our gaze.

Tucker's drawings emerge out of that encounter standing on his feet before the paper, which functions like a platform, like the floorboards on which the artist devotes himself, like Min Tanaka, to his own dance. One has the sensation that the artist is struggling with the square or rectangle of the paper. It becomes a matter of breaking the rules regarding what can be done on that surface. In a certain sense, the distance from the support, like the portrait itself, is disappearing. But when we realized that the image is appearing, among all those lines and strokes, in that overlapping of gestures and smudges, we understand the exhausting work that produced the image. Tucker's drawings are not easy to perceive; they are drawings that took time. They required modelling, as if they were sculptural reliefs. In fact, many of these drawings arose while the sculptor worked with small pieces of plaster that he gathered up in his workshop, leftovers that he uses as new models, like objects that offer up a new image, a new torso, a new *Prow*, to once again ply the seas of modelling.

In Tucker's drawings there is a concern with soiling the space by means of interrelated smudges, which goes beyond the representative outline (representing a body) and its rhythms and musicality. These drawings give the flat surface *dimension*; they "create" not so much a space as a *sensation* of volume and sensuality. They do not seek the rhythmic musicality of Matisse's flat drawings, the rhythm of the line that follows or shapes a body seen as a surface. They attempt to experience the sensation of volume that creates the three-dimensional space that a body must have: in the style of Rubens, but not with the *forza del pennello*, with the fluidity of oils, but with the smudge of the dry line of a piece of burnt earth. Tucker confronts the paper like a stage on which he releases his little narrative, his dance. Between the eroticism of that nearness to the paper and the intimacy of the frontal gaze, he discovers *his style*, his manner of brushing up against the surface and giving shape to, *con-figuring* an image.