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Tony Cragg talks to Barry Schwabsky - '80s Then - Interview

By Barry Schwabsky (April 2003)

BARRY SCHWABSKY: When I first started seeing your work in the early to mid-'80s, it was related to the new figuration. In fact, that's the title you gave to one of your found-plastic wail pieces from 1985. Was that maybe a misreading of what your work was about?

TONY CRAGG: One has to see it in terms of bigger movements. I was born in 1949, went into art school twenty years later, in 1969. The first art that I saw and was interested in was the art of the Conceptualists, the Minimalists, the Land artists, arte povera, Joseph Beuys. I realized that there were already people who had a certain sensibility, these ideas and formal solutions for something that I'd already started to do on my own, like tying up bits of string, and knotting it, and other sorts of practical exercises with material. I was still a student, and these were people five, ten, fifteen years older than me. In Europe this was the postwar generation that moved into positions of responsibility in all walks of life, simply because of the vacuum that was in front of them due to the war. My life has been spent with this big wave of people in front of me. So at the time I was very influenced by these artists' work, but I realized I didn't want to make their work. I even had problems with a lot of that work. I was already kind of antagonistic toward the idea of making straight lines and flat surfaces. I didn't like the romanticism of certain things I admired. I didn't feel like I had my own position yet, and I didn't want to be the tail end of something. So it took most of the '70s, student times and after, to work out something that wasn't too heavily influenced. I wanted to use materials that weren't romantic, that were typically used in an urban situation, I wanted more complicated references rather than reducing everything down to a minimal gesture. I didn't want work that stayed always on a gestural, conceptual level. I wanted to challenge the geometry of a lot of the work of the time, as well as the very aestheticized purist sense of much of it. At the end of the '70s, in Europe anyway, you had the feeling that the preceding generation had dominated the decade in such a way that something had to change. That was even expressed in the fact that there were a lot of exhibitions whose explicit purpose was to look for a new generation of artists. And you immediately saw that it wasn't going to be a linear continuity, but a real break.

BS: Can you define the nature of the break?

TC: The change when it happened was not a sculpture change, it was a painting change. The artists I got to know at that time were people like Cucchi, Chia, Clemente, and Paladino in Italy, Immendorff and Lupertz in Germany, and Martin Disler in Switzerland. So I took part in a lot of exhibitions where you literally had paintings everywhere and then this strange mix of materials in the middle of the floor. That was my lot, in a sense. In London I had relationships with artists like Richard Deacon, Bill Woodrow, Anish Kapoor, and a few others, and we all came to the Lisson Gallery. And out of that you had a kind of national group situation coming up; you had the Italian painters and the German painters and the English sculptors.

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BS: Your references are primarily to European artists.

TC: That was absolutely an aspect of the end of the '70s and into the '80s, an awareness, a new consciousness of European art. It started with these apparently national groups, but there was a European identity. Europe had been downtrodden since World War II, but now there was a new self-confidence. The idea of political union came later, but it was very much felt in terms of art. Even the opening of Spain, for instance--that happened first on a cultural level. Culture was a real vehicle in the '80s for the unity of Europe, and not in the sense of homogenizing it.

BS: So you felt as connected to the Italian painters and the German painters as you did to the English sculptors?

TC: I had great sympathy, great relationships with them. We knew we made very different things, that our origins and our interests were very different. But alongside those national groupings, there was another structure that is much more difficult to describe and therefore less well known, which has to do with sympathies and spiritual affinities.

BS: Did these relationships with painters help you see your way toward using images in sculpture?

TC: Obviously. I felt very free to use the plastic fragments I'd started using in '77 in new forms. That was almost a kind of punk gesture at the time, a little bit aimed against the pieties of Land art, Minimalism, or whatever.

BS: The story that usually gets told these days about those times says that the return of recognizable, representational images was a kind of regressive move, a betrayal of the innovations of the '60s and '70s, so it's interesting that you recall the subversive thrust of it.

TC: I always have rules about what I'm doing, and the game becomes to break the rules, but on my own terms. The first things I did that you'd call representational--they actually represented a fragment of what I'd found as a material. For instance, a little plastic Indian that I'd found on the banks of the Rhine would become the motif for a work made of plastic fragments. So I was very conscious of the relationship between the image, the material, and the object. That's the eternal triangle. It was premised on a conceptual basis rather than a subjective gesture. But it still allowed for complicated thoughts and a richer emotional palette or atmosphere around the work. It wasn't just about going back to figuration.

BS: What about the change that took place in your work, during the '80s, from accumulations of separate elements to works where the elements were fixed together in a way that made them more like sculptural objects in a traditional sense--works in cast bronze, for instance?

TC: First, this process I'd come to--running around, finding the material, finding images, dealing with a given situation, the challenge of the time and the space--was something that was a great enrichment to me. I traveled the world, encountered materials I could use, widened my understanding of what I wanted to do.

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BS: So those early pieces were essentially made on site.

TC: Absolutely, site-specific. And then at the end of that period of time a whole set of considerations slid into place for me. One was the fact that I was physically tired of doing that. What had started as an adventure and a challenge had become a repertoire. Two, at the same time and parallel to that, I realized that while you could make gestures that were exciting, you couldn't get past a certain level with the material; the engagement with the material was too limited. You could never actually impose your will; you could make images, but you couldn't influence very much the form of the object. I needed to go back to the studio and to remake things and learn more skills. Third, I also had a sense for the first time then that what I call the Duchampesque strategy was reaching its limits. In the nineteenth century there's so little material for making sculpture. There's plaster, wood, stone, very traditional materials, and most of the sculpture was figurative. Suddenly, because of the discovery of new materials, industrial materials, new techniques and tools that had to be invented for each material, you suddenly had an enormous expansion of the vocabulary of art, of sculpture. I think the twentieth century is just that--the process of artists rushing through the world and finding some part of the non-art world and bringing it into the art world, minus its context. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was still a lot of non-art world, and a small art world. By the time the '80s came, Gilbert & George and Richard Long and Joseph Beuys had made their work; they'd reduced enormously the difference between the art world and the non-art world. So what was I going to do? Rush around looking for another new material to make art with? We have a finite world, so the possibilities were diminishing. This palette or vocabulary of materials is big; you can use anything from shit to gold to make art with, but what do we want to express with it? What do we want to make? The nominative Duchampian strategy was running out of energy. My decision in the early '80s made me go back into the studio and adopt another strategy.

BS: Which was a return to something more like the traditional art object.

TC: The artists of the '70s were the first generation that globalized art, really. The material was very intelligent, they were very intelligent, because it allowed them to do simultaneous exhibitions around the world. They could work with any kind of space and accommodate the work to the architecture or the situation. My attitude is, I make the sculpture in the studio on my own terms on my own time, and I want to see it go out of the studio and have its own existence whether it's noticed or not.

BS: What about the rebirth of the art market in the '80s? We have the sense that in the '70s the materials used were very adaptable to the physical situations but recalcitrant to the market, which was in a recession anyway. In the '80s the market had its resurgence.

TC: In the '70s you could buy substantial works by extraordinary artists for a few thousand dollars. There was hardly any contemporary work that cost more than that. There were very few galleries. There were no television programs about art, nor was it covered by every newspaper. Art was not perceived in a very big public framework. By the middle of the '80s, there was a growth of interest. I don't really want to talk about the market because I never understand it very well, but the growth of public interest through the '80s changed substantially the number of exhibition spaces and the number of artists who could have their work seen. It enabled a pluralization in art. You didn't have to make Minimalism your religion, or Conceptualism, or arte povera. Suddenly you realized that there were the paintings of Baselitz or Twombly and also the texts and installations of Lawrence

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Weiner and also the steel sculptures of Richard Serra, and all these things lived together and just made life more interesting, in fact. It was public interest that made things more pluralized. The market came out of this interest, it wasn't the cause of it. Art became a really vital and interesting story, and there was a public that was interested in looking at exhibitions and that eventually became the basis for some people to make collections. But most of the people going to exhibitions didn't have the money to make collections. That's the thing that's important, that the history of painting and sculpture in the last thirty, forty years is an ever-growing, fantastically interesting picture.

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