

William Tucker : The Language of a Sculptor

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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. These publications appeared in the period 1974 to 1975, and although Tucker has continued to teach and exhibit since then, this represents a particularly prolific moment in his writing. It is in these texts, particularly in *The Language of Sculpture*, that Tucker's ideas are definitively formulated. Whilst his sculpture practice has changed dramatically, he has continued to stand by the understanding of sculpture developed in this book, commenting in his preface to the second edition of the book in 1992:

'Some twenty years have passed since I started work on the lectures on which the book was based; my perspective has changed radically as my sculpture has moved in a direction I could hardly have anticipated in the late 1960s. Yet if I were to rewrite these essays today, I think the changes would be of emphasis rather than substance.'¹

It is interesting to note that in the mid-1970s when Tucker's prominence as a writer on sculpture was at something of a peak, his sculpture was seen to be in a less vanguard position than it had been a decade earlier. Tucker was a student (from 1959-1960) and a teacher (1963-1974) of sculpture at one of the most renowned art schools in Britain: St Martin's School of Art in London. In 1965 Tucker's sculpture was included in the famous and influential exhibition *The New Generation*, together with the other sculptors connected with St Martin's such as David Annesley, Phillip King and Tim Scott. *The New Generation* were considered the leading British sculptors by influential critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. However, by the mid-1970s a new avant-garde was being promoted and, although many of its number emerged from sculpture departments in British art schools (including St Martin's), their work was seen as breaking new ground in defiance of the traditional provinces of sculpture or painting. It was against this background, a new avant-garde that seemingly eschewed the 'rules' of sculpture and the enthusiastic promotion of these sorts of art-making on the national and international art scene. That Tucker framed his exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture* in 1975.

As Tucker explains in the introduction to his catalogue, the title 'The Condition of Sculpture' has a double meaning that encompasses two of his key concerns. Firstly, the *state* of sculpture – its health and well-being – and, secondly, the necessary conditions for sculpture's existence. It is in connection with this second sense of 'condition' that Tucker develops his definition:

'Sculpture is subject to gravity and revealed by light.'

¹ Tucker, William, *The Language of Sculpture*, London: Thames and Hudson 1992 (1st published 1974), p.7.

Here is the primary condition.'²

This is first and foremost a statement about sculpture's being in the world. For Tucker, gravity is of the sculpture, that is to say sculpture must exist of something that withstands the gravitational pull of the earth. Thus gravity is the internal condition of sculpture. Light on the other hand is the external condition of sculpture. Sculpture is matter, it is made of some physical material and its visibility depends on its external conditions of illumination.

Sculpture occupies the same spaces as people, and needs to be understood in that relation too, and thus a third condition for sculpture is its availability to human perception. Importantly for Tucker, sculpture is visible. It can be seen and crucially, for it to exist, it must be seen *as sculpture*. The viewer can physically move around the sculpture, but in Tucker's analysis, movement remains the prerogative of the spectator and not of the sculpture. Although there is a sense in which we experience sculpture bodily, relating it to our scale and dimensions, the important faculties for Tucker's theory are sight and intellect. We perceive the sculpture by seeing it as an object illuminated by light, and we perceive it as sculpture through our knowledge of what sculpture is. Therefore sculpture appreciation is a joint activity of sight and mind. It is not a bodily experience despite our physical proximity to the sculpture. When Tucker writes of the 'touch' or 'feel' of sculpture it is not that we actually touch or feel it but that these are intellectualised, evoked senses. Despite Tucker's insistence on the object status of sculpture, it only becomes 'sculpture' for us through the mental faculty of Perception. In relation to the way in which we look at sculpture Tucker uses the word 'gaze' rather than the more straightforward 'look' or 'view'. The word 'gaze' used in this sense, implies a more interrogative perceiving of a thing: an intellectual looking rather than a sensual experiencing.

The role of sculpture for Tucker is fundamentally a passive one: other things act upon the sculpture, actions of giving light or moving belong to the world or to the viewer. As Tucker says in the introduction to *The Condition of Sculpture*:

'When we speak of sculpture as 'active' we do so metaphorically:
at most it resists our gaze, receives light, withstands gravity.'³

It is important to point out that when Tucker speaks of an intellectual appreciation of sculpture this has nothing to do with 'meaning', or at least any sense of meaning outside of an essentialist meaning of sculpture as sculpture. It is also worth pointing out that such a narrowly prescriptive and passive view of sculpture already had its critics and dissenters in the 1960s. During that decade a range of activities began to interrogate the parameters of sculpture practice, perceiving it as an expanded idea rather than the strictly formal concept adhered to in Tucker's writings. Many of these activities simply lie outside of Tucker's definition of 'sculpture' since they offend against its basic conditions, for example the walks of Richard Long. Other works of sculpture would be difficult to discuss in Tucker's terms since they have concerns outside of those he is prepared to acknowledge as pertinent to sculpture, for example works by Carl Andre. If Tucker's views were being critiqued and questioned in the

² Tucker, William, *The Condition of Sculpture*, p.7.

³ *ibid.*

1960s, by 1975 they were considered by some to be strictly partisan. The motivation of Tucker's writing had seemed, in the 1960s, to be an open-ended enquiry into the nature and possibilities of sculpture. By the mid-1970s, and particularly in the introduction to *The Condition of Sculpture*, Tucker's prose had hardened into an unshakeable dogma and a carping criticism of avant-garde theory, the tone of which did little to enhance the serious thought and valuable insights of Tucker's writing.

One of the areas in which Tucker's writings show particular insight concerns the relations of sculpture and space: the space of the world, the space of the viewer and 'public space'. As well as being a free-standing object, there is another sense in which sculpture is in the world and relates to the world, and this concerns its immediate surroundings: its location and environment. A clue to Tucker's views on this lies in the quotation by Rainer Maria Rilke with which Tucker begins his introduction to *The Language of Sculpture*:

'It [sculpture] had to be fitted into the space that surrounded it, as into a niche; its certainty, steadiness and loftiness did not spring from its significance but from its harmonious adjustment to the environment.'⁴

This 'harmonious adjustment' bears some similarities to notions of 'site specificity'; a term current in relation to sculpture since the mid-1960s. However a 'harmonious adjustment to [its] environment' is still quite a way from the strictest sense of site-specificity where the sculpture is made exclusively for that place (a good example would be Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*) or is actually made of the materials of that site (for example Robert Smithson's *Spiral jetty*). However, it is important to note this concern with sculpture's relationship to its environment for it serves to problematise any simplistic understanding of Tucker's other notions about sculpture being 'homeless' or 'free-standing'. These concepts must be understood in the context of an idea of sculpture already in the world and in relation to that world. Sculpture, for Tucker, unlike the arts of poetry, painting or music, cannot be an 'occasional' art, enjoyed and then stored away. Sculpture is in the world in a much more physical, inconvenient and obtrusive way, more like architecture.

For Tucker, the relation of sculpture to the viewer or spectator is one of private contemplation via the viewer's mental faculties. However, for Tucker, the relation of sculpture to a more abstract notion of 'the public' is much more problematic. Sculpture can become 'public' in different ways. It can become public having been made privately and then being placed in a public space or it can be 'public sculpture', designed and made for a particular place, often as the result of a commission or competition. It is this second sense of 'public sculpture' that Tucker finds most objectionable. In addition to his view that competitions place detrimental and limiting strictures on the sculptor, the real problem seems to lie with the expectations of sculpture's supposed public function. Tucker wrote in 1969:

'For there is no public realm in our time to which a public sculpture might give visual purpose.'⁵

⁴ *The Language of Sculpture*, p.9. Tucker's quotation is from Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Rodin*, translated

⁵ Tucker, William, 'An essay on sculpture', *Studio International*, January 1969, p.13.

The problem involves questions of purpose and meaning. Since for Tucker sculpture is essentially without purpose in the usual sense of function, and moreover is passive, a sculpture cannot actively give meaning to a place. Any such function is incidental, or at least secondary, to Tucker's understanding of sculpture's essential being. Thus Tucker has very limited expectations of sculpture's public function, writing in 1972:

‘...it seems to me unduly optimistic to hope that the envisaged confrontation with sculpture can alter people's minds or their attitude to their surroundings, except in the most marginal way, and I am certain that this is not sculpture's central function.’⁶

It could easily be contested that Tucker's expectations are overly pessimistic, but one needs to set them in their time. Tucker probably had in mind a whole range of public sculpture projects, especially in new town or modern housing developments in the 1950s and 1960s, objects which earned such descriptions as ‘plonk sculpture’ or ‘the Turd in the Plaza’.⁷ He might also have had in mind the well-intentioned but often misconstrued attempts at exhibitions in public places. For Tucker, sculpture is public by virtue of its physical existence as object in the world and not by sharing in, or participating in any functional sense in an idea of ‘public-ness’.

There is a sense in which questions of private and public are also pertinent to Tucker's writing and its relation to his sculpture practice. For, however private one's musings on sculpture or the formulation of one's own theories of practice, their articulation in published form represents as public a statement as the public exhibition of a piece of sculpture. Tucker's personal private interests become a matter for public contemplation and consideration. Like the sculptures, they are out in the world.

The above quoted examples from Tucker's writings in *Studio International* demonstrate that in order to understand Tucker's most prominent public statements in the period 1974-1975 it is necessary to go a few years backwards and forwards and look at other instances of Tucker's written and spoken words.

The relation of Tucker's writing to his practice is not immediately apparent, nor often explicitly addressed. On the rare occasion when an article is illustrated by his own work, as in his essay on sculpture in *Studio International* in January 1969, the connection is difficult to ascertain. In that article a series of three drawings appears across the two-page spread. They are not captioned and are not referred to in the text. The drawings are not dissimilar to the kind of linear construction found in ‘Cats Cradle’ (1971), or in drawing style to the ‘Tunnel Variant’ pen and ink drawings (1974-5).

Tucker and his work make a number of appearances in various guises in that January 1969 issue of *Studio International*, which was devoted to ‘Some Recent Sculpture in Britain’. The work ‘2/5/A’ (1960) was illustrated in an article on the sculpture course

⁶ Tucker, William, ‘Notes on sculpture’, *Studio International*, January 1972, p.9.

⁷ A phrase coined by James Wines: ‘I seem to have inserted a phrase into the language – the Turd in the Plaza.’ comment in a lecture entitled ‘De-Architecture: The Architecture of Risk’ in *Sculpture Today*, a conference held at the International Sculpture Center, Toronto, Canada, 31 May – 4 June 1978, transcript of the conference, p.8.

at St Martin's School of Art⁸ along with the cover of a student magazine called *First* edited by Tucker. This cover is illustrated with a photograph of Tucker's hand holding a Venus of Willendorf figurine. Elsewhere in this issue of *Studio International* Tucker's words appear, both in the afore-mentioned 'Essay on Sculpture'⁹ and as a participant in a symposium discussing the work of sculptor and teacher, Anthony Caro.¹⁰ It is difficult enough to discern the relation between Tucker's work and writing, let alone to relate these seemingly different and divergent 'Tuckers': teacher, writer, sculptor and representative of St Martin's so-called 'New Generation' appearing at one and the same time in a single issue of a magazine. It is even more difficult to reconcile this apparent flexibility with the later dogmatic defender of formal object sculpture that Tucker becomes in *The Condition of Sculpture*.

In the preface to *The Language of Sculpture* Tucker indicates that he writes 'from the perspective of a sculptor working now, rather than that of the historian, critic or connoisseur.'¹¹ Critic or connoisseur he may not have been, but he was and arguably has always been, however much he tried to distance himself from it, writing from the perspective of an historian. In March 1976 Tucker gave a lecture to the Sculpture Department at St Martin's School of Art. It was called 'Confessions of a Formalist'.¹² Tucker began with his own history, and more specifically with the historical moment of his becoming a sculptor. 'It is twenty years exactly since I made my first sculpture and decided to be a sculptor' he states, and then adds, crucially I think, that before becoming a sculptor: 'I was a history student at Oxford.....' The transcript of the lecture has those five telling dots after the statement.

I suspect that this background in history is formative in Tucker's writing and sculpture practice. The titles of some of his sculptures hint at this historical input, for example 'Thebes' (1966) or 'Orpheus' (1965). History looms large in his writing, whether it is the Tucker of *The Language of Sculpture*, imploring his students to view sculpture 'in the matrix of history'¹³ or the Tucker of 'What Sculpture is' desperately trying to free sculpture from the historical web that ensnares it. Whether in abeyance of it or in rebellion against it, Tucker's sense of history pervades his writing. By this I mean to infer both 'History' in the sense of the tradition and antecedents that Tucker is so aware of in his making, understanding of and writing about sculpture, and his own personal history. In both these senses than, Tucker is, always, an historian, in whatever professional guise he appears.

In his lecture, Tucker goes on to discuss three key (historical) experiences that led him from his initial decision to be a sculptor, through the uncertainties and questioning of his chosen professional activity, to the understanding he now (in 1976) felt he had attained. The three experiences are: an encounter with a particular painting in a particular exhibition (a Clyfford Still painting in *The New American*

⁸ 'The Sculpture course at St Martin's', *Studio International*, January 1969, op cit., pp.10-11.

⁹ op cit. (at 5).

¹⁰ 'Anthony Caro's work: a symposium by four sculptors', *Studio International*, January 1969 op cit., pp.14-20.

¹¹ *Language of Sculpture* op cit., p.7.

¹² Tucker, William, *Confessions of a Formalist*, unpublished transcript of a lecture given in the Sculpture Department at St Martin's on 12 March 1976.

¹³ see note 16 for the source of this phrase.

Painting at the Tate Gallery London in 1959); reading a book (Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*) and the poetry of Rilke. From this lecture, and indeed from much of Tucker's writing (in particular *The Language of Sculpture* which opens with a quotation from Rilke writing on Rodin), one gets the distinct impression that Tucker's understanding of sculpture comes from sources other than sculpture itself. Whilst he discusses works of sculpture in detail, his theories and ideas are derived in part, if not primarily, from his own history of seeing (paintings for example) and reading (theory, poetry) and from others' histories of seeing and understanding. Tucker's writing is the product both of his own personal history and of his attempt to reconcile this personal experience with historical accounts of sculpture and its poetic and theoretical representations.

Tucker's book *The Language of Sculpture* is, despite its theoretical passages, a historical account of sculpture. It is a history of sculpture and of sculptors. The book was based on a series of lectures given at Leeds University whilst Tucker was Gregory Fellow in Sculpture there from 1968 to 1970, an origin to which Tucker refers in his preface to the book. The majority of these lectures also enjoyed an intermediary life as individual essays published in *Studio International*.¹⁴ The catalogue and exhibition *The Condition of Sculpture* set out to examine sculpture as an essential category which can be defined in the form 'Sculpture is...' (subject to gravity, revealed by light, available to perception), whereas *The Language of Sculpture* examines sculpture as a historically developing language. The majority of the chapters of the book (six out of eight) are on individual sculptors: Rodin, Brancusi (two chapters, one on his sculpture at Tirgu Jiu), Picasso, Gonzalez and Matisse. It might also be noted that two of these artists are as well known as painters as they are as sculptors.¹⁵ The other artist who figures importantly in the book but does not merit his own chapter is another 'painter-sculptor' – Degas. The remaining two chapters are on 'The Object' and 'Gravity' and as theoretical discourses can be seen clearly to relate to the essential 'conditions of sculpture' that Tucker defined in his catalogue introduction. Whilst *The Language of Sculpture* and *The Condition of Sculpture* have certain things in common, any attempt simply to categorise Tucker's theoretical writings as a while as an examination of the historical development of the essential category of sculpture is confounded by another body of writing published in the very same period as *The Language of Sculpture* books and *The Condition of Sculpture* exhibition and catalogue, and this is the series titled 'What Sculpture is'.

This series, published in *Studio International* between December 1974 and May/June 1975, was based around a direct confrontation with sculpture as it is and as it is made. The eight parts were originally a series of seminars given to advanced sculpture students and other sculptors at St Martin's School of Art. In 'What Sculpture is' a divergence from the method of sculpture discourse promulgated in *The Language of Sculpture* is clear from the start. Tucker states near the beginning of part one:

¹⁴ Essays on Picasso, Brancusi, Matisse and David Smith were published under the general title 'Four Sculptors' in *Studio International* from April 1970, 'The Object' and 'Gravity' from October 1972.

¹⁵ The exhibition curated by Lynne Cooke at the Whitechapel Art Gallery London in 1986: *In Tandem The Painter-Sculptor in the Twentieth Century*, examined the crucial contribution of painters to the development of modern sculpture.

‘Until now I have thought, and have encouraged students to think of sculpture, especially recent sculpture, *in the matrix of history:...*’ (my emphasis)¹⁶

Now, instead, Tucker proposes an immediate and direct confrontation with the objects of sculpture, as if free from history, free from the considerations of time and place, and ideally from a position of sheer ignorance, or at least having made an attempt at a radical forgetting. Tucker continues:

‘I want to strip away all context from the work, so far as that is possible, the physical context, the cultural context, the biographical and historical context.’¹⁷

Tucker states:

‘I want to talk about this sculpture present to us now.’¹⁸

A statement which begs the question: ‘who is this us’? When these essays were lectures to sculpture students at St Martin’s the answer would have been straightforward. ‘We’ – Tucker included – the ‘us’ of the statement, are sculptors. When the context in which the words are presented changes – from an art school seminar to an essay published in an art magazine – the ‘us’ is not refocused. ‘I’m assuming for the moment,’ states Tucker, ‘that you [presumably now including all readers] are all sculptors’.¹⁹ What is presented here is a professional confrontation with sculpture: a meeting of sculptors with sculpture and by extension of assumed sculptors with imagined sculpture. This seems to mark a radical departure in Tucker’s theory and its presentation. Theoretically, the radical rejection of history seems an overt volte-face on his previous approach. In terms of presenting his writing, this series of seminars appears rendered as pure transcript. There is no apparent change between the words of the seminars and the words on the published page. Of course without comparing the words on the page to the actual spoken words we have no way of knowing for sure that this is precisely what happened. However, what is important is that this is how the words appear. This apparently spontaneous, direct form of address is in marked contrast to the carefully reworked words that made their way from lecture to magazine article and finally to *The Language of Sculpture*. The contrast between *The Language of Sculpture* and ‘What Sculpture is’ suggests that Tucker’s approach is dependent upon his audience, and that an investigation of the proposed audience for his words might be revealing of their form, but more profoundly, the contrast shows how Tucker makes use of seemingly contradictory approaches in his attempt to reconcile more fundamental problems at the heart of his practice: problems of perception.

Tucker’s approach in these essays might be defined as ‘phenomenological’. ‘What Sculpture is’ is informed by the kind of philosophical approach that examines the way in which human beings perceive the world. There are various arguments concerning the extent to which the way we see and understand things is culturally conditioned and whether it is possible to apprehend the world in a direct way prior to or without

¹⁶ *Studio International*, December 1974, p.232.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp.232-233.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.233.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.233.

regard to these cultural cues. Tucker is examining such ideas here and challenges the viewer to directly encounter the work without reference or regard to such cultural ideas as history or biography. Whether or not one thinks this kind of encounter possible or even useful, it is clear that this is a very different approach to sculpture to one in which we would examine the historical background to the work, the motivations for its making, the ideas behind it or interpretations of its meaning. However there are echoes of the approach presented in 'What Sculpture is' in other of Tucker's writings. For example in the introduction to *The Condition of Sculpture* Tucker insists that we consider sculpture rather than sculptors, prompting formal investigation of the objects of sculpture rather than questions about their makers' biographies or intentions. Suggestions of a phenomenological approach to sculpture in Tucker's writings are found every time he declines to discuss the historical background or the meaning of the work and instead focuses on the formal appearance of the work: what it looks like, how it is formed, or how it appears to the viewer. Evidence of Tucker's phenomenology is found in his reluctance to discuss certain topics as much as in the things he chooses to discuss.

The example of the series 'What Sculpture is' serves to problematise any simple analysis of Tucker's views on sculpture. It prompts us to consider individual sculptures through our direct experience of them as well as by examining sculpture generally in the matrix of history. It also alerts us to the importance of the context in which the writings were conceived, written and presented. Whilst 'What Sculpture is' is certainly a much more problematic text than *The Language of Sculpture* or *The Condition of Sculpture*, looking at the three texts together demonstrates the variety of types of writing Tucker produced. Judith Winter in her *Spotlight* text points out the sheer diversity of Tucker's sculpture: not just in the sculpture represented in the Arts Council Collection, but also through a long and varied career.²⁰ The lack of a defining 'style' has seemed as much a problem in characterising Tucker's sculpture as his writing. Indeed, one of the conclusions one is likely to make having read a selection of Tucker's writings and looked at the range of sculpture in even as limited a range as is represented in the Arts Council Collection, is that resolution is impossible. It is not possible to summarise Tucker's theories or practice in a few sentences. It may also be that one has to acknowledge a more fundamental and familiar issue: that sculpture and writing exist in a complex relation to one another, and that presenting one in the medium of the other is always fraught with difficulty.

Whilst interest in Tucker's sculpture has waned since the mid-1970s – a situation this exhibition hopes to rectify – Tucker's book *The Language of Sculpture* has long been popular reading amongst students of sculpture and art history. Ironically, it may be that the sheer public prominence and popularity of this book has hindered any thorough-going re-examination of Tucker's writing or sculpture, the prevalent assumption being that whilst the sculpture is difficult, at least we know what he stands for in his writing. Tucker the formalist theorist, a 'spokesman for an academic abstract art' as Albert Elsen put it,²¹ seems easy to pigeon-hole and easier to condemn

²⁰ Winter, Judith, *Spotlight on William Tucker*, Arts Council Collection, The South Bank Centre, London, 1995.

²¹ Elsen, Albert, reviewing *Early Modern Sculpture* – the US title of *The Language of Sculpture*, *Art Journal*, Winter 1975-6, quoted in Stuart Morgan 'A Rhetoric of Silence' in Sandy Nairne and Nicholas Serota (eds.), *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 1981, p.198.

as such a position has become increasingly unpopular, characterised as reactionary and dogmatic. The intention of this text has been to problematise this easy assumption, showing the range of Tucker's approach to writing, his complex negotiations with the history of sculpture and the careful manipulation of his words depending on their intended audience. It is hoped that a new airing of the works and writings will open yet more new avenues of investigation.

The three key texts published in the period 1974-1975 that form the basis of this discussion of Tucker's writings are:

The Language of Sculpture

(Thames and Hudson, London 1974, and 2nd edition 1992)

The Condition of Sculpture

A selection of recent sculpture by younger British and foreign artists (Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London, 29 May – 13 July 1975)

'What Sculpture is' *Studio International*

Parts 1 & 2 December 1974; Parts 3 & 4 January/February 1975; Parts 5 & 6 March/April 1976; Parts 7 & 8 May/June 1975.

The discussion also makes reference to these pieces of writing by Tucker in the magazine *Studio International*:

'An Essay on Sculpture' January 1969, pp.12-13'

'Notes on sculpture, public sculpture and patronage' January 1972, p.9.

...and an unpublished transcript of the lecture *Confessions of a Formalist* given in the Sculpture Department of St Martin's School of Art London, on Friday 12 March 1976.

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