

## “The very impress of the object”:

### sculpture on screen

#### Preface

In the mid-nineteenth century, between c. 1840 and c. 1850, the new art of photography found one of its favourite subjects in sculpture. In England, Henry Fox Talbot used small sculptures and casts as some of his earliest models, as did Daguerre and others in France. Already by the mid-1850s museums such as the British Museum were commissioning photographers to make records of their classical collections. Showing a photograph of the sculpture over the portal of Notre-Dame, a lecturer asked his audience in 1855:

*What could be more truthful than this, the very impress of the object?*

Photography, like casting, offered an apparently faithful record. The object was so like its image that it might have been impressed upon the paper. Like a print taken from a plate, or a coin struck from a die, or a sculpture cast from a mould, these objects seemed to have left their exact impression in the photograph.

One of the very first objects to be photographed by Henry Fox Talbot around 1840 was a bust of Patroclus. (Fig.1) The sculpture itself was not an original, but a plaster

reproduction or 'specimen of sculpture', and part of the subject of this exhibition is reproduction. More generally, the subject is the camera's love of sculpture, and the question is: why?

If the first photographers chose sculpture for their models we know why, at least in part: sculpture is still, and the early technology required long exposures. It was also generally pale in colour, even white, and this helped the early practitioner. Photography was used as a convenient shortcut, saving artists from the labour of drawing, and also from the business of travelling to see the great works of the past. (This exhibition too includes films made in the sculpture collections held in the museums of Athens, Berlin, London, Munich, Paris, Rome.) On the other hand photography also encouraged travel, and was soon being used to document national heritage *in situ*, as was the case with Wenceslaus Cifka and Carlos Relvas in Portugal, whose activities date from the mid-1850s and 60s.

Despite its ambiguous status as a technique, rather than an art, it did not take very long before photography was being used by artists as more than a means to an end. If Roger Fenton's apparently anonymous photographs of the *Bust of Atys* were commissioned by the British Museum as records, they have enjoyed a journey in which the more famous artwork is now the photograph rather than the sculpture. The same is true of Eugene Atget's many photographs of sculpture taken 50 years later. There is a shift in emphasis from one subject to another.

In the films on show here there is also a shifting dialogue between the art object of the past and the art object of today. Why, we might ask, when classical sculpture is otherwise so distant, do artists today continue to find a subject here, and why, in particular, do artists making moving images film something which cannot move, and which does not even require their medium? If there is something odd about the marriage, there is also something intriguing: a kind of defiance. The 'meaning' of these works, however, is hardly explicit, and another reason for choosing the title is the degree to which these artists use the camera as if it were indeed a neutral recording device.

It would be hard to see sculpture now as a discrete discipline. In art schools, in studios, in exhibitions and in museums, sculpture borrows from and lends to other disciplines. Even if its name is still favoured by artists, those who teach, and those who curate, have largely abandoned the category, and instead mix sculpture up with other media in order to reflect the breadth of contemporary practice.

And yet, and yet....Sculpture appears, apparently more and more, as the subject of contemporary investigation, and particularly in contemporary film. Are these film-makers stimulated by similar or different motivations? What does sculpture, particularly antique sculpture, hold for the artist now?

In part it is clear that the appeal of sculpture is connected to the appeal of museums, and of their reserves. The

museum as a subject is ever more prevalent. But there is more to it than this: sculpture seems to embody a content that is hard to reach, even to articulate or define, and in this it replicates the problem of art itself. Sculpture both clarifies and obscures this feeling of hidden content, and artists talk of slowly approaching, encircling, capturing. Perhaps we might see the sculpture as the prey, caught not so much by the hunter, but by the wildlife photographer.

But if sculpture is a quarry or prey, or a fragmented object, it is also of course very often human and bodily. The interchange between the hard marble and the soft flesh which it represents carries a physical charge in some of these works, which is perhaps denied in others. Sculpture indeed fluctuates between being body and object, art or material, and while for some artists the physical charge is unavoidably human, for others it is more accurately just so much material.

The fragmentary quality of much antique sculpture is also of interest, and the idea that the camera can help somehow to restore the whole is clearly present in some of these works. The relationship between material and artwork is also present in the works which examine the question of value, both cultural and financial. Classical sculpture was often used to express power, and those origins reverberate today in the debates about ownership and repatriation.

To a degree ownership can be exercised through reproduction rights, and it is interesting to see among

these pieces how film is used to extend reproduction, to extend our looking, to go beyond the short duration offered by the photo. While the works are different, they all, in different ways, are about extending the potential of sculpture. The fact that many are essentially two-dimensional, rather than three, even defiantly, is striking. In these cases, film creates time rather than space. To a degree, then, these artists use film to make us spend time looking at antique sculpture.

#### MARK LEWIS

Much of Mark Lewis's work embodies a strong sense of physical rootedness in tandem with the sense of looking. His skill at suggesting the body as well as the eye of the viewer is as often implicit as explicit, but on occasion the two seem to emerge together in unison. This is the case in his film of the Louvre's *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* which focuses on the act of looking at a sculpture which, of all sculptures, necessitates a complete perambulation. That sense of feeling the trajectory, which is both instinctive and knowing, encapsulated in the camera's looking, is what gives the film its pull.

Originally one of five films made at the Louvre, all of which involve different manifestations of moving around the museum or its exhibits, while looking, the *Hermaphrodite* also opened the longer feature-length film *Invention* in which Lewis reflects on the relationship between the still world and cinema.

One of his films, which shows the upright milestone (Fig.2) at St George's Circus in Southwark (South London), uses the obelisk as if it were a gnomon, the pointer on the sundial, cleverly destabilizing and re-stabilizing the viewer, who seems both to move around the centre, and to be the centre. Lewis seems to have an instinct for unsettling and re-settling his physical environment: turning it on its head and then righting it again.

In quite a number of Lewis' works the camera seems to be in quest of something, as if looking for its rightful place or resting point. This usually happens in a less determined way than with the *Hermaphrodite*, but the *Hermaphrodite* is a very special sculpture which might almost have been made for Lewis to film. A reclining figure (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) (Fig.3), which from nearly every point appears female, is only revealed to be hermaphrodite by its semi-hidden penis. This point of resolution may actually exist in the statue, as it does with the *Hermaphrodite*, or on other occasions be found by the artist/the camera, as with a reflection in a mirror, which may reflect the missing work.

Statuary has not often featured in Lewis' repertoire, but the way in which he combines the gaze with the question of circumnavigation is highly apposite. While some sculpture, and some sculptors, preferred to fix their optimal viewing point, for most, sculpture offers and demands a different kind of looking. This is a looking which could not be done through still photography, but can on film. Whether or not Lewis heightens the latent sexuality within the piece by the way he filmed it is a moot

point, and one about which he himself is uncertain, but of all the artists here, his is the most 'sculptural' look at sculpture. His choice of subject, moreover, is a significant one, whereas the sculptures filmed by Rosa Barba and Fiona Tan, are much less famous. So much less famous, indeed, that they might almost be seen as everyday matter left over from the ancient world.

#### ROSA BARBA

Over a number of years, and in several pieces, Rosa Barba worked through the idea of a 'hidden conference' which seemed to her to be partly embodied in the museum depots which she visited. She felt there the sense of stored history, and wanted in some way to activate that stored information. This interest grew out of a conventional invitation to a contemporary artist to make a selection from a museum collection. Her wish to begin in the store (Fig.4) itself had not been anticipated by her hosts, but, over a series of projects – with the Reina Sofia, the Neue Nationalgalerie, the Musei Capitolini and the Tate – it became her *modus vivendi*.

Part of the attraction of the store was that it allowed objects 'to be themselves', apparently unaffected by the intentions of others. This freedom was especially marked in Rome, where Barba was able to work by herself, in an off-site conservation depot in the suburbs of the city. She relished the stillness, the absence of visitors, and the absence of information. This sense of stillness is a notable aspect of her film, which does indeed seem to allow the

sculptures to regain their aura after their sustained rest. Here we have the strong sense that the aura can only be restored without too much intrusion, without too many viewers. And, moreover, Barba felt that the camera was less intrusive than the naked eyes of visitors. This is a kind of hospital, where the patients are restored to health. The Capitoline store is notable for its brightness, and Barba used the illumination as a way of activating the sculpture, or bringing it back to life. The golden light of the film is mesmerizing.

This sculpture store clarified for her the fact that sculpture embodied in its age and durability something which painting did not, and that whereas when she filmed paintings she was imposing a narrative and making a composition, with sculpture her trajectory felt less constructed. In this it was closer to the landscapes she has filmed, tracking their surfaces for traces of meaning and stored information. And yet she has to admit that a figurative sculpture held more content than an object like a vase, and continues to ask herself what this means.

Barba is interested in recovering lost meanings, but also in lost meaning itself. She sees the earth's surface as covered by what she calls inscriptions, and sculpture as a concentrated example. Her film is, in part, a straight documentary of what she found, but it also gives us an extended golden moment which offers something of the healing or completion which Barba promises, a different kind of restoration to that more routinely undertaken in the store.

## FIONA TAN

Fiona Tan filmed in the museum, rather than the store, although in some ways the John Soane Museum is notable for its store-like quality. The film came about as the result of being asked to make a project to be shown in Rome, and somehow she ended up in London, as if deliberately swerving off the obvious route. At the beginning the museum seemed unfilmable, but as she took the objects one by one, framing them as objects, but also as images, the theme emerged. And perhaps it is here, in the way her film makes sculpture pictorial, that the work becomes distinctive. Tan talks of the image within the image (known in Dutch as the *Droste* effect, in French as *mise-en-abyme*) which you can find in this piece.

The title *Inventory* indicates both the range of Soane's collection, and the range of Tan's media. This work is the first to make her range explicit, and does this through bringing together all her options, rather than choosing one. The work nicely juxtaposes the casts, which are themselves reproductions, and often exist in more than one version, with her own similar but different ways of reproducing them. Tan was already known for her archival approach, but now the attention is as much on describing the media as on describing the images. Lists are things she likes, and she had already been interested in the idea of the *Kunstkammer*. Now she finds a way of taking individual objects and relating them to the whole.

The different cameras each have their own characteristics, light or heavy, fixed or mobile, and they look at the

sculptures in different ways. They look for longer than most visitors would, and give more time back. Thus film gives duration to the image. It is about stillness (as most of her work is), and also about time. The registering of the eye, and of the camera, and of the image, is one way of understanding this work, and it relates to her understanding of the camera as being more neutral than the eye, and to our reluctance to stare.

Tan talks of the warmth and the chill of the sculpted body, and somehow this interplay between the quick and the dead is something which photography can enhance, in allowing a sculpture to stand in for a body, or even seem to be a body. This kind of deception clearly fascinates her.

There was a biographical aspect to the filming in the Soane Museum, and she felt the loneliness of an old man near the end of his life. The inanimate quality of the objects she also felt to be morbid. There was something problematic for Tan as well in the very solidity of the collection, which recalled all that she had previously managed to avoid. Being aware of the copying tradition, and placing herself within a modern version of it, made her anxious to do well. If copying was central to the education of the artist, this is an exercise in copying updated.

## LONNIE VAN BRUMMELEN & SIEBREN DE HAAN

If Soane's museum represents the classical tradition which was so much part of the education of a man of his time, Van Brummelen and de Haan's project on the Pergamon Museum became, indirectly, a way of reclaiming that heritage for an artist of today.

It was not so much the specifics of the situation, in which they were not allowed access to film the frieze, but the larger realisation that this was an area of patrimony which had effectively been barred them by the theorists and writers with whom they had been brought up.

A little like Tan arriving in London by way of Rome, Brummelen and De Haan got to Berlin by way of Dublin. Asked to make a work that in some way spoke of the Irish economic situation, they followed the Celts to Turkey, and thus to the Pergamon altar, owned by the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Fig.5).

Having previously worked on a piece that fluctuated between being a raw material (sugar) and a work of art (a monument) the artists were attuned to thinking about the relative values of material in its worked and unworked forms. They were also close to thinking about patrimony, and routes of empire, which tended to be less about exchange and more about spoliation.

Despite their apparent alienation from classical sculpture, Brummelen and De Haan had in fact made some copies of antique pieces as a way of making a living, and the film which marked the beginning of their own collaboration

showed Brummelen swimming with a copy of the *Hermes* in the Rijksakademie (Fig.6).

Having decided that the Pergamon frieze made good sense for them, the artists had to find other ways of representing it following the refusal to allow them access. This allowed them to find the subject of their work, which resided in the diverse history of its reproduction, and the question of who owned those images. This was the 'formalization of their rejection'. In their search for complete coverage (which was only possible at very different scales) the artists became very aware of the different ways in the work had been documented (horizontal or vertical), with different illumination, cameras, coloration, etc. This must have made the sculpture seem much more contingent, and less monolithic. Less like a monument, and more like the production of an artist. Ironically, or not, the exercise in reestablishing the connection with the classical world, and especially with its sculpture, happened through books. In so doing they made their own link with the artists rather than with the clients, patrons or owners.

The ways in which materials, of all sorts, are traded, was already of interest to Brummelen and De Haan and in terms of thinking about the relative values of exchange tariffs the sugar which they had tried to export both as a raw and as a worked material is not so very different to the marble which changes value the more it acquires worked meaning. This interest in changing states is also

what underlies David Panos and Anja Kirschner's film *Ultimate Substance*.

#### ANJA KIRSCHNER & DAVID PANOS

*Ultimate Substance* was the penultimate piece made by Kirschner and Panos in collaboration, and reflects their German and Greek backgrounds, and the relationship between these two countries during the financial crisis of 2008. The topical circumstances, combined with a longer interest in questions of value and exchange, led them to figure the Acropolis as the bank in relation to Lavrio, the mine 40km from Athens which provided the precious metal for coinage. The coin became their perfect subject. It was material, and it was concept. The mine represents something hard, and the ore which comes out of it will be made soft, and then become hard again. The material transformation is governed by an intellectual idea.

Seeing coinage as one of our most sophisticated abstractions prompted the artists to consider the material transformations which allow it to exist, and their film, which is on the one hand extremely visual and also visceral, is an almost metaphysical enquiry into the lack of fixity in materials and values. While the film was partly made in the Numismatic Museum in Athens, its composition was also informed by the Glyptothek in Munich, where it became clear that the missing parts were as significant as those which were present. The other classical allusion which the mine brings with it is the cave, as described by Plato in Book 7 of *The Republic*, where

prisoners without daylight have become accustomed to seeing only their own shadows and the shadows of small statues and figurines, as cast from the fire behind them. This complicated story concerns the ways in which we perceive reality, and how our physical context determines our intellectual ambition, and may make it tempting to retain the more limited parameters of habit. This may make us think also of Pliny's story of the Corinthian maid (Fig.7) who traced the profile of her lover by the light of a flame: the artists were certainly interested in a contour which was not quite fixed, and not quite fluid.

What lies behind the object, underneath its solidity, is an interest which partly accounts for the nature of the film, which is soft in contrast to the hardness of the sculpture. If the work is based in economic theory it is effective because it has a strong presence, by means of the soundtrack, saturated colour and mesmeric sensual performance. It combines a kind of repetitive, almost telegraphic, rigidity with the promise of change, perhaps like a manifesto in form. The aesthetic choices may be symbolic, but they are also simple.