T59

CHRISTINE CLEARY

SCULPTURE

3rd Year

1975

20th CENTURY SCULPTURE

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SYNOPSIS

Metal has been a vital contributor to our 20th century life style and is an inextricable part of it. Due to its versatility it has found a place in almost every field of life.

Mechanism has revolutionised our society. While it has made our labour forces so much more efficient and brought, what would seem a century ago, undreamed of luxuries to be a part of our everyday lives, the sociological, psychological and ecological effects have yet to be balanced and fully understood. Robots and science fiction have become a modern folklore.

Sculpture has moved from a theme of organic abstraction to a mechanistic and scientific form of expression.

Brancusi as the innovator, while working with the traditional materials, paved the way for constructivism and many new attitudes to sculpture and form.

Marini related myth and the antique to 20th century humanity.

Arp's abstracted organic forms have their true basis in the science of botany and biology.

Henry Moore coordinated organic and inorganic forms, the influences of Negro, American Indian, Classical Greece and 20th century ideals to form sculpture as landscape.

David Smith, whose inspiration springs from the ideals and environment of our century, worked with the materials and structures of our modern technology and introduced a new freedom into sculpture. It is this freedom and modern awareneww which has

made our present-day sculpture so different from the work produced at the beginning of the century. The followers of David Smith have turned to a form of sculpture no longer dependent on human scale or taste.

Art in general has become part of a world where humanity is merely a vehicle for the greater field of modern advancement, and while the artists realise this they are fighting it in a negative and ineffective way. The return in art to the human figure as sublime is one answer, but it must be in the context of our modern world and all the modern movements can become greater in a more positive sense in the future

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METAL - A CONTRIBUTOR TO PROGRESS

Since the early bronze and iron ages metal has been taken for granted by us as necessary to life. But only since the Industrial Revolution, with its roots in Tudor England, has it been exploited and developed as a singularly versatile material. It has made possible and determined the shape of our buildings and cities, means of transport, musical instruments, scientific instruments, mass production of industrial goods, suspension bridges etc. It is used to conduct energy, strengthen other materials, shape and change their colour and efficiency. In photography much silver is poured down the drain. Metal may be cast, cold cast, forged, welded, turned, soldered, brazed, hammered or bent into any required shape. The surface may be polished to a high reflective finish, plated, galvanized, oxidised, chromed, enamelled, coated etc. Used on its own and with other materials, such as plastic, it has caused a revolution in the field of sculpture. This would seem to be the natural outcome of a society so involved with its use and so dependent on it for both the necessities of life and the luxuries. Even our coins are metal. As a raw material it may be classed with oil as a main contributor to the consumer society. However, without oil there are many other sources of energy which are likely to be used in the future but our dependence on steel and other metals would seem to remain unchallenged. Fortunately it is recyclable and can be made almost indestructible by weather and erosion. With the other materials which have changed our lives in the Twentieth Century it has contributed to a new form of Art. For the first time we have seen welded sculpture, cold cast steel, battery and electrically powered work, constructivism, steel reinforced structures, a freer attitude towards sculpture, not based on the idea that it is essentially dependent on corporeal conditions and repose and weighty materials.

EFFECTS OF MECHANISM ON SOCIETY

The first World War, being a war of machines, gave rise to stories and plays about mechanical men. Karel Capek coined the word robot, meaning 'forced labour' and implying a lack of autonomy and free will. Gradually the meaning became debased to imply either a fearsome, cartoon-like, clanking mechanical man, or a person who insensitively follows orders with rigid efficiency regardless of their implications. With irony Capek visualises a world where machines prevail, producing a decay of social, moral, and vocational ideals and introducing an attitude of alienation. In spite of the serious implications, the electromechanical robots have produced a dream-like folklore for the automatic age.

With the development of motion pictures a new type of human image far surpassed the mechanical one. Machines were accepted by the public as a part of everyday life and as no more or less important than their usefulness. The original robots became museum pieces and what followed were the industrially produced advertising creations of large electrical appliance corporations to attract the public attention at stores, trade fairs, and conventions. In science fiction the robots continued as super-intelligent inhuman beings which became violently destructive in their hopelessness.

After 1945 experimental research in man-machine relationships was coordinated under the title of cybernetics, resulting in electronic pseudo-organisms quite unlike robots in appearance. Grey Walters 'tortoises', Ross Ashby's 'homeostat' and the maze-running 'mice' of Claude Shannon are all attempts by scientists to construct paradigms

of organic behaviour; these are not copies of flute playing or poetry writing, but working models, generally analogues of various aspects of the nervous system found in simple organisms. These pseudo-organisms constructed by psychologists, neuro-physiologists and communication engineers are, in conception and intention, far more sophisticated than all automata preceding them; no longer complex mechanical toys, they are tenuously linked with life itself.

The theory of automata, which has nothing to do with mechanical men, has become one of the most fascinating and vital branches of communication and cybernetic study. From the visual standpoint, the English writer F.H. Cleator recalls that, 'just as the first automobiles looked like and were called 'horseless carriages', the first industrially devised robots were clumsy caricatures of human form; hence there is no reason why the coming generation of industrial robots should resemble men.' Already 'power amplifiers' have been designed that are electronically sensitive to neural-muscular activity. These look in no way like human beings but enable a man to perform the work of ten or twenty men.

As sociology and psychology analyse the viciousness of alienation towards work, literature grows on the phenomena of human beings gearing, or refusing to gear, themselves to the rhythm and communication style of machines. In terms of interaction and sensitivity to human needs a machine may be more effective than another person, as, for example, in the case of teaching machines, e.g. television, linguaphones, language laboratories, practical use of mechanical devices, scientific experiments etc. In many cases machines may win out, because it is cheaper and more efficient to mass produce teaching machines with effective programs than to train sufficient numbers of good teachers. Some relatively inexpensive children's toys use feedback principles that are just out

of the design-research department.

One of the most pathetic cases of machine behaviour has been recorded by Bruno Bettelheim in his essay 'Joey, the Mechanical Boy'. It is the story of a very disturbed nine-year-old who believed himself to be a machine, rid of the humanity which he found unbearable. Bettelheim first reminds us that there is something fascinating and frightening about a machine turned human - but still more ghastly is the human who finds security in actually becoming a robot. Joey's condition was the result of an extreme reaction to parental rejection, and his recovery meant regaining the ability to trust people around him. Probably only in our time and culture could such a situation have arisen.

As machines, with enormous commercial sponsorship and methods of enticement, become the accepted surrogate for human attention and affection, what better escape route is there for the unprotected? If all of this can be said to be true, then the original concept of the robot as the superhuman yet inhumane aggressor may also be true in the sense that the mechanisation of the world we live in has alienated humanity. The impact on the human psyche, whether it be individual or collective, has been great. The human person, in order to be accepted and survive in the twentieth century is conditioned and must conform to a mechanically ordered society geared to industry and machines. Those who step outside of this must first be a part of it and can never escape completely except through death. Had we lived in another century our lives might have been geared to religion, survival against the elements, despotic gods or a tyrannical dictatorship. Our modern sculptures might be seen as monuments to mechanisation, or to machines or communications or energy or science, or, finally and most likely, to modern society.

So far, having begun with the original possibilities and positive

uses of metal in conjunction with other materials, I have worked through mechanisation to a rather negative note. The positive side deals with the conscious mind and the material comforts. The negative is based on the subconscious effects of our means of attaining the positive ends, ~~also~~ these effects may also be positive. To the artist the subconscious is all important and must be accounted for.

THE SCULPTORS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Sculpture has become more and more mechanistic and abstract as the century progresses and the artist become aware of the possibilities for use of the new materials, scientific and sociological research and our changing world.

Beginning with Cubism and Picasso, where the basic idea was to depict not merely what is seen by the eyes but what the artist sees with the 'third eye' of the mind, new concepts have emerged with a rapidity that is almost frightening and ~~where~~ many artists have produced work more dynamic and marvellous in a short space of time than in any other century, many more have become disillusioned and confused. The 'educated' public may marvel at the new life that art has found while the 'masses' are 'afraid to look' because they feel they do not understand the 'elitist' world of art. This may be particularly true in Ireland where our more recent tradition in art has been 'Anglo-Irish'. However the society in which we live belongs to a world movement. Improved communications, mass-media and travel, while bringing us in contact with what is going on in the rest of the world have, in many ways, made us more conscious of our own identity and the fact that we also have something to offer. We need not go back to the bronze age in Ireland, great though it may have been. We have our own twentieth century civilisation. This is the context in which we live.

CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI (Illustrations 1-6)

Brancusi saw the awakening of 20th century sculpture and his work certainly belongs to this period. He lived for over half of this century and for 20 years of the last. No single movement can be said to claim him but he has sympathies with many. His ability to create physical associations with his materials has resulted in the most amazing array of presentation techniques. He rethought the relationship of sculpture to its environment. His bases are part of the sculpture. In a way they have their origins in the senses and memories of the perceiver. Many of his ideas for mounting sculpture are original inventions and like all organically conceived innovations they developed slowly from work to work. To all but a few contemporaries his ideas for displaying sculpture seemed very strange, even more so in some cases than the sculpture itself. Their acceptance into the idiom of modern sculpture is staggering; in the past fifty years thousands of sculptors have borrowed from Brancusi's ideas.

Frequently his bases confront the observer with rough and hand hewn textures in direct contrast to the finished precision of the subject above. For instance the bronze 'Bird in Space' 1919 culminates the forms of wood and stone below it. The textures establish a physical hierarchy. Usually the lower portions of a base are the roughest. The spectrum of crude to fine finishes has its symbolic implication, some revealed by Brancusi in conversation: 'commonness opposed to preciousness, the creative seed in the mother, emergent life, the storyteller and the myth, natural and sublime origins, geometry and organism, etc.'

As with the sculptures themselves, Brancusi infused his bases with an ancient and logical sense of animism. They are logical because they fulfil a primitive need to provide for the psychic security of a living spirit. Their materials represent natural habitat for the spirit of the sculpture.

Intuition, not engineering finesse, exists in the way Brancusi sandwiched assorted shapes into what appears to be a precarious pile. These piles do not seem to be structural solutions but the visual equation of a poet. Structurally to support a portrait head, there is no reason why an eighteen-inch cruciform of light-grey limestone should have a six-inch-diameter pink marble cylinder placed on top of it. The bases often give the impression of precariousness, thereby releasing a bird or fish form from all firm contact. The Sculptor developed the visual power of sources of potential energy with great overhanging weights. In the veined grey marble version of 'The Fish', a millstone, supported by a much smaller cylinder, hovers just off the ground. As counter point a sleek fish hovers a few inches above the ponderous millstone.

It was Brancusi's practice to align the vertical axis of the sections of his bases in rigorous symmetry. Sometimes, as a gesture of provocation, a sculpture would be placed off-centre or rotated to a nonfrontal position. For objects, symmetry offers one of the highest forms of organization - any artistic volition which calls for its destruction must first establish an even higher call to order. There is a biological truth here: within the total regularity of a crystal or organism only an imprecision spurs on further growth or formation; in sculpture as well, a calculated irregularity separates the living from the dead.

A mirror surface placed directly beneath some versions of his fish sculpture is most effective when the area of contact between the reflective surface and the fish form are minimal and particularly when the form is polished bronze. The resulting impression of depthlessness is as close as he comes to 'floating' his sculptures or disengaging them from earthly contact.

Brancusi's eggshaped sculptures rest on a single tangential point. Their point of contact with the flat surface of the base is completely visible. However, the centre of gravity of these sculptures is such that normal tilt suggests tranquility. He does not always position his sculptures according to their inherent equilibrium as with 'Leda'. Occasionally he defies a sculptor's centre of gravity by pinning it with a dowel in a position of unrest. The result is a sense of precariousness and momentary gesture.

MARINO MARINI (Illustrations 7-14)

The theme of Marini's work is man, aware of his happiness and agony, striving to find himself. He places great importance on myth as a revelation of truth like the artists of antiquity and seeks to create a universal symbol of reality through idealised form. At the same time he uses the symbols, the Riders, Pomonas. Warriors to expose the roots of existence. Although his inspiration might be an Etruscan terracotta, a Gothic carving or a Greek marble, he transforms the original into an urgent expression of humanity in his own time.

As his work progressed, Marini's attempt to grasp being is modified, he no longer seeks the essence of man through a universal image but through the individual. His magnificent portraits, among which those of Jean Arp, Stravinsky and Chagall are outstanding, are more than mere portraits of great men; in these seeming noble, suffering heads is reflected the whole world of humanity.

Mythology may be likened to shadows. Physical reality is purified to simple form, exaggerated, elongated, broadened and distorted, but always related to reality and possessed of a definite truth. This becomes more obvious in Marini's later works, such as his 'A Form in an idea'.

His inspiration is of this century looking back on the shadows of the past.

JEAN (HANS) ARP (Illustrations 15-20)

Born in Strasbourg in 1887 and died in 1966, Jean Arp was an astonishingly individual and versatile artist. A leading participant in the Dada movement and later associated with the surrealists, he soon evolved the personal style which he was henceforth to maintain with remarkable consistency in many mediums, collage, 'papiers déchirés' tapestry, engraving, drawing, and, above all, sculpture and poetry. It was as a sculptor that Arp became one of the great formative influences on twentieth century art. Like his great contemporary, Brancusi, he sought to represent (in his own words) 'the secret ways of nature'. Brancusi is probably the only modern sculptor with whom Arp can be compared in his simplicity of vision, and the sense of organic vitality that pervades his work.

In 1930 Arp's interests jumped from wooden reliefs and paper cutouts to free-standing three-dimensional sculpture. For lack of money most of these early forms remained models in plaster. Moving beyond the flat cutout quality of his reliefs of the 1920's, the plaster carvings attempted not merely to reproduce nature but to 'grow', to 'become life' as natural organisms do. Arp called these shapes concretions and remarked about them: 'Concretion signifies the natural process of condensation, hardening, coagulation, thickening, growing together. Concretion designates curdling, the curdling of the earth and the heavenly bodies. Concretion designates solidification, the mass of the stone, the plant, the animal, the man. Concretion is something that has grown. I wanted my work to find its humble, anonymous place in the woods, the mountains, in nature'.

His forms suggest a great awareness of minute and simple organic cellular activity and the process of the division of cells. All is made to seem rearranged from the inside, the growth centre of the piece. They also seem to give the possibility of further growth.

Towards the late 1930's, Arp's experiments were directed toward increasingly complex and irrational shapes. One-celled forms were gradually replaced by partly open, tendril-like shapes. The geometry of organic end-development took precedent over growth. Sometimes his soft fluid forms are abruptly lopped off or truncated.

It is most likely that the mature work of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth would not have been what it was without the example or philosophy of Jean Arp.

DAVID SMITH (Illustrations 32-38)

After his student period in painting, finishing with the abstract painter, Jan Matulka, David Smith's painting turned to constructions which had risen from the canvas so high that a base was required where the canvas should be, hence he had become a sculptor. Steel work had been his trade as earning power in order to study painting and some illustrations in the magazine 'Cahier d'Art' of Picasso - Gonzales constructions of 1931 were the influences which allowed him to launch on his career as a sculptor in steel construction.

He considered line contour as being a comment on mass space and more acute than bulk and 'that the association of steel retained steel function of shapes moving, circumscribing upon axis, moving and gearing against each other at different speeds, as the association of this material suggests'. The overlay of line shapes being a cubist invention, permits each form its own identity and when seen through each other multiplies the complex of associations into new unities. Smith said: 'I do not accept the monolithic limit in the tradition of sculpture. Sculpture is as free as the mind, as complex as life itself.....'

In his sculptures inspiration comes from as many sources as the universe presented to him; the further development of accidental formations, skeletion forms, machinery etc. Many of his works were influenced by Giacometti. His 'Cubi' series comes close to Constructivist aesthetic. Each work balances a tightly organized group of rectangular metal boxes at shoulder height on a steel

column thus giving each composition a charge of potential energy vis a vis the spectator.

Though not the only influence his may be regarded as the strongest on present-day metal sculptors..

Present-day Metal Sculptors

Anthony Caro, whose later work follows on the lines of Smith and who continues to develop his ideas, works in a totally abstract style but makes no concessions to human scale or taste. His works are executed in steel and arranged with total disregard for the normal criteria of sculpture as an object. They rest directly on the floor, often apparently precariously, girders and rods project at all angles, claiming the surrounding space.

He is one of the strongest influences on young British sculptors and to some extent on American. These new ideals have a tendency to arrive in Ireland some twenty years after the rest of the Western World sometimes via Japan or Hong Kong before they make any real impact.

Many indeed are the movements which prevail in the art world of to-day from Op Art with its optical illusions, suprematism of the absolute abstract, futurism going so far as to demand the destruction of museums, Cubism with abstraction of composition and subject, Kinetic art concerned with physical motion, Surrealism described by André Breton as 'A psychic automatism through which can be expressed...' in whatever manner, the true working of the mind' to Pop Art the aim of which is to extend the bounderies of art to achieve something more in tune with modern urban life. The subject-matter of Pop concentrates on commercial art, (advertisements,

wrappers, packages etc.), the styles of the cinema and television, the art of the comic strip, newspaper photographs, pin-ups, magazines, signs and badges, stencilled lettering, machinery, and mechanical drawing and trivial everyday objects. It has evolved a new attitude towards subject-matter and a breakdown of the distinction between subject and object, that is between the content of a work and the manner in which it is executed. In consequence the range of technical procedures used by the Pop artist has been extended far beyond the conventional, thus questioning the nature of the artist's creative activity. This could only have happened in our century.

Setting out with the motive of improving the conditions of human life, we have been overcome by commercialism, technology, science, etc. and the importance of humanity has become diminished. Instead of being human and the object of all these activities we have become the labour force, brain power and 'guinea pigs' in the great machinery of productivity etc.

While artists become increasingly aware of this and particularly Pop artists and while going along with it they fight it with simple irony. This is a negative exercise, a sophisticated and mild form of delinquency. Knowing all this we must find the answer in a positive sense.

A more recent movement would seem to be returning to the portrayal of the human figure as a sublime being and as one answer to all that has gone before. Although we are the creators of this machinery and are its masters we do not believe ourselves to be and until we do we cannot claim the right to be fully human. Whatever it takes, whether it is the representation of the human figure with all its abstract qualities or the aesthetic abstract of suprematism it is the claiming of this right with the use of modern ideas and advancement which must determine the art of the future.

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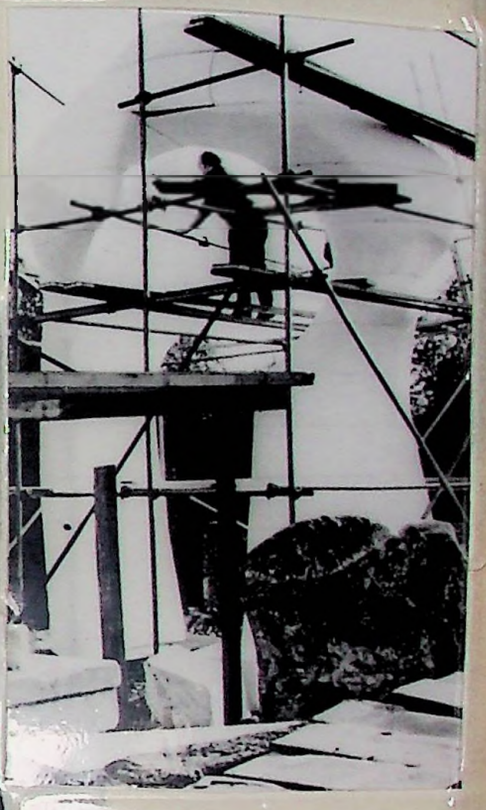

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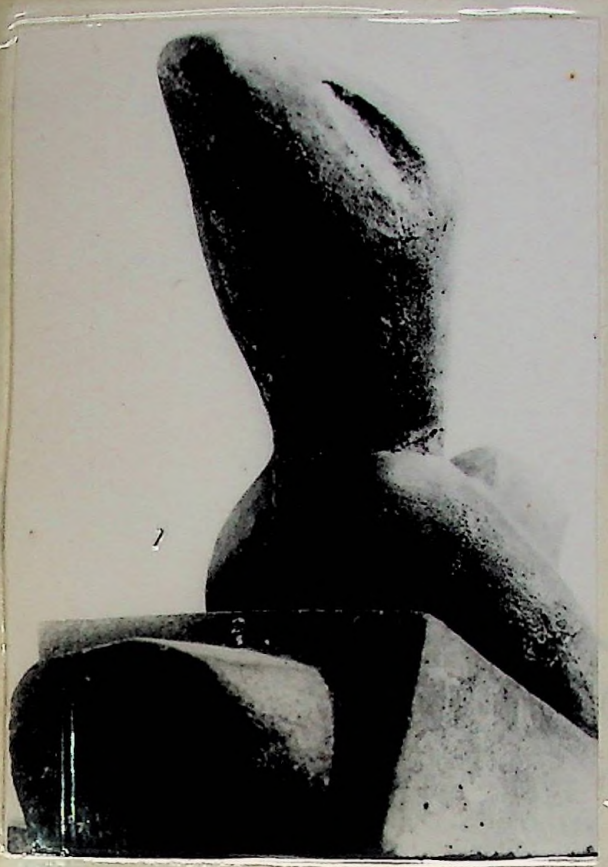

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