

Reflections on Stockwell Depot

Interviews by Sam Cornish and David Waterworth

Edited by David Waterworth, Sam Cornish and Louisa Green

Editors' note:

The following text combines selected extracts from interviews held separately between 2013-14 with ten of the artists associated with Stockwell Depot. This selection addresses core issues associated with the Depot during 1967-79, a period in which each of these artists had an active involvement. David Evison, Gerard Hemsworth and Peter Hide helped to set up the studios in 1967; John Mclean moved into an area managed by Evison by 1970; Jennifer Durrant, Katherine Gili and Anthony Smart all first sublet from Hide in the early 1970s; and Mark Skilton arrived later in that decade. From 1975-79 the annual Stockwell Depot exhibitions regularly included a number of artists, including Alan Gouk and Paul Tonkin, who did not have studio spaces in the building.

Establishing the Depot

Peter Hide

None of us knew what we were going to do in terms of where to work after St Martin's. It was like a sort of precipice that was rapidly approaching. Roland Brener and I were contemporaries there. We talked a lot about forming a group, but it was a nebulous sort of idea. Anyway, Roland, who lived in Lambeth, approached Lambeth Council and the borough's valuer came up with this old, unoccupied property which had been built and used as a brewery. Then it had been a warehouse. Pride and Clarke, the motorbike people, had used it. Roland took the lease for the second floor initially. That was sometime in June or July 1967.

David Evison

We were Saint Martin's ex-sculpture students, all leaving at about the same time. The building was too big for Roland Brener. He was only interested in one particular area – there were two or three areas available – so he informed me about it and he informed Gerard Hemsworth, who took an area of small rooms and I had the large area to deal with.

Gerard Hemsworth

I graduated from Saint Martin's in 1967 and was looking for a studio to work in. Roland Brener, who graduated the year before me, had found this large disused property in Stockwell and was in discussion with Lambeth Council. He asked me if I was interested, so I also contacted Lambeth; there were a group of smaller spaces in the building – probably the offices – which I eventually took responsibility for. Roland had convinced Lambeth Council that they should support the arts, and had made a deal with them regarding rent. I can't remember exactly what the deal was – it may have been that we were not paying rates – but whatever it was, it meant that the studios were extremely affordable. In 1967, Roland Brener with Peter Hide, Roger Fagin and Roelof Louw took one section of the building; I took the offices and David Evison took on another area.

Developments in the 1970s

Peter Hide

In 1970 Nigel Greenwood arranged for us to get a British Council touring exhibition in Scandinavia. The group held together for that; afterwards the group essentially broke up. David Evison remained with his west wing, and he took in the painter John McLean. Roland Brener and I remained fast friends, but he went off for a year to teach in the US so I was essentially left alone in the big part of the space. Then Roland came back and we showed together in 1970 – just him and me. At that point Roland and I planned to sign a lease for the whole three-quarters of the building, but then he got a permanent job in Canada so I took over the lease. I was literally alone in there; many of the artists had just gone and left just rooms full of junk. Essentially, David ran his own part, which ran fairly smoothly. But I just had to gradually get in an entire set of new people. In that first year – 1970 – I was teaching at Norwich, and I was friendly with a painter called Dick James. I invited him, he took space at the top floor and we showed together for two years.

David Evison

After my first one-man show at Kasmin Gallery [1970] Alan Gouk introduced me to John McLean. He was working in a bedroom in a small flat and, I just said to him, 'Well, this space will become available in Stockwell, if you're interested.' He came and had a look and said, 'I'll take it.' So he worked there alone in that space.

Jennifer Durrant

I had the space because my husband and I split up and I had a flat in Camberwell. I was going to Norwich one day a week at the time, and Dick James – who was teaching there – was working in Stockwell where he had the whole piece under the roof. He wanted to share half of it. I can't remember how much it cost me, but it must have been affordable because I had no money of my own or family money or anything like that. So, that's how it came about. We polyethylene partitioned it and there were only odd occasions when we were there at the same time.

Katherine Gili

I studied for two years on the Advanced Course at Saint Martin's and Peter Hide, who was one of my tutors, offered me a studio at the end of my second year in June 1973. Anthony Smart, who was a student at the same time as me, was also offered a studio. We joined John Foster and Peter Hide and initially we worked in connecting studios. By then I was totally committed to pursuing sculpture and it seemed like a very natural move and a good place to start my career.

Anthony Smart

Katherine was in the pigeon room, which is the room at the back of the toilet. Peter was in his big studio with me and John. There was a woman who never turned up who had the first space as you went out to the roof, so we just used that as storage. Upstairs was Dick James and Jennifer Durrant. The art historian John Golding and John McLean were in David Evison's side.

Mark Skilton

I initially worked for Tony Smart, who taught me on the degree course at Saint Martin's. Peter was teaching more on the Advanced Course. I had just built up a rapport with Tony and came to work with him in his studio while I was a student – weekends and things like that – which was great experience for me. Peter saw what I was doing and realised that I would be useful. So, when I left St Martin's [date] and was looking for a studio, he was able offer me one on the proviso that I'd also be able to work for him.

The Building

Katherine Gili

It was an industrial place with a monolithic brick frontage directly on the street, three storeys high. There were neither frills nor comforts on the inside. I really liked it as a place to work, but – thinking about it now – I imagine some people would find it raw, dark and forbidding; even horrendous. My studio had two small windows quite high up that I could only open with a stick. When it rained, it poured down the back wall because the gutters would overflow. But it didn't bother me; I had a space to work in! What more did I want?! You know, some people ask, 'How does the space affect what you make?' Well, I had a show at the Serpentine in 1977 and that was all made in Stockwell, and I am quite sure that you could not tell what sort of space they were made in.

Jennifer Durrant

The building was terribly depressing, when I think of it. I mean, it was very dark and incredibly cold. In the summer it did get quite hot under the roof if the weather was good, but in the winter the water in the buckets froze over in the studio. Eventually I did have one of those industrial gas heaters, which had a big furnace-like thing on the front. I was so terrified of it that I just turned it on for five-minute blasts. Can you imagine with all of that polyethylene, canvas and paper? I don't remember anyone ever coming to inspect the place, but it would have been shut down immediately. Going in, there was a very small front door, and you went in and up a metal ramp, stairs, and then round. If they had steel coming in they used to have to take the metal stairs apart – the work they had to do! At that age, in your thirties, you just do these things. It was so dark, and then, of course, there was that period sometime in the seventies when you weren't allowed to have electricity – the three-day-week. So at night you had to have your torch coming out in the street, which had some terraced houses opposite – very ordinary – and a pub at the end.

John McLean

David Evison's half was a more recent addition. It was quite obviously divided architecturally from the very old Victorian part. It was an extremely interesting building. It had a ramp so that horses could be driven up to the first floor – where they were stabled – as well as inclined flooring with a drain so that the horse piss could go down, which there was an echo of.

Paul Tonkin

Coming through the door you'd see the scaffolding-pole banister. A metal staircase – very functional – but it also didn't look dangerous at the same time. You kind of felt like it might be, but in fact it was all very solidly made. Then you came up and there was, on the left, a door through to John McLean and David Evison's studios. On the right there was another studio at the front of the building, and at the back there was Peter Hide's domain – huge. And behind that there was the roof space, which was just a huge platform. I remember one private view [date] I got a pianist friend to play, and they hoisted a piano up there. The sculptors were good at that kind of thing. And we were all dancing; some of the artists weren't keen on the idea of music, and then those very people were dancing at the end. It was good fun. The space itself was kind of cavernous and gloomy, the light wasn't great and we had to put gauze over the front windows so that we could hang paintings in between them. There were strip lights; it was pretty horrible. Peter's big space had strip lights at the top so it was not great for painting, however it was huge, so you could put the biggest paintings you'd done in there and, of course, massive sculptures by Peter. Some of them were vast, towering things, like dinosaurs. There was like a trap door in the ceiling and Jenny Durrant was up there – above Peter – doing vast paintings.

Jennifer Durrant

We just had a polythene partition. I can remember fixing it. We had to do it overhead as well, because it was enormously high. You were under the rafters where this sort of walkway – like a little wooden bridge – went across where stuff was stored. I don't know why it was there, it had to do with its original use as a brewery.

Katherine Gili

At first I shared a space with John [Foster] and Tony but after a few months I moved into a space of my own. Essentially, we just worked in our own studios. There was very little socialising as such. We all had to earn a living from various part-time jobs – apart from sculpture – which meant that we were not always in the building together on the same days. So the annual shows were the main opportunity to see what each of us had done, and this was when serious discussion took place.

Neighbours

Peter Hide

Lambeth did show a kind of interest in us – and I think even channeled a bit of money to us – but there wasn't a profound influence on the neighbourhood. It was a bit like a bunch of Martians had colonised part of this old building, and there was only the one doorway into it. When we had the openings they were very magnetic for quite a few years; we had lots of drink and tons of people came. It was the place, in a way, but that was the art world mainly, it wasn't the Lambeth folk. They were probably 50 feet away, but they lived in an utterly different world.

Katherine Gili

As far as I'm aware, nobody really knew what was going on in the building. There was only one door, not much bigger than a front door in the side of a brick façade, and the door was kept locked. There were no windows on the ground floor; some on the first floor. It wasn't like other places that needed to involve the community in some way in order to get funding; it was independent, run by Peter Hide and David Evison. Artists went in there to work, they stayed there until whatever hour they wanted to, and left. There were no restrictions on noise.

Studios

David Evison

Because we were ex-students from Saint Martin's we were all following a similar kind of path, except that some people were a bit more minimal in art or imitative than others. And because these large spaces were available, we made large things. Particularly Roelof Louw, from South Africa, who draped his ropes from one end of the building to another. Peter Hide was also starting to use the length of the building to make long steel sculptures. stretch long, long steel beams from each end of the building. There was another South African guy as well, Roger Fagin, who later on filled a whole room full of railway sleepers.

Gerard Hemsworth

For a lot of people, when they leave art school, they find it quite difficult to start operating in a studio because there's no structure and sometimes it's quite difficult to make work. There's not a canteen or a library that you can go to; you just sit there or you go home. Stockwell, in that respect, was quite supportive because in those moments where nothing really was happening for you, you could go and chat to somebody else who might feel the same. I think it takes quite some time for people to develop a studio practice. Whilst I was a student I worked as an assistant for both Phillip King and for Bill Tucker; I was quite good at making things, so they employed me. I was quite taken aback at how rigorous they were with timing – particularly Phillip, who started early in the morning and worked right the way through.

The first period of time that At first, when I was at Stockwell I had no teaching; I was on the dole. Then I got a job in the British Museum making copies of their sculptures, which of course meant that I was only getting to the studio in the evening. I suppose it was a sort of slice of reality to have to work five days a week and then be at the studio on evenings and weekends. The following year, I got two days a week teaching and I could spend a lot more time in the studio.

David Evison

I worked in wood and cheap materials. There were some benches there that could be sawed up to make sculpture, and I used those. I worked in wood because I had no money; I couldn't afford a welder but I could afford a saw and a hammer. A lot happened in that first year; Tony [Caro] brought John Kasmin round and he bought a piece from me and one or two others. He was interested

in us and wanted to show us in a group exhibition in Dusseldorf, it must have been after the Stockwell show in 1968. When Kasmin started to support me a bit I could buy more things, and I was able to buy the equipment.

Peter Hide

Initially the idea was to find somewhere where we could work together and pool our money for tools, for welding equipment and oxyacetylene, that sort of thing. We hadn't thought about it in specific terms of a space, but we thought if we could get a space together it would give economies of scale. You know, we couldn't afford the equipment on our own. The fact was that the Port of London was gone as a proper port, and the old buildings were falling vacant all over the city. People didn't know what to do with them – they were an embarrassment, I suppose, to councils. Then with this boom in art education and all these students leaving, I think that was it really – it was a demographic.

Katherine Gili

Actually – and surprisingly – in those days all one needed was three pieces of equipment: a grinder, a welder and oxyacetylene cutting gear. I had my own equipment but we did help each other with some practical things. John Foster helped me on a couple of occasions with welding and drilling. The sculpture studios were on the first floor of the building, with a double flight of stairs up from ground level and a single doorway opening to the street. In order to get oxygen and acetylene gas bottles to the studios we had to pull them up the stairs with ropes. They were very heavy, especially the acetylene. When we needed to buy scrap steel we would club together to hire a three ton flat-bed truck to go to the scrapyards. We would each pick the pieces we wanted – angle iron, girders, plate and bars – out of the huge piles of scrap, and then cranes with magnets lifted the steel up to put on our lorry. Once back at the Depot it was a question of getting all this steel upstairs and inside. To the side and at back of the building there was an ambulance yard which gave us access to the flat roof, which was also used for exhibiting sculpture. The steel had to be brought on to the roof by the use of a small crane jib, fixed to the side of the building and a chain block hoist. It was a manual chain block so you had to pull on a chain to lift the steel from the ground to the roof deck. It then had to be taken on trolleys across the length of the roof into the studios, which in my case meant taking it through Peter's studio and down the corridor. The whole process could take two or three days. When John Foster left, I took over driving the trucks because at that time neither Tony or Peter could drive.

John McLean

I got this much bigger studio which, yes, was an increase in scale, but technically it was just as messy. That was with throwing paint around. When I was in my flat I would put polythene over the floor and about one foot up the side of the walls because it was that messy. So my approach to painting didn't change, I could just do more. Quite a few people would have been using squeegees, working on the floor. I made one that was five or six foot across. It had cross-bracing, so it could push great amounts. The canvas wasn't on a stretcher, it was stapled to a large board which I think was Kasmin's old flooring that he had specially used for showing Tony Caro's *Prairie*. He managed to get Evison to store it for him and I

started pirating it. The paint would go right through the canvas and puddle, and those puddles would come back onto the surface because the canvas was only 9 ounce; the stuff was so thin, it was like painting on scaled-up tissue paper.

David Evison

In our first year we were visited by Peter Sedgely and Bridget Riley; they wanted to see what a group studio situation was like. They explained that they were about to set up this kind of space in St Katherine Docks. I don't know if they learned anything from us – I doubt it – but I had a good friend who took on a space there called Alan Green. Good painter. He taught me when I was at Leeds College of Art and I visited him in his studio a few times – it was really well organised. They set up this organisation called SPACE and it was like a little business, properly run with decent toilets and things while ours was just grotty.

John McLean

It was one of the first – if not the first – big industrial buildings to be taken over in London. I think it may have pre-dated the artists getting hold of St Katherine Docks and this was acknowledged in the art bureaucracy – for years we got a grant to put on an annual exhibition.

Exhibitions at Stockwell Depot

Peter Hide

The first show was not funded by the Arts Council but we did have a catalogue introduction written by Michael Compton of the Tate Gallery. Roland, again, was a great networker. The artists who showed were Alan Barkley, Roland Brener, David Evison, Roger Fagin, John Fowler, Gerard Hemsworth, Roelof Louw and myself. The exhibitions were like the climax of the year. The first group only showed together twice – in the first and second year – and then, after that, quite a lot of the initial group drifted away.

David Evison

The first show was a local event for 'in' people who came up from Saint Martin's and so on; the second was the one Greenwood put together and it was pretty well mobbed, loads of people came. They were all complaining about having to come south of the river and the fact that the Depot was kind of dank and dirty – all these kind of things – rather than about the art. We got newspaper reviews and I seem to remember getting bad reviews, but I wasn't interested – I think I threw them away. Someone wrote, 'Sometimes it seems like Zadkine rides again.' After that I got my own gallery and one or two other group exhibition venues. By this time I had started to fight with Mr Hide, although I shouldn't put it like that because we never came to blows.

Anthony Smart

David and Peter were at it all the time. It wasn't a distraction; it was fun for us, I think. They just couldn't stand the sight of each other. We were more like intermediaries trying to patch it up. I have no idea why they didn't like each other.

John McLean

I think that Alan Gouk and Peter Hide probably discussed expanding the Depot exhibitions to include other artists in a natural, ordinary way, over a pint together. I didn't take any interest in that – I was a willing participant, but I never wanted to introduce any more people into the exhibitions. I think that I just thought of it as somewhere we showed once a year, rather than as a vehicle for promotion. I've always been a bit slow on that front.

Alan Gouk

It would have been the summer of 1974; we went to the Spaniards Inn after an exhibition of Caro's and Peter proposed to Geoff Rigden and I that we join forces and have a joint exhibition of painting and sculpture. The painting committee – if you like – was me, Fred Pollock and Geoff Rigden, then Paul Tonkin. The painters and sculptors who worked in the annex were not so central to Peter's plans – outside his domain, as it were. John McLean ended up in the shows although he wouldn't take part in the hang; we would come in to do the selection and John would already have hung his pictures in the prime spot – the first room – which was the only room that had any natural light. I suppose that he felt entitled, since his studio was in the Depot; whereas the rest of us were interlopers, as it were. McLean was able to exert quite an influence because John Golding – also with a studio in the annex – was one of the grey eminences on the Arts Council committee. Golding never took part, or rather, he was never asked. Whilst it did get Arts Council patronage on a small scale for the catalogue, invites and things, it was basically seen as an independent venture – independent of Caro, independent of everything – but we did had to get some money to pay for expenses and things.

John McLean

Nobody thought to ask John Golding to take part in the shows He was ten years older and a little bit apart from everybody else, not – so to speak – one of the lads. There was only one occasion when he came and had a pint in the local pub; I had a show coming and I was desperate to do more work than I could manage in my studio so I used his whilst it was empty. When he came back I gave him the rent but he demurred and instead said, 'We'll all go for a drink with the rent money.' Yes, that's the only occasion I went to the local pub with him.

Paul Tonkin

I don't know what happened before me, but I was in the 1976 show with Fred, Douglas, and Alan [in addition to Jennifer Durrant and John McLean]. We would look in threes at the fourth artist's work and select paintings from what they had brought along; it was quite democratic in that way. Maybe it was a bit arrogant of us, but we didn't see any reason to include anyone else until the last exhibition in 1979 when it was decided to broaden the whole show out. It was partly to do with the fact that the main impetus behind the shows was Peter, and they took place in his part of the building. I really enjoyed the way we hung the shows; it seemed to me the works were bouncing off each other, the sculptures and the paintings were almost feeding off each other. There was some common feeling there, it's hard to explain what it was.

Katherine Gili

From a personal viewpoint the exhibitions were an opportunity to step back from what you had made and see it freshly in a clear exhibition space, as well as to see it alongside others work. The sculptural ideas that were seen formed the basis for discussion. Questions were raised, not about technique or about craft but about how sculpture could achieve greater physicality, and each sculptor went away and looked for their own answers. The work changed and developed every year. As the shows were open to the public they also became an important part of the art scene. A lot of people took notice; they were reviewed in Artscribe as well as other magazines and periodicals, and became part of the general debate.

Alan Gouk

The openings were very well attended by art world people, like Anthony Reynolds who then opened up a gallery of his own. Obviously they didn't think much of it because I felt it got little coverage in the magazines – and what there was negative. And then, of course, there was the relationship with Caro. He tried to keep it within his orbit of influence – within his empire.

John McLean

I remember once, when Peter Hide was the main organiser of one of the Stockwell shows, he gave everyone a task and asked me to be the one to see that it was very well reviewed. So, I went off to Studio International. The editorship had just been taken over by Richard Cork; I went to the office to meet him and said, 'I hope you're going to review this', and he said, 'No'. I just looked at him, turned on my heel, and walked out – I didn't know what to say.

Anthony Caro

Peter Hide

As students we were all, I guess, brought up under the influence of Anthony Caro. Most of us had – at one stage or another – been working out of his work pretty closely. I think that all of us wanted to, in varying degrees, escape from that influence.

Alan Gouk

Peter and I were trying to consolidate and hold together a concept, an idea of the value of a shared ethos, shared ambitions and shared criticisms; the sort of things that are a direct continuation of the sculpture forums at Saint Martin's and the critiques we gave of one another's work. In a sense the Forums were a direct product of Caro's teaching method. There was one occasion when we all went to a panel discussion with, I think, people like Richard Cork, Lynne Cooke and Caroline Tisdall. There must have been a certain amount of rowdiness and maybe a bit of heckling. One of the panel got up and said, 'Mr Caro, I wonder if you could keep your coterie in better control', or something similar. We were suffering from both ends; we were seen as Caro's gang – but very much subservient – and also as these bolshie people. It didn't get us anywhere.

Anthony Smart

I would say that it was in response to the publicity of the Depot that brought students in to Saint Martin's [in the early 1970s]. Whereas previously it had been about Caro, suddenly it was about these young, sort of rebel types.

Mark Skilton

When I went to work in Dundee [date] for my first teaching job, everyone there knew about Stockwell Depot. Although there was a lot of respect and awe for the place, they also knew it as a bit of a beast to be slain. Certainly the sculpture was often approached with aggression in the studio – you know, we'd get these big sheets in and just hack them to pieces – but ultimately it was the sensitivity of the work that gave it any quality. I think that everyone realised that but probably wouldn't necessarily want to admit it. I suppose it was something of an aura that we quite enjoyed, being regarded as these aggressive guys.

Alan Gouk

In 'Steel Sculpture Part II' [2014] I describe how, in 1978, Peter got hold of these big, thick, pastry-like rolled steel ends. Caro had used these some years before but Peter stacked them up vertically into these masses, for example in *Left Arm Chinaman* [1979]. Tony Smart had already made some sculptures by massing plates together in his *Tamarind* series of 1977. 'Corporeality' and 'physicality' were becoming the watchwords, and in 1978 Kathy's sculptures became more condensed and object-like as well.

Collective Identity

Gerard Hemsworth

Initially our collective need for Stockwell Depot was studio space. You know, it's a curious time in an artist's life when they first leave art school. You do a lot of growing up; trying to find out what is important for you; what is the consequence of your education. Stockwell Depot developed an agenda – which was not interesting for me – derived from a narrow view of abstract art and the teaching of Anthony Caro.

Peter Hide

At the beginning, there were people who were nearer the conceptual approach, like Roelof Louw and Gerard Hemsworth, and then there were people who were more conservatively modernist like David Evison, John Fowler and myself. So there was a spectrum of artists at Stockwell which also reflected the spectrum at Saint Martin's.

Katherine Gili

There was – amongst everyone who worked at the Depot – a commitment and a shared aim to improve the quality of their work, but each artist worked separately towards it. In my mind, that on its own does not constitute a community. The only artists who worked there to regularly take part in the annual shows were Peter, John, Tony and myself from 1974. I am not sure that the shows could be considered as communal; the place was more fragmented

than that, especially when you think the four of us did not work there for very long.

Katherine Gili

Stockwell Depot did represent an attitude towards the making of sculpture. To put it simply, we all worked in steel and made free-standing, non-referential, sculpture: that was our common ground, our position. We were not alone in this – other people were making steel sculpture elsewhere – but it was the shows that gave it a focus for the four of us in particular. I know that some people saw Stockwell as representing something narrow, but I disagree. If you focus on something particular it doesn't make it narrow, in fact the more one concentrates on something the more things open up and the more there is to find.

Painters and Sculptors

Mark Skilton

I suppose the sculpture that I identified most with was that by Tony Smart, we just seemed to have a common kind of feel about what we wanted sculpture to be. Tony – who was living in Yorkshire at the time – would come down and stay with me and Geoff Hollow and we would all talk about sculpture and painting. Geoff really got me into trying to understand painting. It was that sort of dialogue – together with what was happening at Saint Martin's – that was a big influence.

John McLean

I have always been intrigued by sculpture; I enjoy looking at it. I must have taken in an awful lot whilst I was there, but the painter who really impressed me was Jenny Durrant. I didn't at the time get anything from it – although I admired what she did – but I think I would have to acknowledge now that my use of collage has quite a lot to do with her successful use of the medium. Jenny did once say that she thought my work had developed the way it did because all my friends were sculptors rather than painters. I think there may be a grain of truth there, but also a great deal of exaggeration.

Paul Tonkin

I guess it might be to do with the nature of the work, but the sculptors were very passionate about their beliefs and had very strong opinions. I'm generalising of course, but they invest a lot of hard physical work in what they do whereas painting is a bit more fluid and flexible somehow, and painters generally seem to have a different way of discussing or looking at each other's work – they are a bit more laid back.

Clement Greenberg and US Abstraction

John McLean

When Clement Greenberg visited I associated it utterly with Anthony Caro encouraging him to come. I remember David Evison reminiscing about an early visit [1968] Greenberg kicked a circular sculpture, I think it was by Roelof Louw. As he kicked – well, tapped it anyway dismissively with his foot – he said, 'An

American would have opened the circle up.' But Greenberg didn't hold any sway. We were all independent.

Gerard Hemsworth

On the day that Greenberg came [1968] I couldn't be there because I was teaching, but I did set up some work in my studio with the hope that he would go in. Some time later I asked David Annesley whether he went in and how much time he spent there. He sort of hummed and hawed, so I said, 'Tell me exactly how much time he spent', and he said, 'Well, he spent as much time as it takes to walk into the studio and walk out again'. I said, 'Oh right' and Annesley said, 'Yeah, he's got a trained eye' – I thought, 'Fuck off.' I don't know whether that confirmed my feelings about where I wanted to align myself – I mean, what would have happened if Greenberg liked the work – but he definitely was fairly dismissive about what I was doing and that somehow put me into another camp. So I'm sort of grateful to him for that.

Jennifer Durrant

I went to the US with David Evison and Alan Gouk [1972]; David had sold a sculpture to somebody in the Boston area. I didn't know anything about contemporary American art when I was at Brighton Art College, then when I was at the Slade I had just started to experience nonfigurative painting. So the history of American Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism and, you know, the Europeans going to America – that was all new to me. When we went to Greenberg's they were all having a discussion about Monet, and afterwards they wouldn't speak to me in the lift because I'd showed my ignorance and they were embarrassed. So you can imagine how pompous they were, these young men. When Greenberg visited Stockwell to see the sculptors he asked who else was working in the building, and possibly John said, 'Well, there's Jenny upstairs.' Whether he remembered me from before, I don't know, but he made me show him absolutely everything and was there for ages. At one point he said – which was very misogynist, I suppose – 'Oh, shut up woman, I don't want to hear what you've got to say, I just want to look.' I suppose with my background and how I was, I was too apologetic I expect.

Paul Tonkin

I think that in retrospect, what Fred Pollock, Douglas Abercrombie, Alan Gouk and I had in common was that we were greatly influenced by north-American post-painterly abstraction, as it was known. Yet at the same time we tried to find a way around that by looking at paintings by the previous generation – including Hans Hofmann, Clyfford Still and Adolph Gottlieb – as well as others like Jack Bush and of course the old masters, who I was just discovering in the National Gallery. We were trying to avoid becoming trans-Atlantic as we saw it and also wanting to re-introduce the painterly.

Alan Gouk

One of the grounds for the antagonism towards us was that we were the only ones who were positive about the American connection, where so many other English painters were cynical. There was also clearly some resentment about the Greenberg connection – he was getting a lot of criticism from all quarters of the

British art-critical scene. From our point of view, we were being drawn back to places that we were trying to leave behind; we were being put in a bag marked 'Caroesque' whilst also being put through hoops by Caro himself through his advocacy of Clement Greenberg – Greenberg didn't even want to go see our work, but Caro insisted. We were being pulled constantly in the direction of emulating the painting from New York, while our actual work was moving in the opposite direction – or trying to in most cases.

Mark Skilton

Greenberg had a look at everyone's work, including mine. He did pick up on details of what I was doing but, well, they were pretty crazy sculptures. They were quite dense – information-dense as well as material-dense. We were struggling with pictoriality and how to expand it without actually giving up the pictorial way of working. You can imagine how troublesome that would be. In comparison, Peter was making very clear things with a clear outline and things stuffed into them which Greenberg related to instantly – it fitted in to his ideas about what sculpture could be. But, I got a positive vibe from him. He sensed that I was a young sculptor at the time and had some promise, which was in a way reassuring.

Paul Tonkin

When I was at art school I got a copy of Greenberg's Art and Culture. I was walking down a corridor with it and another guy, in the year above me, walked past and said, 'Your bible.' And I'd never even looked at it before, you know? If you mentioned the name Greenberg – or any of those painters – you were seen as an idoliser, a 'Greenbergite'. Okay we were young and impressionable, of course, but we weren't members of a cult. Greenberg exposed much contemporary art as kitsch and he upset a lot of vested interests. I felt that there were some really obnoxious people who loathed him and tried to make out that he was a sort of tool of the CIA, and all that kind of shit. Okay it did emerge that the CIA – well, the Americans – were funding him, but so what? It's just like the British Council. Similarly, Louis Armstrong was called Ambassador Satch because he went on a tour funded by the American government. Does that make them stooges?

Endgames

Anthony Smart

From '73 the "Depot" with its studios and exhibitions, for me, was the hub of the major events in Abstract Sculpture making. One by one the notion of ideas and design and other conceptual prescriptions gradually gave way to a more direct working with the material, steel. The vision was to examine the things that could be part of abstract sculpture that would not be dependant on other disciplines such as painting and architecture. What the pieces looked like and were about and what determined their meaning became the thing to be invented directly with the material.

Retrospectively that generation of Sculptors turned the practice of previous generations into what I now term freestyle sculpture. For me that second period, 73 - 82, at Stockwell Depot was the trigger for everything else to come, it put the

demands on to the work that introduced to today the full variety of sculptural language and not the various hybrids previously settled for as answers to more singular questions.

Alan Gouk

Probably the most significant year of all for Stockwell was 1979; they had some final, big discussions and decided that that the bulky, corporeal sculpture - as they called it - was going nowhere. Glynn Williams was part of that, but then there was the falling out with Williams, of course. It's all tied in with the sculpture course at Saint Martin's closing, it's all linked.

Mark Skilton

There was some unhappiness with the way that pictorial sculpture had settled into this style which everyone was copying - it seemed almost inevitable. In trying to almost break from that style I went for density, but then we started using thicker and thicker bits of plate, which turned out to be a red herring, and it sort of took over. I think that it became obvious during the 1979 show that we had taken it as far as we could. Bob Percy was working with 5-inch plate and I was working with 2 and 3-inch plate - there was nowhere else that you could go with that. It had reached its logical conclusion, but there were no ideas on the table about how to move forward. This all coincided - more or less - with Peter going to Canada; he carried on working in heavy, chunky steel but he placed one flat plane against another with distinct outlines, and almost some kind of recognisable image. Pretty soon after that we had the 'Lion Project' at Saint Martin's - we looked at this Greek lion sculpture and tried to analyse it and make something from it in metal. The idea just had legs; immediately we started working in a different way because the lion itself was a three-dimensional sculpture, so we sensed the possibilities. For decades, really, we were unaware of the significance of it. At the time we sensed that it was new and the work had a different kind of feel - a vitality of its own - but we couldn't put into words what that was.

Alan Gouk

By 1979 the various projects, including 'From the Body' and 'Paperwork', had started with the students at Saint Martin's. Tony Smart and Kathy Gili continued to make these abstract or planar-type sculptures, but you can see the changes beginning to take place in the sculptures they showed in the 1979 show. Kathy didn't make a lion, but some of the students started working from the lion first. Tony started a project working from an Ionian lion in the British Museum with students on the Foundation course at Saint Martin's, which Tim Scott then picked up on. The first thing Tim did on becoming Head of Sculpture at Saint Martin's in 1979 was to acquire a cast of the lion. I had introduced the model into the projects on the advanced course the previous year, although nothing like the way the model had served in the past, with clay modeling over an armature and all that.

Paul Tonkin

The Hayward Annual 1980 was, I think, a landmark show. I would say that, wouldn't I? Frank Bowling was in that show, and he's a damn good painter, as

well as some of us from Stockwell. The exhibition got mentions in some newspapers, but it all seemed to fall flat because suddenly there was a big show at the Royal Academy at exactly the same time called The New Spirit in Painting. The Royal Academy show had huge, figurative, painterly paintings; Baselitz was one of them – his gimmick was doing things upside down – and there was someone else whose gimmick was using broken crockery. I thought that those paintings were awful and the work in the Hayward Annual was much more interesting, but that was the fashion. Suddenly abstract painting had become very unfashionable.

Alan Gouk

I remember the exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre [1982]. It's this big building – like a hangar – designed by Norman Foster; the end wall is completely in glass with a huge, kind of Venetian blind operated mechanically. It was a sunny evening and as the Venetian blind went up you could see, basking on the green lawn, was this big, glossy, bronze Henry Moore, against which the figure sculptures by Tony and Kathy looked like they were from a different planet. Caro was there at the opening – when he saw Tony and Kathy's pieces he said, 'Oh, this is where I came in', and they said, 'No it isn't. You didn't deal with it in any intense depth.'

Mark Skilton

I think the aggressive persona attributed to Stockwell Sculpture got exaggerated out of all proportion. It was there, but those that wanted to see the downfall of steel sculpture and the Depot would exaggerate the nature of that aggression. It was seen as something extremely negative and exclusive, which it wasn't. It wasn't that anyone wanted to exclude other sculptors from the Depot or from making steel sculpture. It was just that a high standard had to be maintained.

Katherine Gili

The thing is – and this is entirely natural – the more that one develops, the more that common ground becomes stretched and the less useful such discussion becomes. That is why the shows came to an end, but the fact is the artists carried on and that is also part of the legacy.