

STANDING IN THE WORLD

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“For he passed on with royal detachment and gazed seriously for relief at the steel and wood mobiles turning gently in the breeze of the future, like small structures of nerves vibrating in the air without their covering of flesh, the new cages of our future sorrows, so abstract they could not even contain a sob.”

Anaïs Nin¹

What does it mean for a sculpture to enter the world, especially a world devastated by so much destruction, the full extent of which slowly, if explosively, registered as images of the camps and the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, began to emerge at the end of World War II? In 1952, Herbert Read described the imagery of a new generation of British sculptors as “belong[ing] to the iconography of despair, or of defiance; and the more innocent the artist, the more effectively he transmits the collective guilt. Here are images of flight, of ragged claws ‘scuttling across the floors of silent seas,’ of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear.”² Much has been made of this passage, and Read’s concluding phrase in particular, by scholars, critics, and curators. Some have even expressed frustration with the degree to which it has continued to define a generation of British artists, leaving them forever stuck in the 1950s and generationally almost exclusively associated with World War II and its aftermath.³ But both the phrase and the passage, inevitably cited in almost every essay about postwar British sculpture, and the work of Lynn Chadwick in particular, need not be a limiting analytic or categorical end point, as its capacious poetic rhetoric points backward and forward, as well as to the then contemporary moment of postwar unease and renewal.⁴

1. Anaïs Nin, *Ladders to Fire* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1946), p. 196.

2. Herbert Read, “New Aspects of British Sculpture,” in *The XXVI Venice Biennale: The British Pavilion* (London: Westminster Press, 1952), n.p.

3. See, for example, Michael Bird, *Lynn Chadwick* (Farnham, Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2014), p. 21; Robert Burstow, “‘The Geometry of Fear’: Herbert Read and British Modern Sculpture after the Second World War,” in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, eds. Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (London: Lund Humphries Publisher, Ltd, 1993), p. 119; Margaret Garlake “Revisiting The Geometry of Fear,” in *Re-Reading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, ed. Michael Paraskos (London: Freedom Press, 2007), p. 135; Marin R. Sullivan, “Lynn Chadwick in the United States,” in *Lynn Chadwick: A Sculptor on the International Stage*, ed. Michael Bird (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2019), p. 169. Later, Read did qualify his use of the term fear, particularly in terms of Chadwick’s work as “not the fear we experience when confronted with physical peril. ... I have called it metaphysical fear, but it would be still more exact to call it unconscious fear,” confessing finally that “fear is no longer an appropriate word.” Herbert Read, *Lynn Chadwick* (Amriswil: Bodensee-Verlag, 1958), p. 9.

4. Chadwick was represented by four sculptures and four drawings in the British Pavillion, along with the work of seven other artists, including Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi, and William Turnbull, all under forty. A work by Henry Moore stood outside the pavilion.

Most obviously, Read's quotation from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written in 1910–1911, and first published in 1915, manifests the emotional tenor of the pre-World War I period. But Read's choice of "geometry" to describe the images that he also evokes using the Eliot poem seems paradoxical at best, if not imprecise, until one recognizes that it is a somewhat oblique and loosely adapted reference to Wilhelm Worringer's discussion of contrasting *Kunstwollen* ("will-to-art" or "will-to-form") in his 1908 text *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*.⁵ Building on Alois Riegel's argument that the creative act is not primarily driven by a desire to imitate the organic world, but by differently directed wills-to-form, Worringer asserts that the two most basic approaches to art, naturalism and non-naturalism, can only be understood if we examine the climates of feeling that have led to the predominance of the one or the other form at different times. Cultures that have achieved an equilibrium with the natural environment embrace naturalism, whereas cultures that experience the external world as frightening and incomprehensible chaos produce nonorganic or abstract art. Worringer does not address his own contemporary moment in his text, but Read and other of his contemporaries associated Worringer's remarks about abstraction's "will-to-form" with a postwar desire to retreat from one's surroundings because of an inability to cope with their disorienting complexities.⁶ For example, in a series of 1945 essays on spatial form in modern literature, Joseph Frank elaborates on Worringer's dualities as a relationship between things, including people, and their environment and corresponding representations of this relationship, more broadly defined:

"Space filled with atmospheric light," Worringer writes, "which binds objects together and cancels out their individual self-containedness, imparts a temporal value (*Zeitlichkeitswert*) to things, drawing them into the cosmic merry-go-round of appearances. Presenting objects in depth gives them a time-value, or perhaps we should say accentuates their time-value, because it connects them with the real world in which events occur; and since time is the very condition of that flux and change which, as we have seen, man wants to escape from when he is in a condition of disequilibrium with nature, non-naturalistic styles shun the dimension of depth and prefer the plane."⁷

So it seems that despite Read's Worringer-appropriate conjoining of geometry with fear, the repertoire of forms he highlights would, for Worringer, be responding to rather than retreating from a climate and environment that is threatening or inhospitable to humans. It is perhaps the complex terms of the encounter between work and world that Read embraces, and not necessarily the style through which it manifests.

A significant amount of the sculpture made in Great Britain during the initial decade after the war consists of broadly anthropomorphized skeletal, animal,

5. Others have noted Read's seemingly paradoxical use of abstract in conjunction with chains of reference to figuration. See for example, Michael Bird, "A Sculptor on the International Stage," in *Lynn Chadwick: A Sculptor on the International Stage*, p. 54.

6. Throughout his life, Read acknowledged the importance of *Abstraction and Empathy* and Worringer's subsequent text *Form in Gothic*, which Read translated into English in 1927, to his thinking about art in relation to its environment. He also dedicated his 1952 text *The Philosophy of Modern Art* to Worringer. See Burstow, "The Geometry of Fear" for the most sustained and thoughtful consideration of this relationship.

7. Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts," *The Sewanee Review* 53, 4 (Autumn 1945): p. 650.

or insect-like forms: singular pivoting eyes, oversized gaping, sometimes equally movable jaws, thin elongated protuberances that suggest heads, antennae, protective shells, or expressive limbs and fingers. These quasi-naturalistic attributes may connote various hybrid lifeforms and emotional content, but they don't necessarily convey *how* these works relate to their environment. Encounter and retreat were of paramount importance to Worringer, and to those who, like Read and Frank, wanted to describe the nature of modern art's relationship to the real world. And for sculpture, historically—and in addition to changing styles, materials, and technical developments, such as welding—this has involved a consideration of how individual works are situated and interact within their environment, usually through their materiality and the mediating role of a base or architectural frame. Around mid-century, European critics understood the legacy of postwar European sculpture's spatial encounter as extending backward to the nascent principles of modern architecture, as exemplified in the work and writing of Le Corbusier and the prewar sculpture of Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, and Alberto Giacometti, yet also providing significant new points of departure from this past.⁸

Calder's mobiles, for example, engage with the world around them through the sparest of physical connections to their surroundings. These often barely perceptible tethers heighten a sense of their complete immersion in their surroundings. Lynn Chadwick's earliest sculptures were mobiles made of small scraps of balsa wood and aluminum wire. He claimed that he knew nothing about the work of Calder at the time, and when he saw it later, he felt it "had a different viewpoint, a different aesthetic" from his own.⁹ At the time, critics observed that the weight and physical mechanics of suspension were fully on view in Chadwick's mobiles, whereas when experiencing Calder's mobiles, these mechanics were easily forgotten, repressed. Lawrence Alloway, for example, described Chadwick's early mobiles as "marred by insufficient freedom of movement" and lacking Calder's playful humor. Conversely, he felt that in Chadwick's somewhat later stabiles, "his rather heavy form-sense may work uninhibited."¹⁰ Alloway singled out *The Inner Eye* for its "energetic harshness of form and sturdiness of balance which is impressively personal."¹¹ Similarly, Robert Melville described how some of Chadwick's mobiles "creak and clang like an obsolete tank engine," whereas his *Inner Eye* exploits its "tremendous presence, and if it is considered as a transmogrified human being is no less tragic and fearsome than Kafka's giant cockroach. It is a very remarkable contribution

8. Herbert Read and Lawrence Alloway, among others, use the term linear to describe this legacy. In "Britain's New Iron Age," Alloway writes that "linear sculpture takes possession of space with the gestures made possible by light and sinewy materials. The sculptor's ability to enclose space without filling it, by means of a kind of three-dimensional drawing, has been extended by the metals technology made available." *ARTnews* 52, no. 4 (June-July-August 1953): p. 20. Read similarly describes the work as "the outlining of space and the representation of rhythm by means of wires and rods ... deriving from Giacometti and Picasso, but developed independently in various new directions by Calder in America, Butler, Paolozzi, Turnbull, and Chadwick in England, and by Hans Uhlman in Germany. Its potentialities are yet to be fully exploited." *Contemporary British Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 33.

9. Cited in Dennis Farr and Eva Chadwick, *Lynn Chadwick Sculptor* (Farnham, Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2014), p. 14.

10. Alloway, "Britain's New Iron Age," p. 68. Alloway's assessment contradicts Read's description of Chadwick's work as more playful than the work of his contemporaries in the 1952 British Pavilion. Read, "New Aspects of British Sculpture," n.p.

11. Alloway, "Britain's New Iron Age," p. 68.

to the iconography of alienation.”¹² Both critics refer to things and beings in the world, but through them, they also describe *how* Chadwick’s works physically and emotionally engage and anchor themselves within it.

Giacometti’s 1932 *Woman with Her Throat Cut* consists of a figure, seemingly thrown directly to the ground and, like many of the artist’s works from this period, freed from a traditional base. In some cases, his works are all base, but unlike Brancusi’s incorporation of a base into his sculpture while maintaining its verticality and thus a separation between it and the ground, much of Giacometti’s 1930s sculpture is committed to horizontality. Some of these works, such as *No More Play* (1933), resemble gameboards, and their movable parts invite physical interaction, suggesting that their reality is spatially coterminous with the viewer’s own. Rosalind Krauss describes *Woman with Her Throat Cut* as “the human form fashioned from a disarray of sheathings, resembling a pile of old rags which the viewer might trip over.”¹³ Later, when reading Giacometti’s work through the writings of Georges Bataille, Krauss concludes that this fall or rotation into horizontality, which is heightened in *Woman with Her Throat Cut* through formal references to insects, such as the praying mantis, signals a deliberate violent debasement of the monument by folding “its vertical dimension onto the horizontality of the earth.”¹⁴ The “very axis of verticality,” Krauss claims, “declares the apartness of sculpture’s representational field from the world of actuality, and this dimension is traditionally introduced by the uprightness of a pedestal, with its initiation of the lift of the work above the ground, its removal from the space of the real. Like a picture frame, the pedestal closes off the virtual field of representation from the actual space around it. But if the picture is somehow *only* its frame, then this distinction is not so easy, and the representation begins to fuse with its literal surroundings.”¹⁵

Then what of the sculpture that could be described as insect-like and possessing a base that is synonymous with the sculpture, but which manifests its association with the world by standing upright and balanced on its own anatomical terms? Could one consider such a direct engagement with the floor both a violent debasement and an expression of fearlessness, a direct and self-reliant, rather than passive encounter and contact between figure and ground? In 1968, Jack Burnham identified such a paradoxical form of encounter as the adapted legacy of the prewar and immediate postwar period, noting that after a tendency to raise works from the floor by the thinnest of plinths, “Much of the floor-size ‘New York School’ sculpture, following the lead of Picasso and the postwar British metal sculptors, such as Lynn Chadwick, Kenneth Armitage, and Reg Butler, began to grow leglike appendages instead of bases.”¹⁶

Chadwick’s *Inner Eye* consists of a figure whose head and eye become one thing in its central lump of cullet—recycled glass—suspended and swiveling on a movable pivoting bar, poised for engagement with the viewer. Its four

12. Robert Melville, “Lynn Chadwick,” *Quadrum* no. 2 (November 1956): pp. 97, 102.

13. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 118.

14. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), p. 73.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

16. Jack Burnham, *Beyond Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), pp. 40–41.

lower appendages taper and slightly bend inward toward each other as they extend to the floor without the encumbrance of an abstract base. These organic appendages add to the anthropomorphic or beast-like quality of the work—its content associations—but they also become the work’s base, just as legs support any living thing. When the work, just over two meters high, was exhibited in the British Pavilion at the 1956 Venice Biennale, it greeted the viewer with upright independence, standing directly on the floor and at “eye level,” in contrast to Chadwick’s other works, all of which were raised off the ground on traditional white pedestals. While this direct connect may seem like a small thing, it presented technical challenges and would not have been so commonplace at the time. When Chadwick initially made and proposed the sculpture for the 1952 Biennale, he asked the exhibition organizer Lilian Somerville about the surface of the floors in the British Pavilion and claimed that it was not “by any means too big for the exhibition gallery.”¹⁷

In 1948, Alberto Giacometti’s then new departure into figurative work premiered at Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York. While these works were in New York, Patricia Matisse took Giacometti’s *Pointing Man* out on to the street and photographed it. Although still standing on a relatively thin and simple base, the work’s placement and the camera angle suggest a man on the street. The height of the sculpture, 182 centimeters, adds to this illusion; it is the only one Giacometti made at this scale that gestures. Sometime during the first weeks of January 1952, before Chadwick proposed *The Inner Eye* as his contribution to the 1952 Venice Biennale, his friend the photographer David Farrell photographed the sculpture and Chadwick standing side by side on a rise near the artist’s cottage in Pinswell, Gloucestershire. The work is significantly taller than the artist, yet its eye/head meets its companion at eye level.

In her first sculpture exhibition at Peridot Gallery in New York, in 1949, Louise Bourgeois arranged her vertical and life-size “personages” along the periphery of the exhibition space, either flush against the wall, or leaning close to it, just as she did at home in her studio and in various other spaces, including the roof of the apartment building she lived in with her husband and three children. In her second exhibition, in the same space, just one year later, she moved them to the center of the room and did not intend to use bases, claiming that “if there had been bases the bases would have isolated the figures not only from the spectator but from the other figures. The figures construct and inhabit their own social space.”¹⁸ In the end, some were secured directly to the floor and others mounted on a thin metal rod with a small metal foot because of the gallery owner’s concerns for the floors. Scholars have viewed this second arrangement as a definitive move from painting to sculpture, but, like Giacometti and Chadwick’s roughly contemporary installation decisions, it could also be understood as an acknowledgement of the continuum between pictorial and lived space, work and environment. Without a base and thus sharing the same ground as the viewer—their heights equivalent to specific individuals in her life—the sculptures are not self-contained. They become embedded in the world and its contemporary moment. Later Bourgeois was quite clear about her personal situation as a

17. Chadwick, letters to Lilian Somerville, March 6 and 11, 1952, as cited in Bird, *Lynn Chadwick*, pp. 52, 53.

18. Susi Bloch, “An Interview with Louise Bourgeois,” *Art Journal* 35, no. 4 (Summer 1976): p. 372.

French exile during World War II: “I was missing certain people that I had left behind. It was a tangible way of re-creating a missed past. The figures were presences that needed the room, the six sides of the cube. ... It was the reconstruction of the past.”¹⁹ At the time one critic noted that Bourgeois’s figures “intended to convey through their severity of treatment the tragedy of isolation.”²⁰ But Bourgeois was also creating a “social space,” one she hoped the spectator would enter into and share with the work.

All three of these sculptors, born in or soon after the first decade of the twentieth century, lived through the war as adults and produced figures that could or would stand up on their own terms, but always in relation to their environment and a particular climate of feeling. However, this shared generational experience was not definitive in terms of the course of their careers—their work went in strikingly divergent directions—nor was the relevance of their independently arrived at decisions to relinquish their figures’ self-containment for a direct encounter with the ground delimited to a brief moment in the history of sculpture. Critics have described the work of artists of subsequent generations, even if unwittingly, as sharing this same *Kunstwollen*, even if their work is properly abstract. For example, in his first published essay on Antony Caro, the critic Michael Fried wrote:

This additional dimension of physical existence is vitally important—not because it allows sculpture to continue to suggest recognizable images, or gives it a larger realm of merely formal possibilities—but because the three-dimensionality of sculpture corresponds to the phenomenological framework in which we exist, move, perceive, experience, and communicate with others. The corporeality of sculpture, even at its most abstract, and our own corporeality are the same.²¹

There have been numerous exhibitions addressing the impact of World War II on artistic imagery that lean on Herbert Read’s “geometry of fear” as an iconographic or stylistic category but significantly expand the range of artists they include. Some of them even incorporate Read’s phrase in their titles. But the biggest tell of this diminished sense of what was at stake both for Read and for many others circa 1952 was the nature of the encounter between the work and the world or at least the gallery space in these exhibitions. Installation shots of *Soldier, Spectre, Shaman: The Figure and the Second World War*, a 2016 exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art reveal that Chadwick’s *Inner Eye*, Giacometti’s *Standing Women* (1948), and Bourgeois’s *Sleeping Figure* (1950), all in the museum’s collection, were similarly raised off the ground on simple geometric white platforms. Such a decision distances them from their original installation configuration and protects them from damage, but more drastically, it lifts them out of the flow of space and time—both their own and ours. They are no longer “the new cages of our future sorrows,” let alone the sorrows of the past.

19. Ibid., p. 373.

20. M.S., “Telegraphic Constructions,” *Art Digest* 24, no. 2 (October 15, 1949): p. 22.

21. Michael Fried, “Anthony Caro,” *Anthony Caro: Sculpture 1960–1963* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1963); reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 274.