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Sculptural Substance - An Interview with Hester Reeve

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## **Sculptural Substance**

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National Arts Education Archive (NAEA)

sculptural thinking

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art and living

## **Abstract**

*This interview took place at the National Arts Education Archive (NAEA) in November 2014. Whilst there is a necessary focus on Hester Reeve's most recent project YMEDACA – a re-mapping of Yorkshire Sculpture Park through the features of Plato's 'Academos' – the dialogue also moves its way through the archive's important role in the process and formation of the project. We were keen to hold our discussion inside the archive itself; to allow the space to hold us while we negotiated the terrain of sculptural thinking. This was our first meeting and what follows is a partial transcription of our three hour discussion. We would like our exchange to honour the 30 year anniversary of the NAEA.*

**Rowan Bailey [RB]: Could you briefly describe your involvement with the National Arts Education Archive (NAEA) at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) and your motivations for working with the archive as a practitioner?**

Hester Reeve [HR]: I came here as an artist-scholar and I needed to read. I don't get a lot of time to read deeply as a university lecturer, which is all grist to the research I wanted to carry out into the history of British art school education. YMEDACA is very site-specific to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, including the now abandoned Bretton Hall Art College which surrounds the archive building. So the NAEA was perfectly positioned in many ways to inform the project. I had this strange dialectic whilst here, of, on the one hand, feeling unconfident. Not about the project. I was confronted by lots of material by artists and educationalists, striking positions and arguments, tacitly assuming their place in the scheme of things. I just never feel like that. I avidly read all this good stuff and yet the more I research, the more I feel out of place. Anything that seems to have been institutionalized seems to disempower me. I feel that when you make art – reading and risking things in the world – you are receptive to transformation and through the project I came to realize that a fundamental faculty linked to that is the faculty of being undone. This is a signpost to Irit Rogoff's encouraging statement that '[a] theorist is one who has been undone by theory' (Rogoff, 2006: 97). So I came to terms with that here. Also the building itself is a very special kind of environment to work in. There was something so coherent and homely about this place. I felt I could carve here, I felt I was carved and I felt that certain carvings could happen in this space.

**RB: You say carving, as opposed to modelling, shaping or forming for example. Is this trope specific to your archive experience?**

HR: Yes, it seems to be. I've spoken before of humans as 'sculptural substance' in relationship to their thinking capacity but never used the carving reference before. There is something very process directed and linked to human energy about the term. Although I was invited into Yorkshire Sculpture Park as a live artist who works via the body, I saw YMEDACA first and foremost as a conceptual sculpture remapped over the entire facility. I guess that's how sculpting terminology found its way into the operation.

**RB: So, what did you uncover in your reading at the archive?**

HR: The archive became a repository for certain guardians of the project. The biggest discovery was the Philip Rawson book collection in the vaults – one man's artist's quest for knowledge which ran west to east and north to south. Those shelves transmitted a sense of Eros and learning just by scanning the book spines. As I met him through the research it became clear that he was a confident thinker. But, I also sensed the similar undoing that he, as an artist thinker, felt. I picked it up most in the many note books, all have only a few pages filled, as if he were unable to find the right place to carry out his thinking. I like that – it's not just the thinking that counts but the type of place one must open up in order to let thoughts find their form. One of his selected books, *A Philosophy of Form* by Edward Ingram Watkin (1935), was covered in hand-written marginalia notes cross-examining the author. That was such an intimate and informative encounter with him. There was an erratic note about how artists account for their art that sticks with me:

'...then so and so happened...'

'...this came after that...'

'...Why not "I did" i.e. *responsibility*...'

This seemed to be a Platonic stance, insistent on the virtue of doing and a focus on the 'subject that can' as integral to art process. I was totally fed by what he was thinking. Rawson was the first guardian of YMEDACA that I came across in the archive.

**RB: Who else did you meet?**

HR: Alec Clegg, obviously, as the founder of Bretton Hall Art College. His approach to the education of young humans – reflected in his turn of phrase 'mind stocking or fire kindling?' (1966) – struck me as increasingly relevant. Herbert Read became really important. I already knew of him, but hadn't expected to find a contemporary value in his writing. I researched through his boxes of notes more out of a sense of respect for his historical contribution. But then I came across the script for his inaugural fellowship address at Bretton Hall College (1961). It was so challenging and exciting to read. Some of the things he says against the communication model of art are revolutionary in today's context. Archives carry a time bomb where the contents eventually find their moment. That piece could have been written as a manifesto for YMEDACA. I reproduced it in the exhibition downstairs in the archive gallery on a series of protest placards. And I met Plato here too. I read an amazing book contextualizing his thought by Paul Friedlander. The book was blue like the TARDIS and I spotted it on Rawson's bookshelves. Both of those elements pleased me greatly. I read about Socrates' daemon in a section on teaching. Here the daemon is an extra logical faculty that protects education from becoming purely a rational pursuit and allowing a connection to mystery. To read this near the beginning of the project and for it be linked to Plato, the so-called great rationalist, was a great boost. It helped me to realize that I was right to call him in as a major influence, that his thinking would be more nuanced than knowledge equals power.

**RB: I've recently read about the daemon in Read's 1960 publication *The Form of Things Unknown*. In it, he refers to the daemon in relation to the complexes of modern psychology; the detached part of the psyche, independent from what he calls 'the hierarchy of consciousness' (Read, 2010: 53). This is a faculty that operates as a psychic force or energy that can pervert the course one is on. Is this analogous to the sculptural thinking driving your project forward?**

HR: Yes, in some ways but Socrates' daemon does not seem to be an obstructive or perverse force. It seems linked to Platonic notions of justice to me, as in the idea of 'the good'. Since the 'good' is ultimately unknowable, this is to speak of an individual's capacity to seek higher moral orders and to act in accordance with their inspiration as opposed to acting out of self-interest or in line with conformist patterns. When I allude to the human as 'sculptural substance' it means 'capable of being carved' by the forces we interact with or create. It doesn't mean an ego or consciously willed self-carving but an activation on the part of the singular human substance. It is not an account of the way subjects are formed by social structures and discourses which is of course very relevant but a different aspect of how we become what we are. I am wanting to get at the capacity to be open, to being altered by what one does. So art may be looked at, not only by the art works, but by what it does to a human in the process of its undertaking.

A question that preoccupied me when I first arrived at YSP was: 'What is sculptural form for me as a live artist?' and the answer that came was not the art object or the human body but thinking itself. Then the human being becomes sculptural substance. So I wanted to somehow make this explicit through YMEDACA. How does one place philosophy or sculptural thinking in the landscape? To some degree

all these artists in the sculpture park are doing that, but somehow *that* gets obscured by all the bronze. This isn't a bad thing, but something exquisite in the whole process is obscured. So I fathomed a notion of creating a conceptual sculpture where the sculptural thinking could shine through so to speak. I had already been researching Plato's Academos, the origin of our Western university, for some time, mainly because of its focus on philosophy as a way of life. But it was the more simple connection between the Academos being in a garden and YSP's sculptures being in a country park that formed the initial fuse. So I decided 'I am going to put the biggest sculpture you can think of in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park without actually setting a brick or particle of bronze in place'. I just had to make this decision and the whole site became transformed through this thought-intention.

**RB: Can you talk me through the map of YMEDECA, which serves as a re-inscription or overlaying of your sculptural thinking through the project?**

HR: The map (see Figure 1) illustrates the conceptual trace of YMEDACA over the YSP landscape and makes references to known elements of the Academos and where possible, elements of Plato's thinking. So where the boat house stands in the centre of the standard YSP Visitor Centre map, I have instead inscribed the 'Monument to Plato' (this had been erected by his students after he died). I used Platonic solids to mark where each of the liberalational manoeuvres were to take place. There is one direct allusion to sculptural thinking itself and that's represented by the smallest detail - the tree symbol which is dotted all around. In the key, the symbol is explained as 'a good place to stand still and think'. As well as draw attention to deep thinking in relationship to the artistic enterprise, I wanted to have a reference which draws the attention away from the position of the art objects on the YSP site and places it instead onto the visitor, now construed as a potential site of

thinking and transformative experience. A similar sentiment informs the 'citizen's archway' on the map. Certain scholars agree that above the entrance to Plato's Academos were the words 'Let no one enter who doth not know geometry'. Plato felt that abstract mathematics was foundational if one was to become wise. I put the phrase onto protest placards held by human beings at the entrance to YSP.

Positioned in the contemporary context of a creative protest, I felt the anachronistic phrase became poetic with the power to address each human entering the park, addressed as a shape, part of a larger pattern and as having a capacity to be a sculptural substance. I expected this response to be tacit, in the body rather than a literal understanding by the mind.

**RB: So what was YMEDACA as an event?**

HR: It was a one-day Garden Academy at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park which was run by guardians who I had selected from local interest groups. They ran 'liberational manoeuvres' for the public to participate in. I opened the day with an address 'On the Good' at 6am. This was the title of the only public lecture that Plato had given whilst theosarch of his Academos. He wasn't well received, the lecture was philosophically complicated and the public had been expecting advice on getting rich and being happy! To stand in Plato's place, as an artist, remembering that he banned the artist from his ideal state, was an act of cheeky defiance, yet also a proclamation of a creative relationship between philosophy and art. I knew I had to do it as close to dawn as possible to avoid any expectation of a standard speech. I addressed the sculptures on the landscape, projecting my words through a megaphone across the country park. Those people who did show up for it were asked to wrap themselves in sculpture blankets. The use of the sculpture blanket throughout the project was one of those fundamental makes or breaks for me. Rather than use them to wrap up



sculptures in transit, I embroidered them with relevant quotations from Plato and put them on display as carriers of meaning. They were used in both exhibitions. At the heart of the project, was an active consideration of a human capacity to think as a sculptural substance. This was why I incorporated Plato and why I considered YMEDACA first and foremost a 'conceptual sculpture.'

**RB: Can you explain the 'liberalational manoeuvres'?**

It's a bit of a mouthful, I admit. The term 'manoeuvre' has the sense of something a little tricky, an operation carried out across a certain terrain by a group of people in order to get something or to somewhere otherwise not accessible. I left the content up to the guardians, but each was given a practice from Plato's Academos to use as an imaginative spring-board. I wasn't without my own artistic designs, but that was for the overall effect – associating clusters of human beings exchanging in open-ended meaningful discussion with celebrated sculptural forms on the YSP landscape. In YMEDACA, there were the six guardians in the archive and then the seven guardians selected from local interest groups who ran the liberalational manoeuvres. These are people who have dedicated their spare time to forming small communities around passionate knowledge in order to give meaning to their lives. They have no official status as educators, artists or philosophers, no public profile as contributing to society. But I think they've got "it!" So, giving them the floor in one of the country's leading cultural venues as well as my incorporating them into many of the drawings and photographs I created for the project was a mark of respect. Each was assigned a Platonic solid as if to link their actions to fundamental building blocks of something maybe not visible but certainly essential. I wasn't trying to suggest they are 'art' but more – through the liberalational manoeuvres – wanting to make everyone arrive at a questioning of this possibility that we have a capacity to

activate as sculptural substance and that this is simultaneously an individual and communal activity.

**RB: How did the local guardians engage with the archival material?**

HR: Helen Pheby, a curator at YSP, gave us all a remarkable talk about the history of their programming interests and which introduced the guardians to expanded notions of sculpture. That was quite pivotal, all the guardians were very engaged by that. I think being welcomed as part of YSP was more inspiring for them than Plato's ideas. I invited them as a group to the *Temple of the Muses* exhibition that documented my concerns in the NAEA gallery. The guardian of Hand Tool Users United sat through the whole of the Alec Clegg video, he thought it was absolutely brilliant and really important to widely publicise. The Rawson book collection really got the Geometry guardian's attention, he'd read half of the books! Actually, I was bowled over by how much the local guardians knew, they were all like walking-talking archives of their own personally motivated research. For them, YMEDACA was all about being in the YSP grounds and meeting and talking to people in that context. Most of the positive feedback I got for the day was from people saying they had had inspirational chats with certain members of each group. The fact that individual visitors felt "addressed" was a key thing for me. Of course, my own art works address the people who encounter them, but in the case of YMEDACA I did not want a material art object being the agent or the place where the creativity of the encounter with art got fixed. In a nutshell, the map given out on the day and the liberalational manoeuvres were asking people to actively think through the experience, so as to think, to encounter themselves in thought. I think this is one of the profound things an art experience can do. I'm not saying it's easy to achieve or that YMEDACA managed it. Some philosophy can do this too, like Heidegger for

example, who allows you to rethink yourself through his writing. It's less that he tells you what to think and more that through his written thoughts he addresses-activates your capacity to be an actively thinking substance. It's not entirely comfortable, but then I, suppose, how else can we expect such a thing to be?

**RB: There are a couple philosophical registers here that I think are important. One is about ideals in their optimistic and problematic senses – the eternal problematic of the universal and particular. The other is the use of *Bildung* in Hegel – the human who has to go on a thinking journey to transform themselves because that's the fundamental philosophy of living, or journey of speculative reason. But then to think with Kant, it's not so much about the construction of the thinking self in isolation (i.e., the incorporation of the universality, particularity and singularity in a dialectical manoeuvre for the absolute). For him, we have to engage in a community of exchange and that requires commitment from every member; a space of agreement and disagreement. So, 'thinking out loud' and 'loudly' is so important. Without this sharing of thinking, we are all empty statues – internalised ego ideals. *Sensus communis* can never be an isolated agency.**

HR: Yes and let me add a Plato quotation, if taken a little out of context, into the mix: 'You cannot conceive the many without the one' (*Parmenides*, 166b). So, I totally agree but I suppose I am wanting to think this from the singularity of the human being instead of from today's actor-network preoccupation. Of course actor-network theory has been really liberating in many ways but it's as if we glide along with focusing on the relationships between things at the expense of the 'actor's' relationship to itself as being in existence. I want to keep everything in the picture so to speak, including autonomy. I really like what Brian Holmes says about this – that

autonomy means giving yourself your own law but since we only exist through the language of the other, such an action is always going to be a collective adventure' (Holmes, 2004: 548). There's that great image evoked at the end of Foucault's *The Order of Things* where he says the human subject is tantamount to a carved outline in the sand which the waves of anti-classicism might do well to gently erode away. I understand that it was necessary to let the intellectual sea erode the power structures that formed such a figuration of 'man', but that doesn't get rid of the singular substance, I am still here with the book in my hands, it's still my life in the balance. So it's not that I take argument with any of the contemporary approaches to constructivist reality. My concern is that there seems to be a long standing misrecognition of the importance of the singular substance and we might be eroding any ability to consider it. As soon as you talk about singular substance, it gets misrecognised as a nostalgia for the classical or modernist project. In a similar vein we risk missing the contemporary relevance of certain aspects of Plato or Herbert Read, for example. It's already a really hard thing to put into words.

**RB: Can we discuss this in relation to the potential misrecognitions of sculptural thinking?**

HR: Well, that's huge but an extremely important question. Perhaps it's healthy to constantly be brought into check by Heidegger's call that, to paraphrase, 'perhaps most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking times is that we're still not thinking' (Heidegger, 1968: 14). The question does not expect a destination, or answer, but is meant to affect you in your thinkerliness, and that in turn affects desires, actions, connections, capacities etc. Sculptural thinking is not the singular substance thinking, it is the larger process of immanent change (carving) that emerges via inter-subjective dialogue. But only if some sort of capacity is awake or prepared to be

undone by it. And as I think with you here, I don't think it's ultimately about "knowing" we are doing it. Sculptural thinking is not aiming at a model or any recognition since it is really a negotiation with life, both one's own life and then with the inhuman 'other' of life. Being, sculptural thinking, is ultimately not an academic matter but it is a risk of thinking so to speak.

**RB: So this is a daring to think singular substance?**

HR: I suppose it is. I can only speak for myself, but I don't feel like I have much choice in the matter, and that's because of the type of arts practice I've been engaging with and affected by. So it's really not just an abstract operation. This type of thinking really needs art making/art-questioning, and I would say that the art work has to be seen as a by-product of this process, but no less a significant thing-in-itself for that. This is my way of staying in the remit of such a task. A footing in a slippery and difficult world. YMEDACA was using an artwork to stake a remapping which could address the singular substance in each person as a capacity.

**RB: Material manifestations of the mind are brought into the world to be shared. Thoughts have to be out there. The mind isn't an archival repository; it is gifted.**

HR: Yes, I am interested in the way that art has to risk its manifestation through matter, unlike philosophy, to let this thinking be in the world. Through that, it forms a community. A book can do that too I suppose, but its network and framework for reception are already existing and unquestioned. The type of art work I am trying to make and interested in is as invested in sculpting the framework somehow. Of course, which ever intention you have, you cannot be sure that is what you are really doing. I am well aware that I am on some sort of fantasy trip with all this. But as I

mentioned earlier in relationship to Rawson's notebook struggle, my 'marginalia' are not aiming at a correct 'model' but are all in service of creating the right sort of space for new thoughts or things to occur, the outpouring of the gift if we return, hesitantly, to Heidegger again. But the communication model of art that seems to have perversely insinuated itself into every reach of contemporary art forecloses that aspect of thought's ability to be a gift, to be transformed by matter.

**RB: So how might we approach art knowing this...?**

HR: It is about the making of the thinking. To be addressed yourself because that address changes who you are but then affects how you put that matter out there. You are responsive to the needs of the ideas but this being addressed is also carried through the process of making. It's not just an intellectual understanding. The point of the work is not to become an intellectual entity in its own right. It's about manifestation. Going back to Read's Fellowship address, he states that it isn't about forcing a unique expression into commonality. For him, the artist forces into unique perspectives what is already shared in common. For me, that commonality is being singular substance. Singular substance is not the art, art is sculpting thought in the world via the world in recognition of that (see Figure 2).

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Hester Reeve is an artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. She works with the mediums of live action, drawing, writing (in particular in relationship to philosophy), installation, performance for camera and Bohmian Dialogue. Recent public showings of her work include Arnolfini, Tate Britain (as The Emily Davison Lodge with Olivia Plender), Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Transquatier, Vienna.