The Hatred of the Object

In this 30 minute talk I want to put forward and unravel a disparate collection of thoughts based on what I diagnose as "the hatred of the object".

I believe that the studio, and in particular the sculptor's studio, is somehow at the centre of this hatred, and to some extent the victim of it. My argument focuses on two kinds of traditional studios: the enlightened studio and the grim studio.

In the enlightened studio curiosity is fundamental to how ideas are explored, manifested through the physical manipulation of material, privately and intimately, where there is a slow evolution of processes, intellectual and practical, involving experimental approaches to concepts, techniques, forms and aesthetics. My experience of such a studio is that the artist is at the centre of this self-created world, independently selecting and discarding, and in control of the development and eventual showing to the outside world of their individual expression.

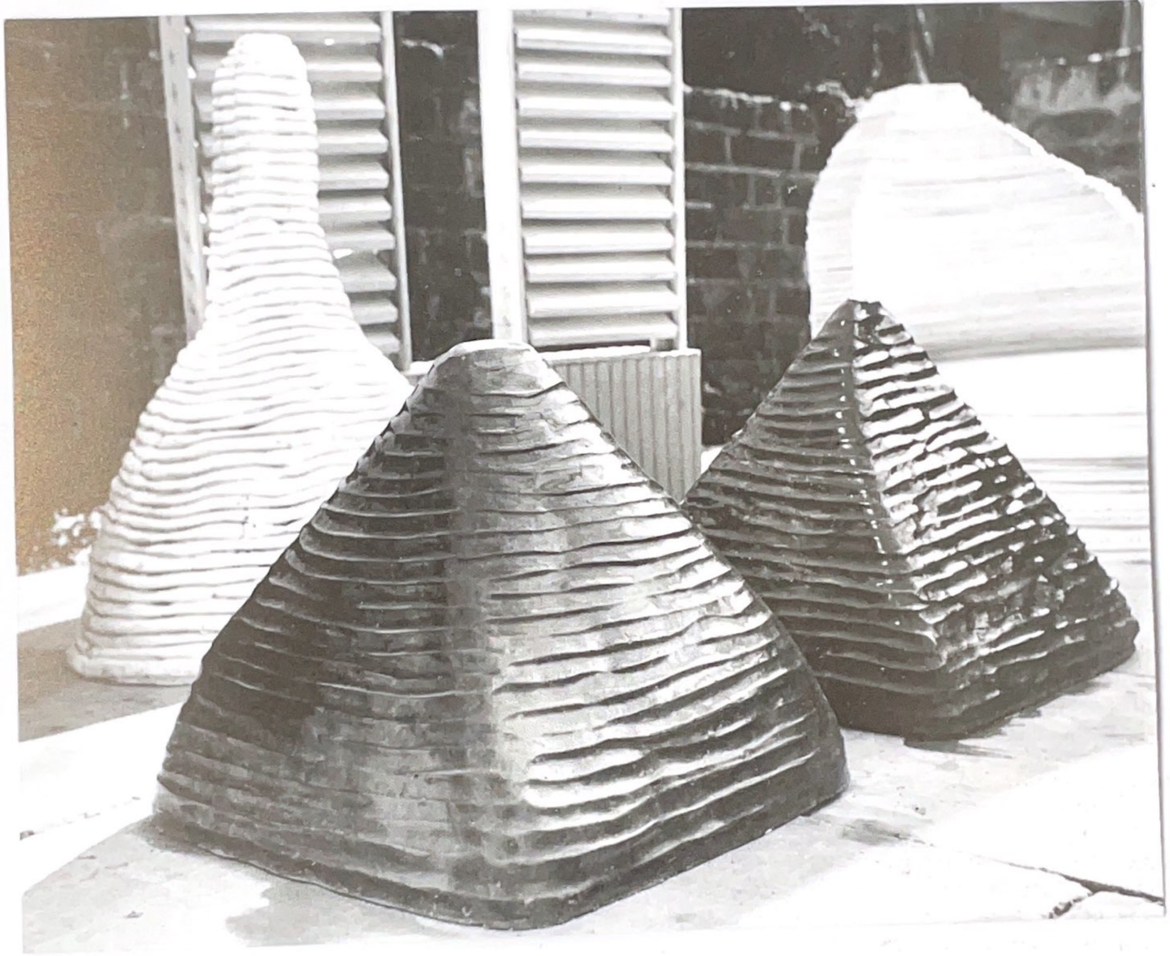
However, parallel to this ideal vision of the enlightened studio there is also a darker, predatory vision of the traditional studio, one which, I believe, stands in direct contention to the experimental needs and economic restrictions experienced by today's artists, and this is the grim studio.

My understanding of this kind of studio is based directly on my art school experience at Chelsea School of Art, and then the Slade, in the early 1960s. I was given a traditional education in sculpture where I was taught a repertory of sculpture techniques. It was accepted that these techniques provided the young sculptor with all they needed to know in order physically to produce sculpture. And from my own experience, they constituted a somewhat grim ritual by which the student was initiated into the highly specialised and selective, even elitist, world of sculpture.

Therefore my education involved clay modelling, casting, plaster modelling, armature construction and assemblage with metal and wood. The emphasis was on self-sufficiency through hard work, preferably involving a great input of labour. Tutorials and seminars did not exist as such, but at the end of a long, and compulsorily hard day's work everyone met up in the pub where there was avid talk but little discussion about the day's events in the studio. Existentialism was the religion and hard drinking and hard working were the rules of the game.

However much I may have departed from this training, it is in fact deeply ingrained within me. The root of all my working methods seems to be somehow related to my early experiences with clay, which was very much my preferred

Untitled
Pigmented resin and fibreglass
75 x 75 x 75 cm each
1968



Bowl
Perspex, resin, fibreglass,
spray paint
Diameter 130 x 100 cm high
Each disc: diameter 40 x 20 cm high
1968

medium because it involved the least amount of technical equipment and kept processes close to the hand.

But more than anything else, this training provided me with the independence to make simply and expediently, enabling me to do so almost anywhere with the minimum of financial and physical resources. The emphasis which such an education placed on self-sufficiency had, despite its exclusivity and its all male domination, given me the confidence to set up my own studio in the simplest way and to begin to make work cheaply and conveniently. The privacy and the autonomy quickly lent itself to experimentation and to a drastic distancing from the more restrictive aspects of such an education.

I am grateful for my sculpture training because of the independence it instilled in me and, for better or worse, a certain kind of confidence in the most basic of making. Perhaps more important than anything else has been an appreciation of time: quite simply the time it takes to make something oneself. Sculpture can reflect this element of time, either in how one must move around it, that is, literally walk around it – a kind of stalking – or in what species of physical and material object it is, or in the processes involved in making it what it is and the time it has taken to achieve this. It is the fusion of these characteristics which makes sculpture, whether it be object or installation, project its own particular, inherent sense of time.

I am aware that what I experienced educationally was representative of the traditional studio in its grim and restrictive guise. As such, this kind of studio comes down to us loaded with cumbersome luggage – historical, aesthetic and moral. The grim studio like this is full of crap which necessarily and understandably has been purged by generation after generation. Especially now that increasing numbers of young artists are rejecting the financial burden of the studio and relying more and more on having their work produced via the desk and telephone, to be organised, managed and manufactured elsewhere. Reciprocally, ideas are submitted in proposal form or as scale models, thus short-circuiting the necessity for the experimental, time-consuming, trial-and-error processes that are so much part of studio culture. Instead, the emphasis is on a need for designed objects, the making of which can be delegated elsewhere – anywhere, that is, other than the studio.

In comparison to this way of producing a work, the studio in either its enlightened or its grim guise can seem to force a moral attitude to work – passing on an inheritance of a kind of Protestant work ethic in which is entrenched a strong sense of struggle out of which good must surely come. Attached to this disagreeable identity there can also be a resistance to and suspicion of experimentation which is understood as breaking rank with sculpture and which should therefore be expelled from the discipline of sculpture into a kind of purgatory. Such attitudes are backward looking, suggesting a grumbling, discontented relationship with the present and a denial of the fantastic, if difficult, choice of materials and techniques available to the sculptor, all potential for plundering in whatever way possible. To deny this potential further enforces the studio as the grim abode of the punitive, the repressive and the backward looking.

For me, the studio is deeply important: emotionally and practically. But it speaks trouble, and although I would not, could not, have it any other way, it can seem to be a shaming thing to be lumbered with, as if the party is going on elsewhere. The grim, traditional studio, rigidly rooted in the past, can now not only be expensive, but boring as well. Rent and amenities, along with the specialist traditional materials such as stone and bronze, cost a fortune, and the desire to limit mistakes in order to keep costs down demands a prescriptive attitude to working methods – paradoxically, not unlike those of artists who have rejected the studio.

Of course, there are many superb artists who use the studio, or not, in whatever way they like, enlightened or otherwise, and their work speaks for itself, being of imagination, originality and relevance.

But my proposition of the hatred of the object hinges on the perception of the traditional studio as an inheritance loaded with morality and stringent work ethics enforced for no good reason. Furthermore, where such a domain is thought to abide by rigid hierarchies of good and bad, right and wrong, these judgements seem to be passed according to the extent to which the artist can deposit evidence of struggle on their sculpture-object through the act of making.

Craft, and the hands-on hands-off debate emerges. Again, the spectre of the grim studio rises, claiming the high moral ground with its demand for the hand made, with the added insistence that maximum evidence of the mark of the artist be left on the work. Thus the essential need for the studio is justified – as the place where the object is processed through private and personal rituals of making. In this blinkered environment Duchamp has never existed, nor any attempt to acknowledge the wealth of iconoclastic gestures erupting out of twentieth century art which have kept the processes of sculpture awake and contentious.

Understandably a revulsion can set in. The object – the hot object – that is, the object loaded with the all-too-visible signs of the act of making, can repulse through its somewhat desperate need to attract. It becomes an object of emotional blackmail, persuading us to feel for it because it shows us so clearly the marks, wounds perhaps, caused through its

struggle to come into existence. For those who are questioning the necessity for such agonised creativity, these objects arouse suspicion and eventually a kind of loathing because they rely on predictable mannerisms with which to generate a reaction.

Similarly, our culture abounds with objects demanding to be loved – but produced in a totally different way – that is, industrially designed and manufactured products. These are cool objects, hands-off maybe, but objects which impose a similar emotional blackmail to their opposite numbers, demanding to be bought, to be owned. These product-objects which saturate our daily lives infiltrate our emotions, often seductively and pleasurably. But on closer analysis they can also generate loathing as their true destructive or pollutant identities are revealed behind their fabulous disguise of, for example, rounded forms and glossy surface. The car is, of course, the supreme example.

Therefore my notion of the hatred of the object is born out of what I perceive to be a conflict between opposing species of sculptures: one hot, and the other cold. However, their supposed differences can, paradoxically, produce similar responses: both demand to be loved and needed, albeit in different ways, and yet both are infinitely capable of invoking the opposite response to the one intended – instead of love, hatred.

Not surprisingly, finding a way out of this conflict can not only be an attractive proposition but a necessary one. So abandon the studio with its dogged, backward looking, moral messages and abandon the product with its corrupt disguises and its economic dependency. Where else to move other than to take on production through delegation? Without a studio there can be liberation to explore and exploit diverse media through the specialist agencies, suppliers and manufacturers. The technology does not necessarily have to be learnt or directly experienced in order for the idea to be manifested: the work can be produced through delegation via desk and telephone or fax machine.

This position makes the technologies of computer and industrial design production available for artists to plunder without the burden of having to own or even learn how to use them.

There can be no need to engage physically or in tactile ways with the stuff with which the proposed work is to be made: it can all happen elsewhere. Again, anywhere but a studio. Such a distance from the manipulative production of the object seems to me to generate a genre of object-sculpture that is more pictorial than sculptural. Nothing exemplifies this more than the on-going use of the vitrine – a compelling, often mesmeric object in its own right – and when deployed as a device for framing and containing, one that becomes an art object with infinite possibilities, all dependent on the choice of thing to be placed within.

The vitrine is, at its most banal, not only a substitute for the plinth but the symbolic equivalent of the screen – that of television, film, computer, video, x-ray, radar and a host of others. It so conveniently and, funds permitting, so beautifully offers the real as the anti-real within a space that is pretence.

For me, the vitrine tidies up, cleans up. It makes safe the horrific so that objects of danger, disease, terror and violence can be shown as easily as objects of desire and seduction. Anything and everything can be tamed into submission once framed within and behind the glass defence.

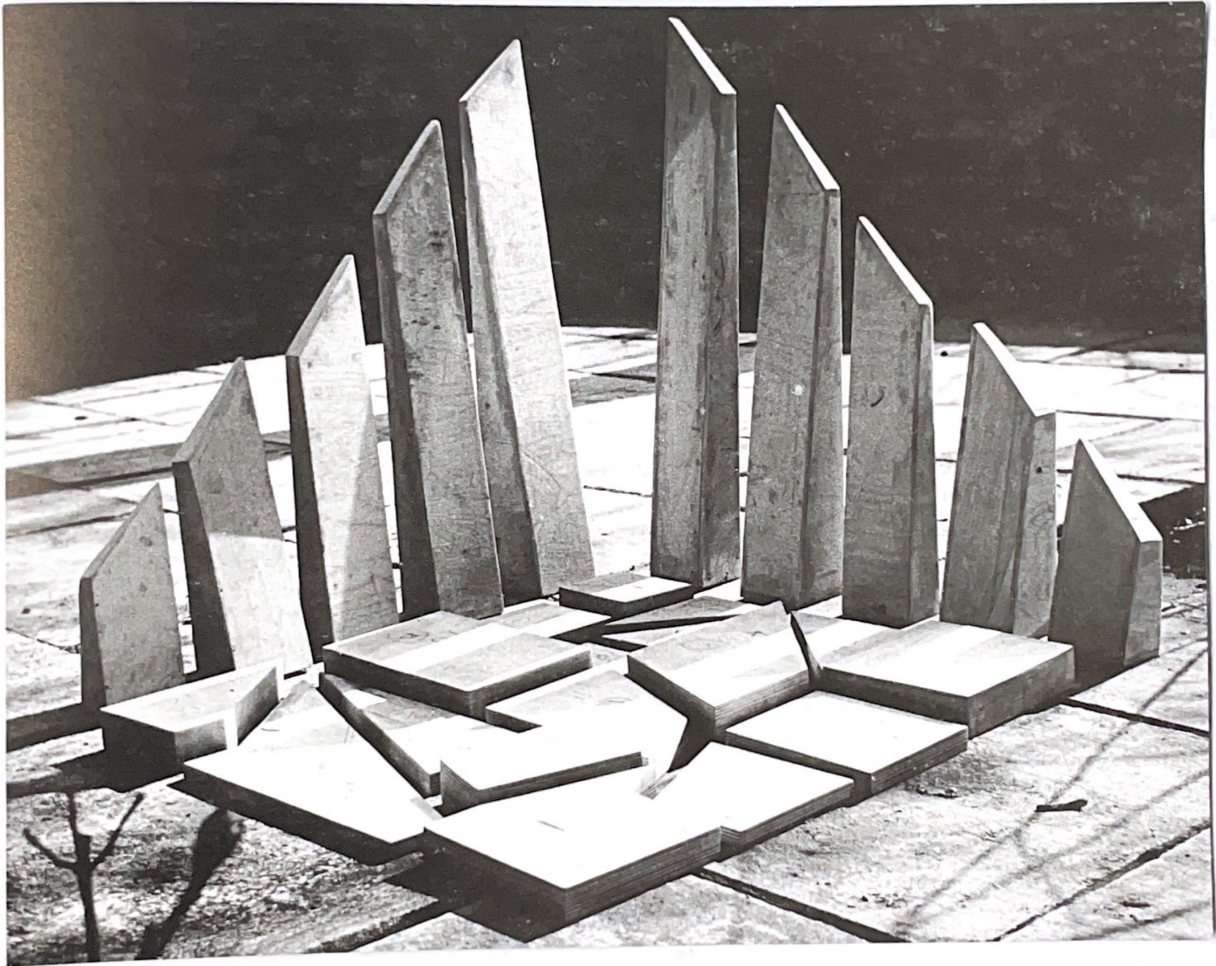
It must be the vitrine's ability to accommodate anything and everything that makes it so compelling but, at the same time, it does more than this. It removes both viewer and artist from the work, it tames and sanitises and although it makes possible an astonishing choice of content, materially and technically, to be acted upon, in the end my response has been that, as a device, it deadens opinion, rendering the status of the object as a wild, messy, unpredictable, ugly, difficult thing to being cleansed, tamed, glamourised, polite. A shift from raw experience to managed spectacle.

Therefore the confrontation with raw experience and the unpredictable must be through the uncontained object, the wild object – one which can be approached close up, which can be walked around, experienced in real time. I believe this kind of object to be inherently difficult and more likely to be experienced as so, even as uncomfortable and confusing. And even more problematic, such an exposed object might fail to arouse any response whatever, because when so blatantly displayed it is not glamorous, and must stand up to close, uncompromising scrutiny through which all is revealed. This is very different from the vitrined object which can cunningly both mask and hide parts of itself, if so wished. The naked object, raw and exposed, does at least offer itself for opinion, showing that a risk has been taken even if it has perhaps failed.

Not so with the vitrined object. It can never fail. The object is repressed and once-removed. It becomes pictorial, framed and glazed – quite literally glossed by the shiny reflective glass. It seems almost more akin to photography than to the confrontationally presented object. It therefore becomes a made-easy experience.

Consequently, the vitrine, for me, induces disappointment: like the wild animal in captivity, the object is emasculated, the potential of its physicality reduced to a mere virtual identity. Vitrines are an invitation to remove the potency of an object,

Landscape
Plywood, car body filler
100 x 100 x 100 cm
1968



Head
Resin, fibreglass, plywood, filler
100 x 120 x 120 cm
1968

its repulsiveness, its seductiveness, its beauty or its ugliness – all hugely powerful characteristics in their emotional effect. These characteristics potentially invoke hatred because they perhaps remind us of the uncontrollable sides of ourselves and could be too strong to deal with. Therefore the vehicle of these emotions, that is the object, must, quite literally, be removed, put away, to be scrutinised from a safe distance and to function only as a reminder of possible threat.

The vitrine can reduce the material physicality of objects to a pictorial status. But the contention of the sculpture-object is to oppose the pictorial and to offer experience in real time – the time required by the object and its space to be walked around, through, across, using memory – to remember this part whilst you are experiencing that part – so that the work unfolds through the senses and is the antithesis of the pictorial.

The sensory aspect of sculpture is more than just the state of appearance. It is a whole relationship with the process of making and can engage with the non-visual as much as with the visual. The vitrine exemplifies how an object can be produced through delegation where there is no need for a studio: the work can be produced, through design and specification, by specialists. The contents, likewise, can be brought together through the appropriate research and if necessary, sponsorship. Without doubt there is considerable work involved, but little that demands the physical and tactile involvement with materials where processes of trial and error inevitably create sensory and sensual relationships with the emerging object. Because of this the vitrine triumphs. It is as free of historical luggage as a studio-produced object might be. In this way the vitrine, yet again, proves itself to be an enviable device.

Those artists who desire to make sculpture have chosen an increasingly difficult art form. When there are already so many objects in the world and so much manufactured stuff in production the sculptor is challenged from every side. Because of this, I consider sculpture to be a minority art form – preferably highly elitist – and in constant need of critical reassessment.

The burgeoning number of students taken on to sculpture courses indicates that only a few will pursue sculpture as rooted in the traditions I have described, both in how they will use a studio, an enlightened one I hope, and how they relate to making processes. For me, this is a healthy state of affairs.

Traditionally sculpture courses have offered only a few places, for practical reasons as well as those of demand. Since the idea of what sculpture can be has diversified, so have the numbers wishing to enter sculpture courses increased. The traditional object-maker, using hands-on processes and workshop techniques, is surrounded by performers, filmmakers and object-designers in an environment where proposals for sponsorship abound and the act of physical making is kept to a minimum. A rich symbiosis is generated in which the independence and close involvement of the maker is in contention with their opposite number – the delegator – and a tough co-existence is established between the two.

The delegated object, also the designed object, produced by specially chosen manufacturers or craft-persons, combined with the significant role of the vitrine, signal the importance of the written proposal in seeking out and achieving the artist's intended objective. This represents the reality of being an artist today, whereas crass economics can determine so much. The vitrine could be understood as being economically accommodating. Once made, admittedly probably at some considerable expense, anything can be placed within it, probably at less expense. If there are no studio overheads, (the vitrine would be factory produced), there would be little or no experimental making, no trial-and-error processes, therefore no outlay on materials, etc.. The written proposal would determine how and by whom and with what this object would be realised, and it could be no more expensive, probably less so, than the cost of maintaining a studio and all that goes on in it.

Without doubt, the vitrine is endlessly fascinating, but now familiarity is beginning to breed contempt – it has become an over-used and therefore, abused device. Aesthetically stunning, capable of beautifying anything from shit to sheep, and portraying the already desirable as unreachable and untouchable, the vitrine seems to have captured the imagination of artists and viewers alike, perfectly symbolising how we are now forced to experience aspects of contemporary life. Its glory is becoming muted, its message repetitive.

The vitrine clearly demonstrates the endless possibilities of making without making, signalling how the artist can be emotive whilst keeping their distance from their work, delegating its production and thus rendering the studio unnecessary.

Therefore the hatred of the object is manifested through the mistrust and abdication of the studio. The demise of the studio equates with a shunning of, and a hatred of the object.

In researching the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois I came face to face with my contention of the hatred of the object. Her sculpture has received unanimous appreciation in recent years, even more so since the *Rites of Passage* exhibition at the Tate, and the Paris retrospective, both showing the rich extremes typical of her work, which refutes type-casting and

stylistic formulae. Her sculpture emerges without self-conscious strategies for making and unashamedly identifies itself with its roots in traditional sculpture processes of carving, construction, modelling and casting, so prevalent in the middle years, the 1930s and 40s, of the twentieth century in Europe when Bourgeois was just beginning as an artist. These processes are exemplified by the brooding, cumbersome sculpture of artists such as Etienne-Martin, Stahly, Zadkine and, to some extent Arp, who were her influential contemporaries. Because of its traditional roots, the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois is the antithesis of the hatred of the object, and from this point of view I am perplexed as to its popularity when it stands for everything which has been so drastically repudiated in the way I have described.

Perhaps it is because her work transcends the grim spectre of traditional practice, and is unpredictable and diverse enough to refute classification. Also, her art absorbs contemporary debate. There seem to be shrewd calculations made as to where she positions herself in the work: sometimes every trace of making is left evident and exposed on the surface of the object and at other times the surface is stretched and cleansed of all such marks, indicating an impeccable craft process. Similarly, appropriated objects, *objets trouves* and designed factory-produced objects co-exist in harmonious abandon with the overtly handmade.

This work stands unprotected, open and exposed, offering itself for the closest of scrutiny, strategically involving the viewer in very specific acts of looking, and all the while there is the sense of the work looking back, at times insolently answering back the viewer's gaze. This is sculpture which operates in total antithesis to the vitrine: the objects celebrate, reveal and confront the desirable and the repulsive, the beautiful and the ugly, the seductive and the repellent. The sculpture, whether it is autonomous object or installation, contrives to meet the viewer with the demand to be investigated, to be walked around, pried into, stalked, looked under and over. These are object experiences that jolt us into seeking out comparisons, to find equivalents, emotional and physical which stir our imagination to question what we are looking at and what it is saying to us. There are no quick answers and no conclusions, just stark, undiluted confrontation with raw emotions.

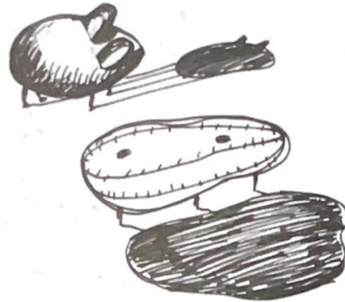
Perhaps in the end the hatred of the object has had its day and maybe the tremendous acclaim awarded to Louise Bourgeois' sculpture is part of the hated object's demise. Perhaps the *tabula rasa* of traditional sculpture processes has been fulfilled and these processes can now be reclaimed and reinvested and their potential can be rediscovered. I would certainly welcome this as I do consider that these ancient processes are not necessarily an end in themselves but a means to an end. They provide independence and an appropriate, expedient and human antidote to the worlds of the virtual and the removed, the sanitised and the hands-off.

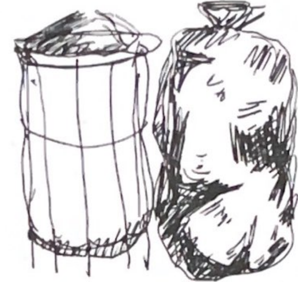
The hatred of the object is a fiction I have invented in order to understand and contextualise some of the issues emerging from contemporary art. Within my arguments are, possibly, some truths, but there is also a good deal of conjecture, some of it all too familiar. However, for me, the idea of the hatred of the object is important because it enables me to examine and make clear to myself the importance of the studio and its harbouring of those private acts of making which, however removed they may be, are in my case deeply rooted in the traditional sculpture processes of modelling, casting and construction. And I value them all the more because they are vulnerable to misinterpretation and abuse, and therefore easily dismissed and overlooked. Their co-existence with the productions of the delegators and the non-studio makers forces debate and a continuing critical exchange, ensuring that all acts of making are infinitely possible and necessary for a rich and challenging diversity of sculpture to be produced.

This text is taken from a paper presented at the *Sculpture, Method, Research* conference hosted by Central St Martins in September, 1995.
It was also published in *Matrix 3D*, Stuart Evans, Joanna Greenhill and Ingrid Svenson, eds., London: The Lethaby Press, 1997.

Untitled
Painted timber, canvas
210 x 210 x 240 cm
2001

Dawn till Dusk
Carpet felt, painted wood, painted hardboard, paint stripper, bitumen, canvas, cardboard, casters, brown paper, parcel tape, casters
Overall dimension of work/ space: 600 x 540 x 540 cm
1999
Royal Western Academy, Bristol, *Sculpture Triennial* curated by John Maine and Alison Wilding





GALLERY