

**STUDY: POSE PIECE FOR THREE PLINTHS WORK, BRUCE MCLEAN**



**STUDY IS THE GENERIC NAME** for a series of focused case-studies of works from the collection.

It involves a single work, displayed on its own in a gallery. The work is studied in depth, from its techniques, origin and history, to its position in the artist's practice and the contemporary debates. The study is made available, in a folder on the bench.

**AN ARTWORK IS A SYSTEM** that cannot be reduced only to an object or an index (certificate, instructions, etc.). It also includes the histories (material and conceptual), the trajectories (physical or virtual) and the narratives (past or to come) generated by the artwork: this is what this programme will research.

**TO STUDY IS TO DEVOTE TIME** and attention to a particular subject, to acquire knowledge. It can also refer to a piece of work done for practice or an experiment. It is this sense that we would like to pursue – not the transmission of knowledge or the act of contemplation, but rather an invitation to act.

**STUDY IS NOT AN ATTEMPT** to capture or seize but a methodology of encounter and the insistence on the provisionality as both form and content within the process of research. It is an exercise to respond to the infinite demand of the work. Not to bring forth any historical truth but to enter into a dialogue with the work.

**IN THIS SENSE THE STUDY IS NOT FINITE**, but demands the reader to take up multiple positions and viewpoints. More than anything, it asks the viewer to engage with the artwork by, at least, spending some time with it.



**POSE PIECE FOR THREE PLINTHS WORK** is a series of 15 black and white photographs by Scottish artist Bruce McLean (b. 1944) showing the artist reclining in various poses on three different plinths. Each photograph is 9x15 cm, one of which is signed and dated by the artist on the reverse. The works were later mounted on card. The series was acquired for the collection from Richard Saltoun Gallery in 2012 after it was exhibited as part of the group exhibition *For Charles Harrison: When Attitudes became form*, at Karsten Schubert in 2011, which adapted the seminal exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (ICA 1969)<sup>1</sup> and included conceptual artists from the UK as well as America and Europe from the 1960s.

**THE WORK WAS ORIGINALLY MADE AS A PERFORMANCE** for McLean's solo exhibition at Situation, London in 1971<sup>2</sup>.

**SANDRA PUSTERHOFER:** The work in the collection is a documentation of a performance at Situation in 1971. Can you tell us about the context of this work?

**BRUCE MCLEAN:** Situation asked me if I wanted to do a show in their space. This was a time when, to my mind, conceptual art was already finished and I had just started work with a pose band<sup>3</sup>. There was a show on in Leverkusen called *Concepts no Objects*. So I made this show called *Objects no Concepts*. It was on for about three weeks, I changed it every day or every other day. For the first part I got about forty plinths from the Tate storage: on top of the plinths I put photographs from magazines of desirable objects like electric tooth brushes and so on, very expensive consumer objects at the time. The next day they took out all the plinths. There were about three left against the wall so I just got onto the plinths and thought to make a work for the plinths. Someone has taken photographs of me doing this.

It was a really good space but again it seemed a little after the event in 1971. I think conceptual art ended in 1968 really. But at the same time it was a very interesting space, they didn't tell you you couldn't do this or that. They were enabling people to do things when nobody else was, which is quite an interesting concept I thought.

**BETWEEN 1963 AND 1966**, McLean studied sculpture at St. Martin's school of art, which at the time was led by such 'New Generation' artists as Anthony Caro, William Tucker and Philip King promoting

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1 *When Attitudes Become Form* was a seminal exhibition curated by Harold Szeeman and organized as a survey of conceptual art. It opened at Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 and toured to the ICA in London in the same year, organized by Charles Harrison in a reduced form.

2 Situation was an art space in Horseshoe Yard London run by Roberts Self. It was one of the places that showed conceptual art in London at the time, alongside other spaces such as Nigel Greenwood, Lisson and Jack Wendler Gallery for example.

3 In 1971 McLean established 'Nice Style - The world's first pose band', while teaching at Maidstone College of Art together with Paul Richards, Gary Chitty and Robert Fletcher. He continued to use humour to confront the pretensions of the art world and wider social issues such as the nature of bureaucracy and institutional politics, social hypocrisy, posing and mimicry.

High Modernism<sup>4</sup>. McLean however, quickly reacted to the confining principles of the formalistic approach to sculpture of his teachers, questioning the didactic prescription of the non-referential object. Looking at sculpture only in terms of its formal qualities such as size, material, colour did not hold any possibility to generate new sculpture or ways to look at sculpture for McLean and other students of St.Martin's in the late '60s such as Gilbert and George, Richard Long or Hamish Fullton. The new 'conceptual' sculptures were now thought of in terms of actions, the ephemeral, situations, propositions, process, and their practice might include transient structures, everyday materials and photography. A conceptual attitude was important and the material and formal qualities were strictly secondary. Sculpture was seen less in terms of a particular object and more in terms of a proposal or proposition for a sculpture, or of what sculpture could become.

**MCLEAN CONSIDERS HIMSELF A SCULPTOR**, irrespective of whether any particular work of his is a performance, photograph, painting or object. It is the action of looking at or engaging with an idea or object that is itself sculptural, a practice, even though the resulting work may only exist as an imagined form. The New Generation artists were credited with the elimination of the plinth, the demolition of the pedestal and putting sculpture on the ground but it essentially remained an object for contemplation. The question persists, why stop there?

Modernists followed the Greenbergian approach to art of medium specificity<sup>5</sup>. It posited that there were inherent qualities specific to each different artistic medium. In the case of sculpture: three dimensionality. It existed for and by itself and the codified structure of the plinth (traditionally required to elevate the sculpture and designate it an artwork) had come to be seen as superfluous.

McLean and his contemporaries though, stressed the associative potential and transient nature of objects. Although his works were performative in style and form, McLean was still very much concerned with the notion of sculpture; instead of simply eschewing the plinth as mode of display, he questioned the idea of sculpture as a static and material object. He removed the sculpture from its conceptual pedestal of Modernism and instead, through his poses, he incorporated the plinth into sculpture. In some ways this can be seen as a reversal of the traditional relationship of support/artwork by letting the plinth become the deterministic factor. His body and its limits were constrained and informed by the configuration of the plinths. We see here then, a blurring of hierarchical boundaries between the display mechanism and the displayed object.

"I made a sculpture for the three plinths. So the plinths were determining the sculpture, not the sculpture being the thing, which determined the plinths. The plinths modified my behaviour rather

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4 High Modernism reflects a move away from representational art works and towards works that explore the materials used in art making. Such as the three dimensional qualities of a sculpture or the two dimensional qualities of a painting.

5 'Medium specificity' was a term popularized by 20th century American art critic Clement Greenberg related to the artwork carrying the essential and intrinsic properties of its medium.

than me modifying the plinth's behaviour. It seemed to me that it was a critique of the plinth, of the idea that whatever you do ends up on a plinth.

It was just me being modified by the plinths and continually changing. It's quite interesting when you make work like that, as while I was making that stuff I had no idea that that work would be so reproduced in the future. I had no idea that any of these things would take any significance at all. They were done with such a lightness of touch and were no big deal, and I still feel that about them.

I was also thinking about how at St. Martin's we were taught that we couldn't put sculpture on a plinth, rather it had to go on the floor. In a sense I was interested in bringing back the plinth, just to be perverse.”<sup>6</sup>

**EMBRACING THE PLINTH AS DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC** of sculpture, McLean simultaneously devalues its authority and introduces 'Pose', the body as sculpture. The concept of 'Pose' describes the exploration of the possibilities of sculpture by means of performance. The body of the artist simultaneously becomes the primary material for sculpture and the sculpture itself, all the while criticising the contrived coolness of artistic self-presentations.

If the position of a piece of wood or metal is considered sculpture, why not the position of a body? In works such as *There's a Sculpture on My Shoulder* (1971), *Stand About Piece* (1969) or *Pose Piece For Three Plinths Work* (1971)<sup>7</sup>, he doesn't consider his body as just another art material in as much as he questions the conventions, which determine and constitute art and its display in general.

The notion of using his whole body as a sculptural vehicle of expression led him to explore live actions: Pose was live sculpture: Not mime, not theatre, but live sculpture.

**BM:** “*Pose Piece for Three Plinths Work* was part of this ongoing kind of 'trying – things – out – situation' at Situations. And then the photographs become the work. But I just found something else: I'm very interested in a singer called Johnnie Ray<sup>8</sup>. Looks a bit like Pose Work for Plinths; he used the piano as a plinth. I think it's serious business making art like this. He is not coming from the same notion, he is not trying to make sculpture but it is a curious coincidence.

What I've said before is I like Jackson Pollock, because he was an action painter and I like the action of Jackson Pollock, not so much the paintings, they had nothing to do with it. Him doing it was the work, not the thing he's done. I think Johnnie was an Action singer. The singing wasn't important it was the action, and I think I'm an action sculptor, it's not the sculpture that's important it's the action.

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6 Bruce McLean, Excerpt from an interview with Jon Wood in 'Sculpture Journal' 17.2, 2008 p. 123

7 See images in the appendix

8 Johnnie Ray, (1927-1990) was an American pianist, singer and songwriter whose Jazz career was at its peak during the 1950's. He is often sighted as a major precursor of what later became 'rock and roll' (see image in the appendix).

**SP:** Photographs as records of the work and a photograph that was intended as a work are two different things. Works such as *Fallen Warrior* (1969) for example were made as a work, whereas *Pose Piece For Three Plinths Work* was a documentation of an event. Do you see the staged photographic works as a collaboration between you and the photographer?

**BM:** Yes. Works like the *Fallen Warrior* (1969) or *Take a Line for a Walk* (1969) were taken by a good friend of mine, Dirk Buwalda (pieces that could only exist because they were photographs). He was very good because he could make me look the way I wanted to look. If he would have photographed me for this work (*Pose Piece for Three Plinths Work*) they would have looked very different. He took the photograph before I was into the pose, before you nodded he got you. And then it was a nod, it wasn't a post nod, pre-nod, and he understood that.

There weren't a lot of people taking photographs as art at the time. But what I've been interested in and what I'm still trying to do, is a proposition for what sculpture could be. It wasn't art, it wasn't necessarily sculpture, it was a proposition that it could be that. You could put it from the table to the floor, you could put it under the floor. You could put it under the seat and that's what I'm thinking about, still.

I'm not actually interested in art to be honest with you, I'm interested in sculpture, I am interested in architecture, in painting and all sorts of things. I'd been making all this 'throw-away' sculpture and things floating down a river, things that disappeared basically, things that remove themselves, which is something I quite like. I wanted to form another context, which was the context of pose. It didn't have any rules or regulations. I mean everyone was posing heavily, but I was the godfather of pose!

**SP:** What did you make of sculpture that was being produced at the time of your show at Situation?

**BM:** Not much, I couldn't figure out why it was in the galleries. I really have a big problem with sculpture. There was no discussion about where the thing would go. If you make a painting, alright you can hang it on the wall, but if you're making sculpture, where do you actually put it? Unless it's for a particular purpose. I think a lot of sculptors should have been architects and a lot of architects should have been sculptors. If you make a work in the studio and then it goes to a gallery, which sells it to someone or it goes to a museum, it means that context it always changing and meaning too. Why not just make a photograph and stick the photograph straight in a magazine? Because that's how people see it anyway without going through the transport and installation, it would make it more economical and that was a lot of the thinking about conceptual art. But that disappeared quite quickly.

So I'm still interested in the photograph but what I'm interested in now is why make a sculpture when it is reduced to flatness anyway, when it has a preferred viewing angle? In books or installation shots the photographs are all controlled so you only see the sculpture from a particular angle.



Why make a big polymetric lump to then flatten it?

Conceptual art came out of the student unrest and political agendas but then disappeared quite quickly and I think that a lot of stuff never got made. It got made up to a certain point but then it got stuffed by Conceptualism, it was enough to have an idea, you didn't have to make the sculpture. And as I'm getting older I really try to do some of the things I haven't done, I'm thinking about some of the sculpture I haven't made. I'm thinking about how I could make it in another way, and I'm actually trying to make new sculpture. Propositions for things. I'm trying to work backwards from the photographs.

**SP:** You made two versions of *Pose Piece For Three Plinths Work*. The first is the work in the David Roberts Collection, the documentation of the performance at Situation, and the second version is a restaging of the performance. Why did you restage it?

**BM:** I made two versions of the piece, this is the original and the other I made about six months or a year later, which is now in the Tate Collection. The original was actually photo documentation. I put it up as a piece but it was photographs that say, you took as I was doing it throughout the day, which we then decided the next day to put on the wall as a work. And then we thought later on why don't we get a proper camera and sharpen it up a bit. I didn't make it to sell another piece. I didn't sell that piece for years. In the second version there are three panels with 12 shots in each panel. It was a roll of film basically.

**SP:** And the Tate purchased two out of the three panels of the second version in 1981, ten years after.

**BM:** Yes. That's quite quick for the Tate.

**SP:** How do you want the piece displayed?

**BM:** I showed it in a line. It wasn't in a block because a block made it look too much like a picture.

**IN A MANNER SIMILAR TO THE STREET SCULPTURES** from 1967, the series of fifteen images suggests sculpture as an attitude, in flux and without a monumentalized, resolved form. Instead what we are faced with is mutability, the proposition, shifting poses and meanings. The work remains a proposal and within its nature as a proposal there is the potential for ongoing engagement. If we were to see only one image it might suggest another idealized form of what a sculpture should be, or perhaps a mockery of a particular classical work. Presented with a series of images we understand that the artist moves between the poses. The work acquires a temporal aspect and sense of duration, which is sequential rather than static. Here you have the sense of movement like still images from a film sequence.

So when looking at the work today, what are we left with? It is easy to characterise the work as a series of decisions and reactions against prevailing approaches to sculpture, which McLean experienced at the time. What *Pose Piece for Three Plinths Work* leaves us with is a sense of vitality and humour – the work does not seem reactionary, and while the trappings (B/W, photo/display conventions) take us to a particular time, the series of photographs from the self confessed Godfather of Pose are contemporary now and still pose questions to the ongoing dialogue about what can contribute to and, furthermore, constitute sculpture as a practice today.

**WHAT MCLEAN ALSO BRINGS TO HIS SCULPTURES** however is an element of humour. An art of construction that can disrupt, resolve, reverse a set of relations and governing intention that is opposed to fake intellectualism and mere contemplation. Instead, as Robert Garnett described it, ‘Humour is treachery; its agent is the traitor as opposed to the trickster. The trickster plays on words, practises the ironic positionality, of “discourse specificity”. The traitor makes gestures, proceeds through posture as opposed to positionality.’<sup>9</sup>

All conversations unless otherwise mentioned have taken place between the artist and the writer between December 2012 and January 2013.

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9 Robert Garnett quoted in ‘Humour v Irony’ by Andrew Hunt , ArtMonthly, October 1, 2010,



## **SELECTED IMAGES**



*There's a Sculpture on My  
Shoulder, 1971/2011*



*Stand About Piece, 1969*



Johnnie Ray (1927-1990)

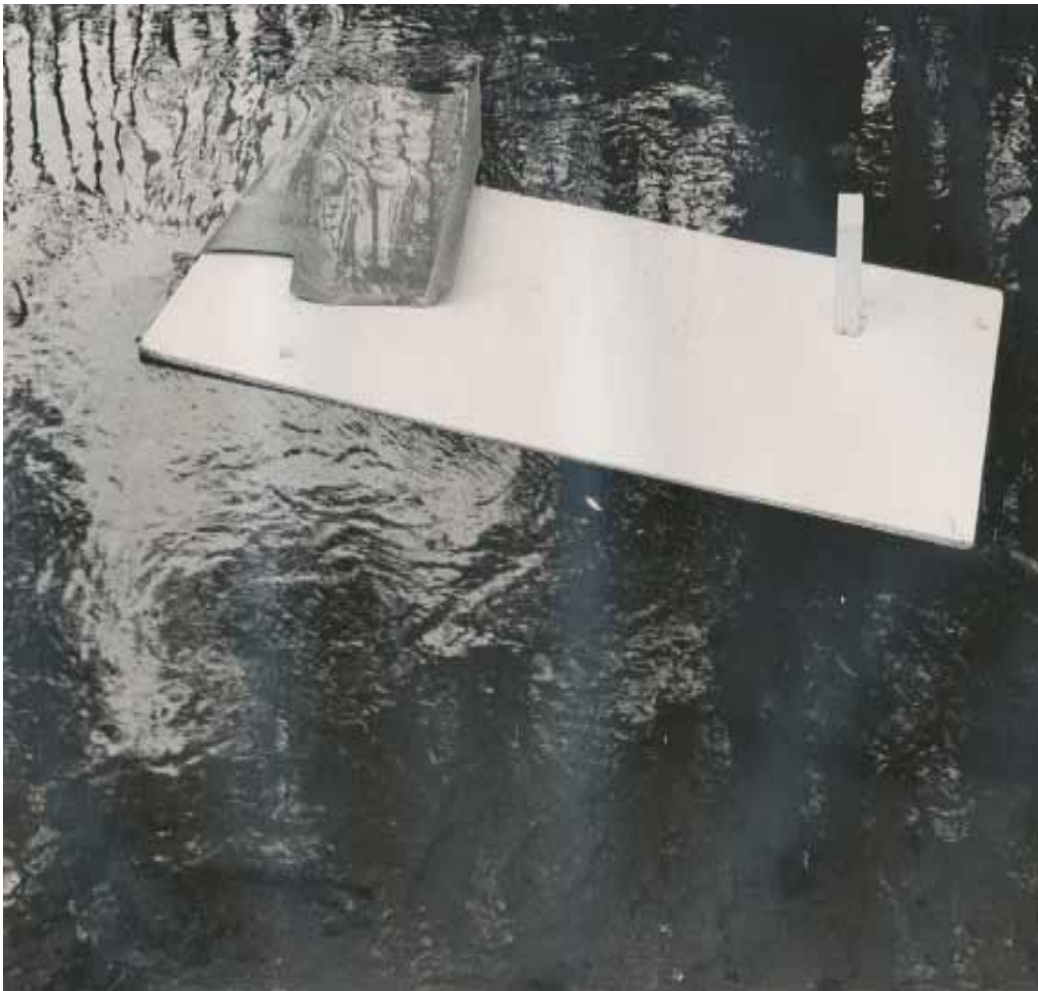


*Fallen Warrior*, 1969





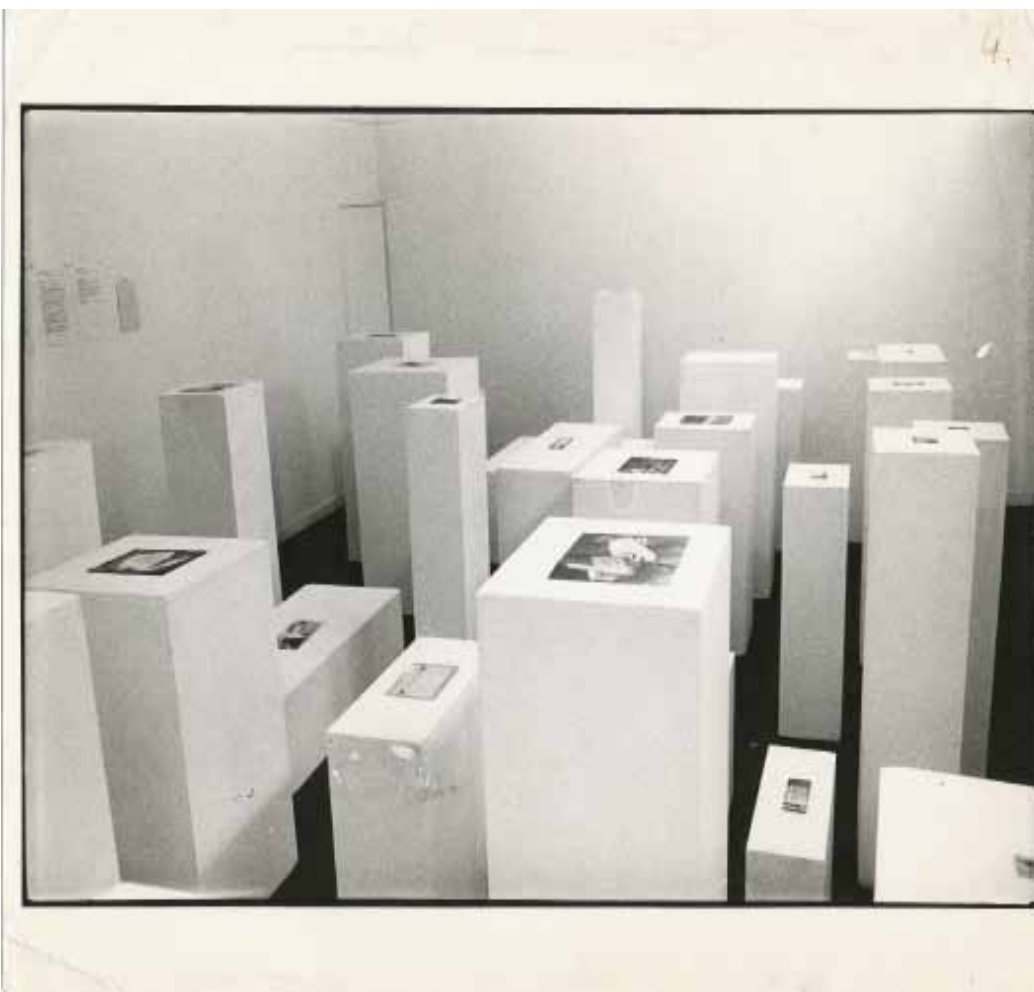
*Taking A Line For  
A Walk, 1969*



*Floataway Sculpture,  
Installed in Beverley  
Brook, Barnes,  
London, 1967*



*High Upon a Baroque  
Palazzo (Garage, London),  
1974*



*Installation Image:  
Objects No Concepts,  
Situation, 1971*



Floataway, throwaway, blowaway, giveaway works were actioned as a response to the problems of sculpture, the on off and latterly very much on again plinth/pedestal problems. re. The fourth plinth. The positioning and placing of sculpture was of the highest or, (depending on where you were studying) lowest importance. The white cube “no irony” spaces still existed in the sixties, memories of Cornwall white washed stone floored cottages and espadrilles, modified flotsam on yellow ochre hessian walls. Something had to be done, a shift had to be made, put a sculpture in the pond, river, up a tree, in your pocket, under the floor, out of sight, on site, street, etc. The five part landscape painting piece was a self critical work, a landscape painting sculpture, not much of a shift. Now the documentation of the work seems to be the work although the work which lasted five to ten minutes was the work, or was it?

Some of the floataway pieces possibly still exist, these referenced other works by many people, put a concept in a bottle and throw it into the sea piece. By shifting the positioning of works, propositions for what sculpture might be, and putting them eg in your pocket, on your shoulder, opened up many new and exciting possibilities for sculpture. You could be a sculpture, you could make a sculpture with your body, or parts of it. You could position, place yourself, in various spaces, moving or still for varying lengths of time. You could make photo sculptures, most sculpture is photographed and the photograph becomes the sculpture, so why not start by making a photo sculpture and working backwards. Where do you position a photo sculpture? Do you photograph a photo sculpture? Are all photo sculptures black and white, early conceptual art was black and white, the only colour photograph in the *When Attitudes Become Form* catalogue was by Bruce Nauman, because he requested it.

Bruce Mclean, 2011





**DRAF**