

NOTES ON SCULPTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Transcript from a discussion at the Royal Society of Sculptors, London, June 12, 2018

Participants

Julian Wild, Vice -President of the RSS, sculptor and lecturer
Melissa Hamnett, Curator of Sculpture at the Victoria & Albert Museum
Katey Goodwin, Deputy Director Art UK, Project Manager of ART UK Sculpture
Anne-Katrin Purkiss, independent photographer

Introduction

Julian Wild

Our discussion is looking at connections between the mediums of sculpture and photography, and at the changes we have observed in both art forms recent years.

The event was organised in connection with the photo exhibition 'SCULPTORS – Portrait of a Profession' by Anne-Katrin Purkiss, which covers 30 years of her photographs of British sculptors in the context of their work and their studios.

The discussion takes place at the Royal Society of Sculptors, the UK's oldest and largest organisation dedicated to the practice of sculpture.

It is worth noting that the venue of our event, Dora House, was once a sculptors' studio and prior to that, it was also used as a photographers' studio. So there is an interesting connection in the history of this building and the subject of our discussion.

Our concept and understanding of sculpture has changed in recent decades.

We have seen a shift from conventional practice to more idea-driven works and to new, sometimes short-lived art forms such as site-specific and installation art, or performance art. And with that our practices, the materials we use, and our understanding of our profession has changed too.

Sculptors, like other artists, have used photography in different ways since its invention more than 150 years ago. But in recent years, the medium of photography, has also undergone fundamental changes.

The rise of digital photography presents both new opportunities for interpreting sculpture and for creating visual records. It brings also new dangers with it, such as the loss of original images.

The fact that both, sculpture and photography have seen such fundamental changes in a relatively short space of time is worth noting.

At this point, we can only begin to explore the subject from the different perspectives of four practitioners, starting with a look at traditional connections between sculpture and photography.

Melissa Hamnett, Curator of Sculpture at the Victoria & Albert Museum

The V&A is designated the National Collection of Sculpture, and the V&A's Sculpture department contains approximately 24,000 objects, concentrating mostly on western European sculpture from about the 4th to the mid-20th century. Our highlights include Italian Renaissance sculpture, Ivory carvings and Northern European wood sculpture. Due to our collection remit, we do not collect large scale contemporary sculpture, but we do regularly exhibit it in dialogue with our historic sculpture collection.

Likewise, our photography collection is now bigger than it ever has been before. We hold photographs from the very beginnings of photography. The V&A collection of photographs began in the 1850s when the museum was founded. Until 2016 we had about 400,000 'objects' in the photographic collection. At that point the V&A took on the Royal Photographic Society's collection. That meant, we almost doubled, our own photographic collection. That places the V&A in a very interesting position by holding the national collection of sculpture and now holding near a million works of photographic interest as well.

Although sculpture is a three-dimensional art form and it needs to be seen to be experienced, it is normally reproduced through photography.

One example I would like to mention here specifically is a collection of over 4,000 photographs of sculpture that has recently been re-discovered in the V&A's collection. They were the brainchild of the art historian and writer William Kineton Parkes (1865-1938). Much of the cross-over between sculpture and photography can be seen in the example of this collection.

Kineton Parkes was particularly interested in the perception of sculpture (which photographs are important for). He asked artists how they want their work to be viewed, because he was using the material as a research tool for the third volume of his survey *Sculpture of Today*. Accordingly, he sent out questionnaires to living sculptors asking for information about their careers and crucially for photographs of their work. From 1922 until 1925 more than 300 sculptors from 23 countries responded, some with brief responses; others with detailed and chatty replies. These archival records are now held in the V&A's Archive of Art and Design where they have been brought together with the questionnaires that were sent out to the sculptors. It's a fascinating snapshot of sculptural practice internationally, during the early 1920s.

Part of what makes these photos so interesting is, that we now know that the sculptors themselves selected the photographs in a bid to best represent their work. Giving a tantalising glimpse into the sculptors' studios, many show works partway through making. Others show portrait busts next to the people they depicted. The archive also includes many female sculptors of the period, with 77 of the sculptors represented being female, and 40 of those having both questionnaires and photographs. It's a very rich source of information and they are very interesting from the perspective of the sculptor, but also the photographer.

The questionnaires are also rich in information from the perspective of the sculptor with the likes of Leon Underwood humbly pointing out that he has 'only recently begun to carve' or Oliver O'Connor Barrett asserting that he has 'had no Art Education, unless you count occasional drawing from life at evening classes, after doing a full day's work in a factory'. Many sculptors listed the works that they were most proud of, the teachers they worked under, and their commissions and exhibitions. As these records demonstrate, for sculptors themselves the photograph was not merely a method of preserving their work and its process, but often a necessity for their survival as artists. It was seen as a means through which they were advertising their output.

I would like to mention one other example briefly, that of Constantin Brancusi. When the Royal Photographic Society Collection was transferred to the V&A, we received with it a series of staged photographs by Brancusi that show his talent as an object-based sculptor as well as a performative artist. Brancusi's interest lay not just in the photographic image but also in its ability to capture the different juxtapositions achieved through the careful sculptural arrangements in his studio. Brancusi had moved to Paris from Bucharest in 1904. As a relatively unknown artist without an art dealer, photographs became the easiest way of getting his work known. Brancusi's active engagement with photography was sparked in 1921, when he met Man Ray, who had just arrived in Paris from New York. He helped Brancusi to buy equipment, install a darkroom in his workshop and refine his photographic techniques. From an early period, Brancusi refused to allow anyone to take pictures his work. As a sculptor, he left behind over 560 negatives and 1000 photographs that he had taken himself of his own work.

From these two brief examples of sculptors using photography early in the 20th century, the next contribution will look at a contemporary photographers' experience of photographing sculptors and their work.



Site-specific installation by David Ogle, London, 2013, photograph by A.K.Purkiss



A souvenir picture for the photographer, taken during restoration work on Nelson's Column, London, 1987.

Anne-Katrin Purkiss, photographer

My background is in photo-journalism, and I came to photograph sculptors in Britain in the 1980s, initially in the context of news stories. Commissions to work for arts organisations, museums and galleries followed much later.

The common ground that I see between my work as a photographer and sculptors using photography, is above all the joined interest in documenting sculpture, the process of creating it and in my case also the people who made it. And like sculptors, I am also intrigued by the creative challenge to represent a three-dimensional artform in a two-dimensional medium.

There are other connections between sculpture and photography too. It is the shared experience that both of our professions have seen considerable changes in recent decades in terms of materials, equipment and processes we use. I have seen much of that in my own work, since I started to take photographs in London more than 30 years ago.

To give one example, in 1987, I took photographs for The Associated Press during the cleaning of Nelson's Column in London's Trafalgar Square. On the occasion, someone took a picture of me standing next to the head of Nelson's sculpture at the top. I had given him my camera, the film was later processed, archived in an acid-free sleeve and kept it in a filing cabinet, until I remembered the picture in connection with today's event. 31 years later, I scanned it and posted it on Twitter. If we fast-forward, and imagine that I was in the same situation yesterday, what would have happened? I would have taken a selfie and tweeted the picture on the spot, or I could have given my DSLR camera to someone. I would have downloaded the files to my computer (one would take several pictures, since there is no extra cost involved), backed them up on two hard-drives, and kept them there. If we fast-forward from today's event by another thirty years, how would I find yesterday's pictures? It's an interesting thought...Assuming that I had backed them up and scanned the hard-drives regularly for corrupted files and replaced them from the second drive where necessary. I would have had to copy my files several times in the course of thirty years. As mechanical devices, the hard drives are unlikely to last for three decades. I might not have gone to the trouble of converting my jpeg file to Tiff format, which is considered a more stable archive format, but in any case there is no way of knowing what kind of software we will have in 30 years' time, whether it will still read our jpegs or tiff files, or whether we will have the hardware to run the necessary software to read them.

There is much unknown territory, and if we look at the sheer speed of change in recent years, we might have reason to be concerned about the longevity of the photographs we take today.

There is another aspect to this development that effects both sculptors and photographers - the speed of disseminating vast quantities of pictures.

Again – looking back thirty years, to this one picture of Nelson's Column, if we wanted to send colour transparencies to AP's head office in New York, we gave a packet to a bike messenger, who took it to Heathrow to catch the evening flight of the Concorde. Once it had cleared customs in the US, it was picked up by courier there. Alternatively, one could have transmitted three colour separations on an analogue phone line, which took about 15 minutes under ideal conditions.

Compare that with today – if a sculptor takes pictures of the installation of his work, he would do this on his mobile phone, post them on social media and they would be received anywhere by anyone who happens to be interested in the subject more or less instantly.

It is interesting to note that almost at the same time as photographic technique has changed, sculptural practice has changed and expanded as well.

The conventional way of photographing, for instance a portrait bust on a plinth, is something that we still do. At the same time, with the rise of new forms of sculpture, such as installations, site-specific or land art, photographing those works, can pose different challenges and may require a new approach.

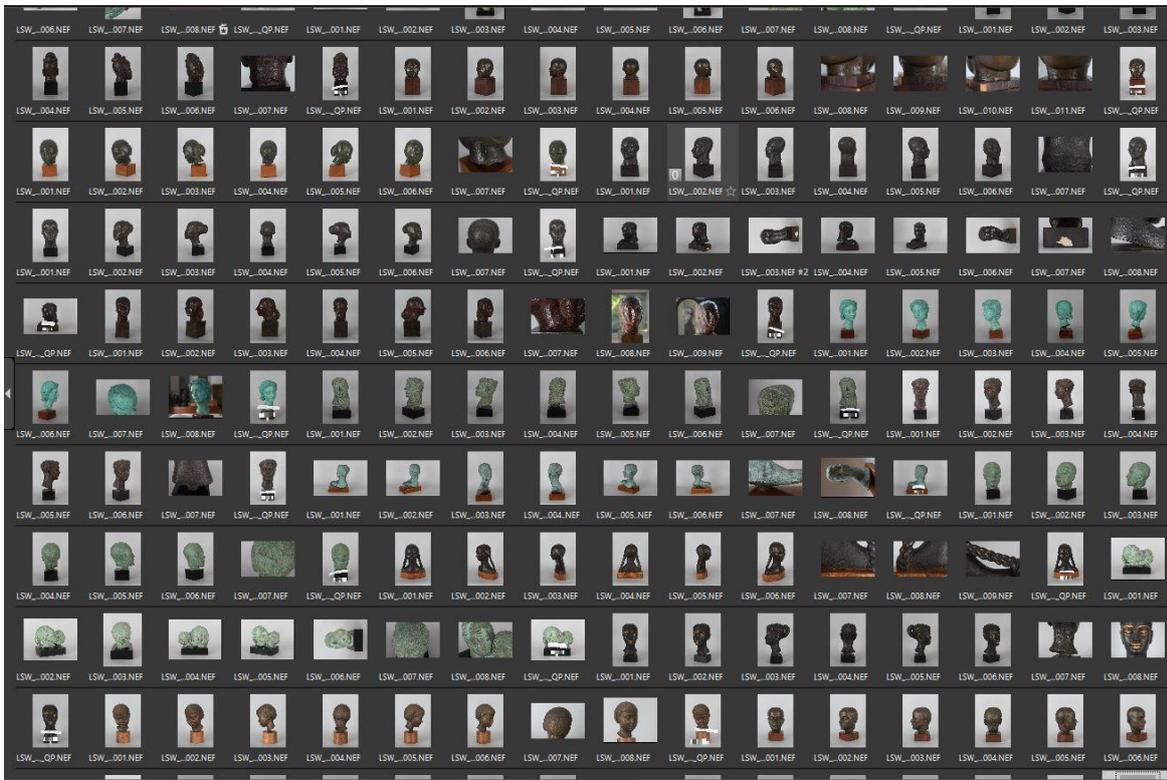
For me as a photographer it is a fascinating development, partly because these works offer greater potential to be creative beyond merely documenting them. The work is often closely connected with the environment in which it is placed, it is almost unthinkable to see this kind of sculpture without the context of the site at which it is placed. And crucially from my perspective, much of this work is very short-lived. That means, from a photographers' perspective, the changes in the practice of sculpture can lead to an almost complete reversal of the situation that Melissa has described, where the sculpture was something made to last a long time, compared with photographs of it that had by their nature a much shorter lifespan.

What we see increasingly, are works of art, that exist for a limited time, a few months or years, and the photographs of those works become now the object that outlives the sculpture as the original work of art.

The photographer suddenly takes on a different role, in that the photographs that I take are no longer only a record of that work that can be replicated at a later stage. My work becomes at the same time an interpretation and reflects how this work was seen at the time of its creation. And my pictures will influence how people will see the artwork, or how it will be remembered in the future. It is an interesting shift in the role of the photographer, in that the pictures or copies of the artwork that we create now are in some cases more durable than the originals.

If we return at this point to the technical side of photography and developments in the field of digital image processing, storage and dissemination, there is another aspect to consider.

We have now the opportunity to make images of sculpture available to a wider audience and on a scale that the artists whose work is held for instance in the V&A Collection could not have imagined. That is one area, that ART UK is currently working on, and Katey Goodwin will be able to give an introduction to the scale and timing of the Art UK sculpture recording project.



ART UK sculpture project, Dorich House, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, August 2018.
Photographs by A.K.Purkiss

Katey Goodwin, Deputy Director, Art UK, Project Manager of the ART UK sculpture recording project
Managing data and preserving images is something that's very close to our hearts at ART UK.

ART UK is a charity, set up 15 years ago originally to digitise all oil paintings in public ownership across the UK which we have achieved. We have previously digitised 212,000 oil paintings in public collections. I am now project-managing the largest sculpture digitisation project that the UK and possibly the world has ever seen, which is bringing together data on objects in public collections and sculpture in public spaces throughout the entire country. In order to achieve this, we are working closely with a number of partner organisations, including the V&A and the RSS.

Art UK Sculpture is a three-year national project, running from June 2017 to June 2020. Supported by a National Lottery grant, we will digitise 170,000 sculptures from inside public collections and outdoors in public spaces and display them on the Art UK website. The aim is to transform the way people access and learn about sculpture.

The Art UK Sculpture project will work with the 2,800 public organisations in 3,200 locations. Each organisation has an allocated regional Coordinator, who will be the main contact between the participating collections and Art UK. We have two Photography Managers, one in Devon and one in Edinburgh. Both have come to us after working at national museums in the UK and they have selected 50 Photographers who are located all across the country, from Devon to Orkney, to ensure that all regions will be sufficiently covered. For photography of sculpture in outdoor public places we will be working with a team of trained volunteers, in liaison with the Royal Photographic Society.

The main method of capture for the project will be 2D images of the sculpture. We want the images we take to be clear and good quality, and we aim to photograph around 20 sculptures a day.

If we can, we will set up a temporary studio on location. We are using a grey background for sculptures in these circumstances, as it helps with colour balancing. To make sure this is a cost-effective project, Art UK Sculpture is based on co-production, with Art UK taking a percentage of high-res images of the sculpture and the remaining images being gathered through the use of existing images, the collection taking images themselves and Coordinators taking record shots.

That means, two types of image will be taken by Art UK in collections as part of the project:

High-resolution, multiple images of selected sculptures taken by Art UK photographers

Art UK will photograph 20% of sculptures without existing suitable images and within the sculpture remit, the 20% will be chosen by the collection. The collection makes the final decision on which sculptures in their collection should be photographed by Art UK and record shots of sculptures taken by Art UK Coordinators or by staff and volunteers from participating collections

For outdoor, public sculpture photography, we hope to photograph 100% of sculptures across the UK, taking multiple images if possible and a context shot.

All of this provides huge challenges – access to sculpture can be difficult; collections are lacking in resources to help facilitate the digitisation process; sculpture records are lacking information or are non-existent; taking multiple images takes time; weather conditions can impede taking good images of outdoor sculpture. Quality checking is very important, as sub-standard images on our website could damage our reputation.

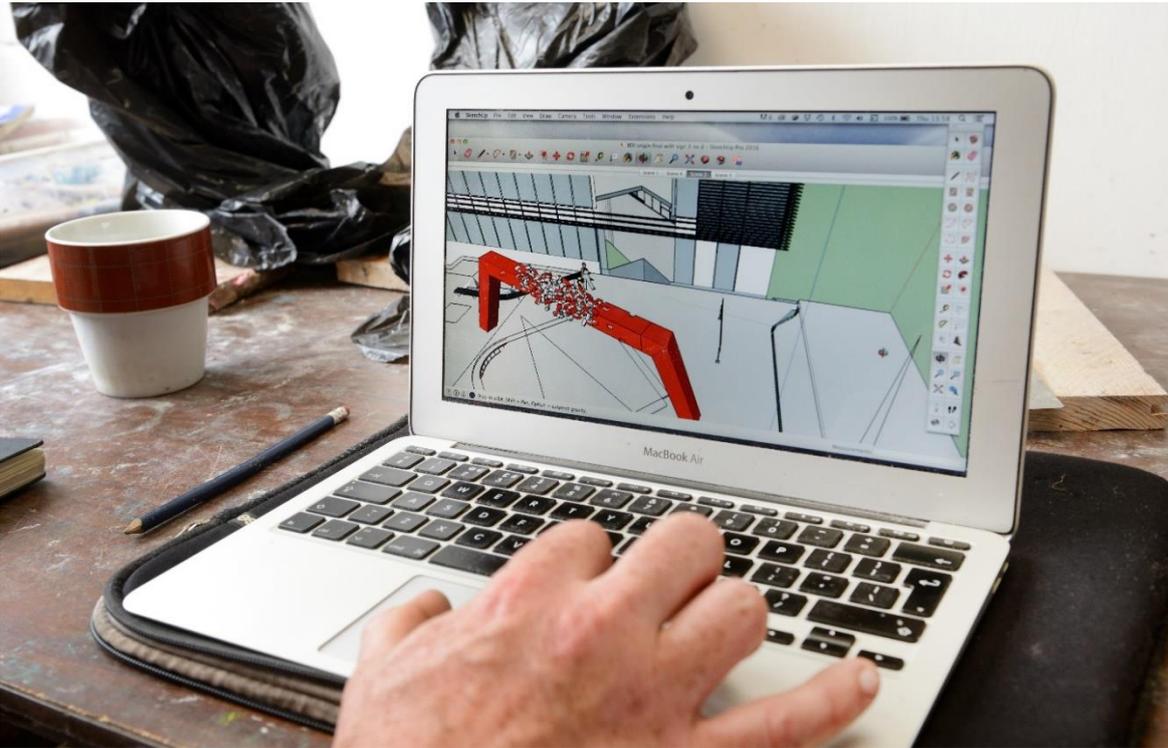
We do not have the time or resources to capture all sculpture in 3D, so we will be including 3D imaging on a project basis, in liaison with project partners Factum Foundation. These projects include high-resolution scanning of two collections of busts and heads, and creating high-quality 3D facsimiles of selected busts for use in the learning and engagement programme.

We have a bespoke content management system which holds all the artwork, artist and collection records in digital format. This relational database feeds directly into the Art UK website and allows us to search across collections to find specific people, themes, etc. Most organisations have a digital catalogue of their collections in some form, but they often have gaps or they need updating, especially if the organisation is under-staffed or under-resourced.

We hope that by the end of this project, we will be able to show the range and scope of sculpture across the UK. The Art UK website is meant to be a starting point for people, whether they are researching something specific or just browsing. Our aim is to inspire people to visit collections and public sculptures in person if they can.

It is also worth noting that more than 50% of Art UK's online users are from overseas and many of these users might never be able to see the actual sculptures. To ensure they continue to return to the site, we have to make sure the catalogue entries are accurate and that we constantly add photographs, articles and stories of new, interesting artworks.

Art UK Sculpture provides opportunities for both digital and in-person engagement with sculpture, which will continue after the life of the project.



Julian Wild, project record of his work 'Origin', installed at the University of Oxford, March 2017.
Photographs by A.K.Purkiss

Julian Wild, VPRSS, sculptor and lecturer

From a sculptors' perspective, we rely on photography, a good documentation of the process and the final piece is very important not only for our own records but also for promoting our work. As a lecturer, I see photography also a vital tool for teaching art students.

Anne came to my studio in 2015, just before I started a major commission for a public sculpture for the University of Oxford, and she ended up documenting the entire process from working on the first drawings to the installation in 2017. For me, that was a wonderful opportunity to have a project completely documented from building models, to working with a steel foundry and recording the installation of the work.

Looking back at my own practice and the way in which it is connected with photography, the process has changed massively over the past 25 years. I was at the opening of this exhibition and talking to another sculptor, we suddenly realised, that we both belong to a 'pre-internet' generation. The arrival of the internet and of digital photography, changed the landscape for me. When I set out to work as a sculptor, the photographs of my work were transparencies. One used to get three sets done. They were sent out to galleries and one had to wait for one set to come back before one could send it to the next gallery. The immediacy of the digital image and the way we share pictures has changed things enormously. The same is of course true for our society, the RSS. We have just launched our new website. As a resource that is as important for sculptors as it is for people who are interested in sculpture or who are looking to work with a sculptor.

Another point to mention is the advent of social media and the fact that many artists spend now a great deal of time on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc., photographing the process of making new work and distributing images about it immediately. The advantage is obvious, you can reach a far greater audience and there is this enormous spread of artists' work to discover online. At the same time, as an artist, I have concerns about the fact that certain works are 'instagrammable'. That means, they look good on social media, whilst many of the more subtle works might be lost in this way of disseminating work. That has in turn an effect on what kind of work is selected for exhibitions. It means also that some types of sculpture are getting more exposure, i.e. are seen by a wider audience than others. I wonder what kind of effect such developments might have on the presentation of sculpture as a whole.

Connected with the rise of the internet and social media is another concern, and that is the subject of copyright and intellectual property. That is not only an issue for me as an artist, but that concerns all of us, curators, photographers and sculptors alike. Perhaps we could start our discussion on that point.

Extracts from the discussion

AKP: Copyright is a big issue and so is our understanding of intellectual property.

Some of the photographs in the current exhibition were taken in the 1980s or 90s. At the time there was an understanding that pictures of an artist in his studio were taken with the artists' permission, nobody thought of getting consent forms or legal documents signed. One worked on a basis of trust. When I started to compile photographs for the book that accompanies this exhibition, one artists' estate maintained that all sculptures or parts of them that are visible in the background are the artists' intellectual property and the estate began to lay down conditions for the use of my pictures. Such conditions were never made by the artist himself in his lifetime.

It appears, that there is now much more financial interest involved and organisations such as DACS will actively advise photographers to get copyright clearance forms signed by the artists before they start to take pictures. At the same time, I get regular requests from arts organisations or publications for images they have found on my website, which they want to use without paying a licence fee, just in return for giving me picture credit. I can see that the same problem exists for artists.

The protection of intellectual property rights which is ultimately the basis of financial security for artists, has become a minefield that did not exist to the same extent twenty years ago.

The DACS Foundation has recently set up a programme aimed at 'mid-career' artists, to advise on their legacy and how it should be managed.

MH: With the advent of 3D photography people are able to come into any collection not just museums such as the V&A and – at the most basic level – use their mobile phone to make a 3D representation of a sculpture, and similarly, there are many legal minefields. For instance, that work could still be in copyright or it could be a loan and there maybe stipulations attached on how it is used or in what context.

KG: At ART UK we have a special copyright team to work with artists and artists' estates, trying to trace, people, getting their permission. And there are permissions for different kinds of use. 15 years ago, when we were working on the oil paintings project, there was no Facebook or other social media. We now have to go back to all the artists and their estates and get their permission for this new form of use of their pictures. There are also other restrictions, some people do not want their images cropped or the colour changed or see them manipulated in any way.

AKP: You have touched on another issue, hugely important for digital photography – when we used only analogue photography, the potential for manipulation was by comparison limited. How much of the manipulation of digital images that we can now routinely achieve with software is permissible, and to what extent is it later still traceable?

MH: That reminds me of sculptors, like Brancusi, who wasn't willing for anybody to photograph his work other than himself. He wanted to have complete control over the photographic output of his sculpture.

JW: Brancusi's photographs were not released until after his death.

MH: Also, interesting as a cross-over between disciplines, that he became interested in photography having met Man Ray in the early 1920s. I don't think he would have taken such control of the photographic documentation of his work if he had not met a photographer.

JW: I am also really interested in another form of documentation, not photographs, but plaster casts at the V&A. Could you say something on how these copies of the original have helped with conservation.

MH: Interestingly, the plaster cast courts at the V&A have completely changed in status. What was once, in the 19th century, seen as copies of originals, are now in many cases the only surviving pieces of a work, or the copies are better preserved than the original. This is for instance the case with Trajan's Column. The UK had once, in 1867, an agreement within Europe and were able to take a piecemeal cast of the Trajan's Column in Rome. Now, with the effects of acid rain and environmental pollution, the relief on the original in Rome has degraded, and the 1867 cast is a more accurate version of the original that was once created.

So you are getting back to the role of photography. In some instances, where a sculpture might not survive, the photograph is the original copy.

AKP: And this aspect will become more important in future not only with the effects of environmental pollution on sculptures in public spaces but also for works of site-specific and performance art and whatever else constitutes sculpture.

JW: That brings us also to other possibilities such as the scanning artefacts and 3D imaging, there is a project on the internet, called 'scan the world'

KG: We are doing something similar to what you mentioned at ART UK , we are looking at 3D imaging and how that can be used to monitor the condition of sculptures, especially when they are outdoors.

MH: There are other aspects to that too – museums and collections are talking about possibly acquiring 3D printed work. That means, acquiring pieces of sculpture in a format and material that you don't really know, you don't know how they will degrade, how to conserve or store them, and museums exist to preserve these items for generations.

AKP: Talking about preserving works for future generations in museums and collections – Julian, you are teaching sculpture, how many of your students would actually go to those collections and study the works that are so carefully preserved in close proximity?

JW: We are encouraging students to go use these institutions, to go to these collections and see things for themselves and use that as part of their research. But what you also see is, that these archives are accessible online and that makes a huge difference, and that's what students are currently using. This brings us back to amounts of data and how to access and manage and store them. That's an issue you have touched on earlier. As a sculptor I must say that there is probably no substitute for the real thing.

AKP: I would agree on both. Storing and managing data is perhaps not such a problem for large institutions like the V&A or ART UK, because they have funding for archives that are of national importance. It is a very different situation for the individual sculptor or photographer who works to an average budget. Buying cloud storage for the amount of data that I currently use, say 10 to 20 TB, is not economically viable. Consequently, I keep using hard drives, backing everything up twice with clients expecting me to keep copies of their work for several years. For me, managing my archive is part of my work, but for sculptors? Artists now find themselves not only generating more images than ever before to feed their websites and social media streams, they also have to find the time to archive all these images properly. In that respect, digital photography may have become not only a help but also a hindrance in that it could encroach on the time that artists spend on creating work.

Summary

Julian Wild

Bringing our discussion to a temporary conclusion – we have looked at connections between sculpture and photography from four very different perspectives, not only from that of sculptors like myself, and a photographer who has worked with sculptors, but also from the points of view of a curator of sculpture and that of a manager of a major national art project.

The purpose of this event was, to raise awareness of issues, rather than to try and offer solutions. Speaking for the RSS, I hope that it will provide ideas and inspiration for future discussion on more specific points that we could only mention briefly in this context.

We have touched on an enormous range of subjects from historic connections between sculpture and photography, to changes in my own profession and in the field of photography, to questions of conservation of original artworks and the role of copies in conservation. We have also spoken about the protection of intellectual property rights, the challenges of storing and disseminating large amounts of images and the benefits of new technology in sharing images of artwork and making sculpture accessible to a much wider audience than ever before.

There will never be a substitute for the encounter with an original work of art, but for many people their first encounter with a sculpture is likely to be through the medium of photography.

Additional information, related websites:

<https://sculptors.org.uk/>

https://artuk.org/about/blog/view_as/grid/type/the-sculpture-project

www.vam.ac.uk/collections/sculpture#

www.julianwild.com/

www.purkiss-archive.eu/category/sculptors/

