

VITRINE

# SCULPTURE AT Bermondsey Square

**Karen Tang**  
October 2014 — March 2015

**Edwin Burdis**  
March 2015 — August 2015

**Frances Richardson**  
September 2015 — February 2016

VITRINE launched SCULPTURE AT as a public artwork commission in September 2014 on Bermondsey Square. Its continuing aim is to create a unique platform for temporary public sculpture by emerging and mid-career artists. We have collaborated with Pangaea Sculptors' Centre, to present the recent symposium, 'Public Sculpture: From Process to Place', and on this publication, as part of a shared aspiration to expand the discourse around sculptural practice.

VITRINE is focused on artistic experimentation and development, with material, process and installation led practices at its core. This ethos, combined with the gallery's location on a public square in the thriving artistic hub of Bermondsey, seemed a natural progression for the gallery and an opportune environment to develop such a commission. SCULPTURE AT Bermondsey Square has been made possible by the support of Arts Council England, Ideas Tap, Team London Bridge and the Bermondsey Square Community Fund, among others.

Our aim is to encourage experimentation and the realisation of ambitious large-scale works throughout our programme. There are, at present, limited opportunities for emerging artists seeking to work with public sculpture in London, making SCULPTURE AT one of the few places in which such practices can be explored. Furthermore, by creating opportunities for artists who have not previously worked in the public realm, we are resolved to developing a broader dialogue in artistic practice, with manifold and stimulating outcomes.

The initial programme was conceived and developed through three projects in collaboration with artist Karen Tang to ensure that its development would be artist led. Each work stood in the square for six months: the first by Tang (October 2014 - March 2015); the second by VITRINE artist, Edwin Burdis (March - August 2015) and the third, Frances Richardson (September 2015 - February 2016), selected through an open call. A public engagement programme incorporating workshops and activities with schools and local groups accompanied each commission, offering further opportunity for dialogue and wider audience reach.

Tang brought to the programme her experience in large-scale public commissions, allowing for interchange of ideas and skills between the artists throughout the programme. We made the decision not to provide a brief or guidelines to the commission, bringing to fruition examples of both assimilative and interruptive sculpture. The history of the area and usage of the square as an historic antiques market every Friday, presented possible opportunities to influence the works as well as practical challenges to their realisation.

Each artist employed varying methodologies whilst developing the work. Karen Tang's *Synapsid* (2014) drew from a 1959 science-fiction film set and shot in Bermondsey. Initially working from maquettes, Tang developed a large fibreglass sculpture made from segments assembled in situ. The piece was designed to be interacted with and climbed upon, provoking playful responses from adults and children alike.

Edwin Burdis employed studio experimentation and an extravagant fusion of sub-cultural references typical of his practice in his commission, *Brad Pitt's Bruised Bits* (2015).

Working entirely off-site, Burdis produced his sculpture in wood and acrylic and, for the first time, marine-ply seeking advice from boat builders on how to use this material.

Frances Richardson was the only artist to submit a work in proposal form — as she was selected through an open call — developing initial drawings for the piece in three parts. The materials of *Loss of object and bondage to it; Fig. 2* (2015) harmoniously reflect the development's architecture, whilst bringing into the open air a work that one might more comfortably expect in a gallery setting.

The choice to avoid common guidelines or need for permanence brought three unique compelling commissions into fruition. This will remain at the heart of the project as we evolve it into its next phase.

As the artist commissioned for the inaugural SCULPTURE AT Bermondsey Square, Karen Tang faced the combined challenge of creating a work that would engage local audiences, withstand wear and tear brought by the more inclement months of the year, and satisfy her own aesthetic and conceptual curiosity. As a new multi-use environment with markets, bars, restaurants and heavy footfall, Bermondsey Square promised to be an ideal location for public art. In the research phase for creating her work *Synapsid* (2014), Tang delved into local history, accessing Bermondsey's popular imagination via a 1959 science-fiction film set and shot in the area.

Karen Tang

The original storyline for *The Giant Behemoth* featured a radioactive blob working its way up the Thames to Rotherhithe Docks and Bermondsey. This amorphous character was later recast as a mutated dinosaur, but its fluid form inspired Tang to make a work that investigated the contrast between organic shapes and the rigid formality of the new buildings around Bermondsey Square. It also invited people who saw it to consider the relative values attached to formal and informal aesthetics, in particular in relation to built structures, a relevant issue in a city where the straight and narrow Shard shares the skyline with the curvy Gherkin and where buildings with seemingly spontaneous outlines were some of the stars of the 2012 Olympics, for instance Zaha Hadid's sinuous Aquatic Centre and the 'pringle' velodrome.



Image credit: Jonathan Bassett

#### **Synapsid (2014)**

Fibreglass, epoxy, Styrofoam, paint, steel, timber  
370cm x 370cm x 400cm  
October 2014 - March 2015

First working in soft materials such as plasticine, Tang modelled a number of small sketches for the sculpture, later realising the full-sized work in wood particle board and Styrofoam, which she covered in fibreglass using a technique for glassing boats. Shaped roughly like a plough with mottled jade green treads resting on the ground and a pair of appendages rising up over bilious yellow doughnut-shaped windows, *Synapsid's* parts were joined by visible bolts, revealing the work's construction. Somewhat reminiscent of the fused plates of a human skull, or the stitched-together parts of Frankenstein's monster, *Synapsid's* component parts and alarming colours harked back to the toxic monster that had inspired it.

As the first sculpture in the new square, *Synapsid* drew avid interest in how, over the course of six months, people would respond to it and how they might interact with this awkwardly shaped and coloured work, which, as Tang explained, 'hovers between representation and abstraction'. One week, the sculpture was co-opted as an impromptu market stall, at other times it was adorned with posters and used as a climbing frame or a resting place. These uses hint at the various interpretations of the work, producing a range of different meanings for *Synapsid*. When the work travelled to Plymouth in the autumn of 2015 for a four-month sojourn, it mirrored the movement of the Giant Behemoth in the film, which had also travelled to the port city. The potential for mutability inherent in the work suggests that *Synapsid* may develop even further, as Tang suggests that 'it may tour again, get a revamp or even new colours'.

Style is often predicated on substance, as though the one without the other would hardly be worthwhile considering. But there is an argument to be made for the importance of style all on its own: when it manages to be visually arresting and sensorially provocative without needing recourse to any conceptual justification. Edwin Burdis's *Brad Pitt's Bruised Bits* (2015), the second commission for SCULPTURE AT Bermondsey Square, was decorated with hot pink and pillar box red tadpoles, keyed in deepest black. Its cartoonish shape, like a bawdy chess piece, was all organic curves and wry tilted angles, topped by a teat-like head tilted over a sloping belly.

Edwin Burdis

It offered plenty of space for innuendo: were those tadpoles or spermatozoa; was that head actually denoting a penis? The sculpture looked screamingly different from anything else in its built environment, and its sitting on a relaxed public square during the spring and summer months exacerbated its suggestion of bodily curves, its sizzling colours hinting at the ill-advised exposure of fair skin to sudden sunshine. The sculpture's bravado, conveyed in a bold and comical style, drew people's attention while the ambiguity of its meaning or any potential symbolism held that attention.

Burdis drew on his experience making speaker cabinets for sound systems, using techniques of bending plywood and applying car body filler to build the structure for *Brad Pitt's Bruised Bits*, which was based on one of his drawings.



Image credit: VITRINE

**Brad Pitt's Bruised Bits (2015)**  
Marine and flexi ply, acrylic and spray paint  
244cm x 122cm x 122cm  
March - August 2015

The work was Burdis's first sculpture in the public realm, and after unpromising trials in which it was simply placed on the ground, it was eventually fixed onto a bollard for security, making an expedient marriage with the available street furniture on Bermondsey Square. The curve of its spine proved irresistible for local skateboarders, and one particularly strong impact resulted in damage to its plywood surface, which was repaired with clear plastic and tape.

This mishap, which Burdis embraced for its transformative potential, allowed the sculpture to evolve into its next state with an easy mutability, a world away from the permanence of traditional public sculpture, which has typically been made in materials of supreme durability such as stone or bronze. The adaptability of Burdis's sculpture, from a finished piece to an accidented one, connected it to the realm of chance and also to time-based art, in which continually shifting works of art can proudly bear the scars of their encounters with the real world. There may even be a case for considering *Brad Pitt's Bruised Bits* six-month sojourn on the Square as a performance, or perhaps as a stand-in for Burdis himself, who has a long history as a musical performer. The rhythmic pattern of tadpoles adorning the sculpture, the rhyming musicality of its title, and its graciously bowing shape combined to lend the work a performative presence, perhaps even erring into the dangerous territory of entertainment, a risky but thrilling place for an art work to visit.

Frances Richardson's *Loss of object and bondage to it; Fig. 2* (2015) has a double quality. This work, composed of three related sculptures installed on Bermondsey Square, alludes to the grandeur and elegance of classical art, while also declaring its affinity for modern minimal sculpture and contemporary material technologies. With their semi-translucent panels and luxurious folds of cloth, the sculptures' component parts lean together to form a series of deceptively precarious ensembles.

Frances Richardson

Swathes of concrete canvas drape romantically over upright panels of greenish Perspex connected to varnished plywood volumes, defying the wind and rain to disturb them. Richardson has brought out the best in her materials, inviting them to work in synergy to stabilise the sculpture as a whole. The utter pragmatism of concrete canvas, a material developed in 2006 as a solution to the desperate need for rapid response shelters in areas of man-made or natural catastrophes, combines with the romantic appearance of its gentle folds into something of a material oxymoron, enabling the sculptor to produce an effect that, for a moment, foxes sensory understanding. The eye and the hand work together to apprehend the hard softness of the concrete canvas, its capacity to suggest movement rendered frozen in space and time.

Richardson's proposal was selected from an open call as the third commission for SCULPTURE AT Bermondsey Square. *Loss of object and bondage to it; Fig. 2* was installed close to the entrance of the Shortwave Cinema,



Image credit: Frances Richardson

**Loss of object and bondage to it; Fig. 2 (2015)**  
Perspex, concrete canvas, marine ply, bolts  
Section 1 (in foreground): 201cm x 110cm x 66cm  
Section 2 (not in view): 69cm x 173cm x 66cm  
Section 3 (in background): 71cm x 106cm x 111cm  
September 2015 - February 2016



its Perspex panels echoing the green tint of the cinema's glass skin. The work's tilted planes and cascading drapery provided a counterpoint to the compulsive right angles of the surrounding built environment. The work's box-like structures overlaid with cloth conjured up a range of associations with the use of drapery and clothing in sculptures from antiquity through to the Renaissance, while its more curtain-like elements alluded to theatrical and domestic environments, or to the many different kinds of veiling. The refinement of the work's fabric flourishes was challenged by the startling solidity and roughness of Richardson's concrete canvas.

For visitors to Bermondsey Square, these three sculptures, alluding to the cultural tropes of divine and aesthetic trinities, offered a formal link with the weathered stone sarcophagi in St Mary Magdalen Churchyard, across Abbey Street from the Square. The three elements became one in the course of its presentation and, like the historic stone memorials in the Churchyard, Richardson's sculpture gathered detritus, the windfall of local trees and passers-by. In developing the work for its public setting, Richardson was concerned with achieving a sense of intimacy between viewers and the work, involving a harmony between the scale of the human body and the work, and the irresistible invitation to approach the work and touch it. For Richardson, 'my process of making is to hold the material and feel the weight and the balance, and for it to talk to me whilst I am making.' As a result of this 'conversation among equals' the artist has harnessed the multifaceted nature of each material: the Perspex lets light through but obscures the view; the plywood is flat but not square; and the concrete canvas publicly performs its baffling visual and tactile paradoxes.

What does it mean to make (public) sculpture in London NOW, at this historical moment? This was the question at stake in 'The State of Sculpture Today', a curated conversation convened by Pangaea Sculptors' Centre, following the symposium 'Public Sculpture: From Process to Place'.

Introduced earlier in the day by Lucy Tomlins and chaired by Marsha Bradfield (PSC's co-directors), this conversation created a space for sculptors, curators, commissioners and other enthusiasts in PSC's growing network to share prepared reflections, based on their personal experience, exploring salient issues together through a no-holds-barred discussion. The invited interlocutors were asked to weigh in on the most urgent concerns of today — urgent because they point to new and exciting developments or signal serious cause for concern in sculpture as it is shaped by its immediate context: London as a capital of culture.

We galloped across a wide range of issues. Many will be familiar to practitioners who remain stalwart in their commitment to materially-based approaches, the kind that take up space and combine stuff into new forms. Together we wondered about: conditions of production (studios and services); scope of opportunities (funding and paid work); sculpting the public domain (shaping space; changing how sites are used and changes in public behaviour); criteria for commissioning (works that work - conceptually and outside); the economy of art (the winners and losers — the buyers and choosers; budgets, proposals and the process of producing); and practical challenges (materials, transporting and storing sculpture).

The quotations that follow tap sculptural production from many and varied points of view. Straight from the horse's mouth, they are based on those uttered in the short position statements offered by the interlocutors to kick off 'The State of Sculpture Today'. After this the audience was invited to join in and together we reflected on various strains of discussion that emerged over the course of the day. These included: If sculpture was ever the province of sculptors, today this art form is attracting the interest and expertise of artists more broadly, as well as designers and architects. How these different sensibilities will interact to shape the future of public sculpture in particular is hard to imagine. We'll have to wait and see...

“ There seems to be more and more anodyne architectural spaces which strive to be as close to the pristine and perfect computer generated image as possible. Consequently, there is a plethora of spaces that have no identity. They have not sprung up organically but have been conceived out of a screen, out of a problem-solving approach to community. These spaces need artists. Artists need to take all they have learnt in the privacy of their own studios and installing works in galleries and bring all of this to bear on art for public space. To do this need not be difficult. Artists, art agencies, architects, landscape architects, supported through developers or industry, need to start face-to-face dialogue together, as early as possible.

— Kate Davis

(Senior Tutor in Sculpture, Royal College of Art)

// We were fascinated that this morning's discussion about public art didn't really talk about the public: what they thought about the art, what they enjoy. While both architecture and fine art can shape the public sphere, it seems that architects and fine artists have very different sensibilities towards it.

— Projects Office

(A multi-disciplinary agency addressing architecture, design, branding and experiences)

// It's harder to take risks when you're working at scale on a high pressure public art commission ... but if you have the right support and collaborative relationships with people, this can be what allows the artist to do something amazing.

— Briony Marshall

(Artist and Trustee of the Royal British Society of Sculptors)

// There's an inevitable undercurrent to any discussion about public art: the question of permanence; how can art, which is often of a certain time, fit into what is a seemingly fixed setting? And when dealing with something public the artist faces new issues such as contracts, unfamiliar value systems and power structures, ownership, branding etc. All these issues exist because you find yourself dealing with bodies whose primary concerns are not always the art. These bodies, the people with the money, are by their very nature 'risk-averse' and business minded, and this can be seen as a huge drawback to the gallery artist. Coming from an architectural background, we see the creation of public art as an opportunity to work within and critique these value systems, engage with and disrupt the everyday and create more than a benign 'gift' to the public.

— PUG

(A critical, theory driven architecture, art and design five-piece)

// [In regards to public sculpture commissioning] there are arguments to be made about the artist empowering him/herself by getting much more cunning. To begin with, you have to develop an extra language skill set, and that includes becoming knowledgeable about planning and health and safety, budgeting, contingency, very boring subjects, I know. By having this knowledge, however, you get a headstart in the process and can preempt things before they become issues. Remember, many developers and local authorities are as inexperienced as you are in these things. As a result, you almost have to become a lawyer. But it's not as difficult as one thinks. It's about understanding the importance of the contract, reading it carefully, as well as talking to other artists who have had successful projects for their advice. Once you understand the contract the next step is two-fold: 1) Making sure and insisting on conditions covering the full process e.g. always include maintenance and follow-up repair costs and conditions; 2) Knowing when you have to make a compromise, which can be a life-saver in your artist-commissioner relationship. Not an aesthetic compromise(!), but one that allows you to address practical problems of planning, of the construction process or other pragmatic hurdles. It can make a big difference [when working with] local authorities and developers to show a sense of pragmatism, a pragmatism that ultimately can save the creative idea that sits at the heart of the commission.

— Sven Munder

(Consultant for Cultural and Creative Economy Strategies,  
formerly Founding Director of Bold Tendencies)

// The commissioning process can lead to a generic aesthetic, forms and materials; whether it be bronze or increasingly this shiny mirrored surface that you see everywhere. This sought-out concept of public interaction, on a base level, could be defined by someone seeing themselves in the reflective surface and taking a picture of it. Posting it on their Twitter or Instagram, just because it makes for a nice photograph. It's become familiar, but whether that makes for good work, I'm not so sure.

— Conall McAteer

(Artist)

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The open call jury consisted of: Oliver Basciano, Marsha Bradfield, Nadia Broccardo, Matthew Couper, Sacha Craddock, Lucy Tomlins, Amanda White and Alys Williams. The symposium panel included: Sacha Craddock, Ellen Mara De Wachter and Rachel Withers.

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