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Candlin, Fiona (2014) Embracing sculpture, holding stones: on gender and the details of touch. In: Dent, Peter (ed.) *Sculpture and Touch*. Subject/Object: *New Studies in Sculpture*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, pp. 181-196. ISBN 9781409412311.

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Chapter 10

Embracing stone, holding brushes: Differentiating touch in the *Unit One* photographs

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Within twentieth- and twenty first-century art writing, touch is often discussed in homogenising terms. Rather than being concerned with the differences between patting and grasping, stroking and holding, or between the varying affects of touch depending on what is touched and who touches, commentators often attribute particular qualities or characteristics to the act of touching. A significant example of this tendency is Nicholas Bourriaud's characterisation of touch within *Relational Aesthetics* where he argues that relational or participatory arts offer 'so many hands-on utopias', are a 'hands-on civilisation', provide 'a tangible symbol' of the state of social encounters today, have a 'tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups', and as such provide an alternative to the alienated conditions of contemporary society.¹ At no point does Bourriaud discuss the detail of these tactile encounters or countenance the possibility that tactual encounters may be inequitable, oppressive or alienating.

Similarly homogenising examples of touch can often be found in the association between touch and women's art and experience. During the 1960s and 1970s touch and texture formed part of woman-centred imagery and although these art practices were firmly refuted by feminists who argued against 'the notion of an

unchanging female “essence”, a certain equation between touch and women’s art and experience has remained current.² In these instances contemporary feminists generally use ‘touch’ as a means of strategically refuting patriarchal conceptions of disembodied vision but, while this approach can be powerful, it can also assume that touch necessarily counters vision, that it is always conceived or experienced as ‘embodied’, and that it is primarily connected to female experience and notions of femininity.³

In this chapter, I examine a short series of photographs to demonstrate how complex, nuanced and historically specific representations and discourses of touch can be. The images in question are from the exhibition catalogue *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture* which included photographs of the participating artists’ hands. Published in 1934, the images show the artists holding their brushes, pencils or materials, their hands delicately poised, engaging in work or even embracing their sculptures. A close analysis of these images suggests that these variations were significant to the distinction between painters’ practices and those of sculptors, to the construction of the artists’ gendered personas and to the attribution of authority within their given fields.

I

The group Unit One was founded by the painter Paul Nash in 1933 and comprised of the architects Welles Coates and Colin Lucas, the sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, and the painters Edward Wadsworth, Ben Nicholson, Frances Hodgkins (later replaced by Tristram Hillier), Edward Burra, John Bigge, and John Armstrong; a diverse group whom Paul Nash corralled together under the label of

'non-figuratif' and within a general commitment to the modern.⁴ Announcing the formation of the group in a letter to the *Times*, he wrote that the eleven participants eschewed repetitions of Pre-Raphaelite or Impressionist styles, and turned away from Nature, in favour of experimenting with design as a structural process and the 'imagination explored apart from literature or metaphysics'.⁵ For Nash the group stood 'for the expression of a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly of *today* in painting, sculpture and architecture'⁶

In his introduction to the group's exhibition catalogue, Herbert Read reiterated their shared commitment to 'the forward thrust of modernism' and the contemporary spirit.⁷ Their collective agenda was further constructed and reinforced through the design of the catalogue which, despite the diverse contributors and contributions, was highly standardised. Each member of the group was allocated their own section which featured photographs of the artist, their hands, and their work alongside a written statement. The corresponding photographs are all the same size and most of them were shot from the same angle and taken or cropped to maintain a similar distance from the artwork or artist.⁸ The differences between the photographs are minimal but they are nevertheless intriguing, particularly as they pertain to the images of the artists' hands, what they hold and how they hold it.

A key distinction is that all the painters are all shown working with paintbrushes, palette knives, set-squares, mixing bowls, pens and pencils, but the sculptors are photographed touching their materials. Rather than holding her tools as the painters do, Hepworth grasps a large globular pebble or possibly a sculpture in process (Fig. 10.1) between her hands while Moore has his arms tightly wrapped around an unfinished (and unidentified) sculpture (Fig. 10.2).⁹ It is unlikely that the

differences between the images of the painters' and sculptors' hands are accidental since Read commented, that the 'ideals and intentions of the modern movement in art' were articulated within the catalogue, its layout indicates a strong editorial stance and, perhaps more importantly, these poses recur elsewhere.¹⁰ Moore was frequently shown with his arms around his sculptures while Hepworth includes another photograph of herself almost identically positioned in her *Pictorial Autobiography*.¹¹ What then was at stake here? What did it mean to hold tools rather than to grasp stone?

In 1933, the same year as Unit One was founded, Herbert Read published *Art Now*. The book was clearly read and responded to by his colleagues since John Bigge alluded to it in his *Unit One* artist's statement as did Paul Nash who cited directly from Read's conclusions. The passage Nash mentioned deals with the notion of the artist's handwriting and reads as follows:

The ability to express ... which art may have: that is unique in the artist. And by the ability to express I mean literally the technical skill to transpose mental images into linear signs. I mean what has often been called in a very apt metaphor – the artist's handwriting. It is only a metaphor: we must use the word in a large sense, implying that not merely idiosyncrasies, but the whole being of a man is expressed in this act.¹²

Ostensibly straightforward, Read's text makes a series of elisions between artworks, artists and creative production and in consequence requires some unpicking. Read refers to artist's handwriting as an act which encompasses the activity of making art and more specifically the transposition of mental images into linear signs (expression). At the same time, the phrase 'not merely idiosyncrasies' implies that

handwriting can be read as a noun, referring to the linear signs (form, brushstrokes or image) of the artwork. Read therefore collapses the activity of making art (handwriting) with the style of the artwork (its handwriting), and so the artist's actions and the artwork are rendered synonymous.

In turn, Read closes the distance between the artist's ideas and the artwork. Mental images are conceived of as being transposed into linear signs suggesting that fully formed ideas pass from the mind of the artist, through the hands and brush onto the canvas. The artist's skill lies in their unique ability to perform this act of expression and supposedly to convert thought to material object. The artist's idea and the artwork are therefore presented as being straightforwardly conjoined. Finally, Read also advises that handwriting is 'only a metaphor' and that the word must be used 'in a large sense implying that not merely idiosyncrasies', but that 'the *whole being* of a man is expressed in this act'; in other words the handwriting (as material thing) stands for the artist in their entirety.

Thus, within this short but complicated passage, 'handwriting' comes to stand for the artist, the process through which thought becomes image, the unique style of the artist's oeuvre and of individual works, and the act of making art. The hand is a synecdoche for the artist, a conduit for thought, the locus of technical skill and the means by which these factors are all transferred onto the canvas (or stone). It is a bravura display of over-determination, but within that context it was neither idiosyncratic nor erroneous. Rather it belonged to a much longer tradition of connoisseurship and art criticism wherein 'the artist's hand' referred to both the style of an artwork (usually a painting) and to the physical hand of the painter, and similarly condensed the applied paint with the activity of painting.¹³

Photographing the artists' hands for the *Unit One* catalogue was therefore a means of signalling the artists' claims to expression, style and personhood, but exactly how these attributes were articulated varied. Depending on what exactly the painters hold and how it is held, the *Unit One* photographs nuance authorship and artistic activity in slightly different ways. The photograph of John Bigge shows him painting using a long slim brush and a mahl stick to keep his hand from touching the canvas, a conventional, even (for then) old fashioned method of painting (Fig. 10.3). At the same time his impossibly poised hands and fingers do not denote actual labour but a moment of pause. This photograph is an image of mastery – perhaps ironically so for Charles Harrison later wrote that 'Bigge's work looked like a ham-fisted version of Wadsworth's'.¹⁴ Ben Nicholson's hands are photographed over his shoulder and appear similarly deft. In his left hand he holds a fishing float, and in his right a striped pencil while in the background, as if it is to be included in an incipient still life, is a glass vase (Fig. 10.4). Nash is shown holding a set-square on an angled architect's desk with one hand and a pencil in the other. In using graphic equipment he is clearly distancing himself from free-hand drawing, but nevertheless his lightly balanced hands serve as an image of control, expertise and skill (Fig. 10.5). Despite their Surrealist and abstract subject matter, the choice and manual articulation of tools within these photographs denotes a traditional 'artistic' persona.

To some degree Read's notion of handwriting and all its correlative assumptions applied to the photographs of the painters and to those of the sculptors, but there was another discourse which related explicitly to carving.

By the time Unit One held their exhibition in 1934, direct carving was widely accepted as *the* mode of practice for advanced sculptors.¹⁵ Although they also used other methods, Hepworth and Moore both carved by hand and in *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (1932) R.H. Wilenski defended their work and that of other sculptors on that basis. In a section entitled 'The Modern Sculptor's Creed' Wilenski reprised Jacob Epstein's conception of modellers, that they build 'something out of nothing'.¹⁶ The modeller, he explained, has an idea, makes an armature with 'pliant metal, and on to that he sticks a series of lumps and worms and pellets of clay until the idea has been given form'.¹⁷ The materials provide no inspiration for the artist and are in some manner 'converted to another substance' since the clay is baked or the model is used as a template for a final sculpture. It is this aspect of modelling that particularly offends Wilenski and his contemporaries since it enabled 'marble workers' who are 'merely assistants, operatives or stone masons' to produce scaled up sculptures in quantity: sculpture becomes a mode of manufacture rather than of individual creation.¹⁸

In contrast, Wilenski claimed that the direct carver 'starts with a block of stone or marble or wood beneath his hand'.¹⁹ Following Michelangelo, he suggested that the final carving is already embedded in the block and that instead of creating it from scratch, as the modeller does, the sculptor is engaged in 'revealing a formal meaning inherent in that substance and no other'.²⁰ Wilenski conceives of this process as 'collaboration' between the sculptor and the stone. However, the stone also offers the sculptor a 'definite resistance' and 'opposition', and because the work is made 'entirely with his own hand', it is of necessity slow.²¹ In consequence, direct carving involves 'greater judgement and difficulty, obstacles and toil' than modelling

or painting, for the sculptor cannot replace what has been removed, alter his decisions, improvise or 'hope that inspiration will turn up'.²² For Wilenski all these factors cumulatively result in 'the expression of deliberate and considered concepts of permanent and universal significance'.²³ The only way to make modern, serious sculpture of import was to carve it directly.

Throughout *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, Wilenski emphasises the stone beneath the sculptor's hand and carving by their hand alone. Kineton Parkes also stresses the physical contact between sculptor and stone in his two volume book of 1931 *The Art of Sculpture*, but rather than construing it as a relation of collaboration and resistance he characterises it as one of love, tenderness and jealousy. He argued that whereas modelling 'implies some severance from personal contact', direct carving establishes an intense emotional bond between the sculptor and their stones or wood.

There is no doubt that the handling of the material of a work of art from start to finish by its creator must result in a more intimate expression ... There is an affection for his product possessed by the sculptor ... which makes him jealous of its handling by any other person, and so are direct carvers made.²⁴

In actuality clay models can be made using the hands alone, while direct carving would be impossible without chisels, mallets and drills, but because modelling had become so closely associated with the 'gentleman sculptor of manifold commissions' whose models were scaled up and produced in marble or bronze by a team of skilled assistants, it was characterised as being machine-like and as distanced from the artist's body. Direct carving, since it was conceived as a one-person operation

(although Moore acquired his first assistants soon after the publication of *Unit One*) was associated with immediate manual and emotional contact.

By holding their carvings rather than working upon them, Moore and Hepworth are unequivocally represented as direct carvers and therefore as advanced sculptors and not as artists or sculptors in general. This discourse was so potent and the status of direct carvers so exalted, that even the painters tried to ally themselves with it. In his *Unit One* statement Nicholson drew an analogy between his incised paintings and direct carving and Tristram Hillier's catalogue photograph makes a similar connection. He is depicted wearing a flannel shirt with the un-linked cuffs rolled back over a tweed-jacket, his fore-arms bare and flexed and protruding veins highlighted, creating an image that erroneously signifies strenuous manual labour (Fig. 10.6). In his hands Hillier holds a pencil, sharpening it with a knife by cutting away from himself. Far from adopting a painter's demeanour his pose, grasp, and tools connect Hillier with carving.²⁵

III

Hepworth and Moore both hold stones, in Hepworth's case a pebble, in Moore's an unfinished carving, but there is a crucial distinction in *how* they hold their object. Both Moore's portrait (Fig. 10.7) and the photograph of his hands (Fig. 10.2) depict him embracing his sculptures. In his close-cropped portrait he looks out, to the right of shot, and leaning against his shoulder is the carving that appears in the photograph of his hands beneath. In this second image he cradles his 'Mother and Child' sculpture against his body, his pose exactly replicating that of the stone 'Mother'. Like Moore, Hepworth also made 'Mother and Child' carvings and three of the four carvings depicted in the *Unit One* catalogue take this theme, but unlike

Moore, Hepworth is not depicted in the pose of a mother to her child the sculpture. Rather, Hepworth sits with her arms resting on a table slightly removed from the stone she grasps lightly between her hands (Fig.10.1). Arguably, the difference between Moore's embrace and Hepworth's loose grasp concerned the attribution of gender roles within discourses of direct carving.

In his reviews of Barbara Hepworth's 1933 exhibition at Lefèvre galleries, Adrian Stokes wrote that the true carver 'attacks his material and 'he woos the block', smoothing and caressing the stone with love and reverence.²⁶ "Advanced' carvers', he continued have 'felt not only the block but also its potential fruit, to always be feminine', a formulation that was clearly problematic in relation to Barbara Hepworth.²⁷ Stokes sees Hepworth as one of the 'advanced' carvers so in line with his argument she should have assumed a masculine relation to her feminine object. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Stokes asserts that her success is directly connected to being female:

A man would have made the group more pointed; no man could have treated this composition with such a pure complacence. The idea itself is a spectacular one, but it gains from Miss Hepworth's hands a surer poignancy.²⁸

Perhaps realising that he had, even in this very short review undercut his own argument, Stokes retreats, concluding that 'her carving is astonishingly mature: whereas the appreciation and critique of sculpture is fatuous'.²⁹

The following year Stokes' published *The Stones of Rimini*, (a response in part to Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* which also characterises carving as a distinctly masculine pursuit). Removed from the necessity to negotiate an actual female

carver, the account of gender that he adduces is clearer if no less bizarre. Like his contemporaries Stokes made a firm distinction between modelling which took its material to be 'no more than so much suitable stuff' and carving as 'an articulation of something that already exists in the block'.³⁰ Stokes developed this point further, claiming that in successful carving 'not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure, has come to life'. This animation of the stone takes place under the *hand* of the sculptor: 'Polishing, when it is hand-polish and not a chemical polish ... gives life and light to the stone', the 'hand-polished marble's glow ... can only be compared to the light on flesh-and-blood'.³¹ Even more extremely, polishing stone was 'like slapping the new born infant to make it breathe'.³²

Crucially, only carvers can animate the stone and carving is the prerogative of 'man, in his male aspect'. The male sculptor woos the female marble whose 'hard luminous surface ... suffers all the stroking and polishing, all the definition that our hands and mouths bestow on those we love' and feels life 'beneath his tool' which Stokes notes is 'masculine' in shape.³³ The sculptures that emerge from the female block of stone, Stokes continues, 'are her children, the proof of the carver's love for the stone'.³⁴ Having been in analysis with Melanie Klein, Stokes was presumably aware that he was constructing a fantasy of creativity, but his writing nonetheless attributes men with the power to animate raw materials and, in the shape of sculptures, to create offspring. By comparison, women are either linked to the raw material of stone, from which life can be made to emerge by the (male) carver's touch or to the inferior art of modelling. 'Woman', writes Stokes, 'moulds her products', and as moulding cannot endow life, only replicate its forms and figures, modellers are rendered curiously sterile.³⁵

Published in the same year as *The Stones of Rimini*, the photographs of Moore and Hepworth in *Unit One* show Moore in two poses traditionally associated with a mother: he cradles his stone carved child in his arms, and held against his chest. Hepworth could almost be modelling, since her thumbs are raised above the stone as if about to start pressing down to mould and shape the material. Here, two more details are pertinent. In the *Unit One* photograph she holds a pale grey pebble whereas the alternative photograph which she included in her *Pictorial Autobiography* shows her holding a larger, darker sphere which resembles clay (Fig. 10.8).³⁶ This explicit allusion may have been rejected in the selection of the final image but her pose still subtly references modelling. In addition, the rejected photograph shows her without a ring, whereas in the *Unit One* image she has a large (opal?) ring on her wedding finger, the disparity between the images suggesting that it was worn deliberately. The decision may have been made on aesthetic grounds for, located almost exactly in the centre of the shot, its gleaming whiteness focuses the viewer's gaze onto her hands. Nevertheless this punctum also provides a clear reminder of marriage, her femininity, and that Hepworth is (in this context) an anomaly, a woman carver.³⁷

IV

The overlapping discourses of the artist's hand and the direct carver's touch account for the differences in the *Unit One* photographs. For the painter the hand was the focus and conduit of ability, the thing that connected the artists to the artwork. In 1934, holding a pencil or a brush against the paper or canvas was enough to indicate mastery. Holding stone or a sculpture indicated that the subject of the photograph

was a direct carver; embracing it allied Moore to a discourse that privileged masculinity as a creative and procreative force, 'moulding' it feminized Hepworth and placed her lower down the hierarchy of sculpture. Thus, what the artists held and how they held it mattered, since these images of a paintbrush lightly balanced, a knife grasped, or a sculpture embraced all situated the artists in slightly different ways, crediting some with more skill, a greater engagement with modern art, or with the advanced practice of carving than others.

These photographs draw from and articulate a complex and nuanced discourse of touch. Analysing them in detail shows how their signification is highly differentiated – these are not just images of artists' touch – but of sculptors as distinct from painters, direct carvers from modellers, of male and female touch, and of men as mothers. In these photographs touch functions as the conduit of expression, as evidence of expertise and as the guarantee of integrity, authenticity and originality. If the eight small black and white photographs I have discussed in this chapter offer such permutations, then how many more could be found within the conceptualisation, representation and articulation of touch within sculpture or art practice more generally?

Pointing to the nuances of touch and of the discourses that constitute our conceptions of touch does not invalidate the association between touch, participatory art and inclusive social interaction. Nor does it suggest that touch cannot be allied to women's experience or used strategically within a critical feminist art practice. What it does imply is that touch should not be characterised as one thing or another, rather that the nuances of touch should be fully acknowledged and examined. This sited approach to sensory interaction is nothing new for art history or

visual culture studies since there have been many fine analyses of vision and visuality over recent decades, but the specificities of gender, history, culture and so forth are regularly evacuated from the study of touch. Perhaps ironically then theorists of touch may need to emulate their colleagues in visual studies to a far greater degree and to write about touch more strategically and with more specificity.

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: les presses du reel, 2002, pp 9, 15, 43.

² Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society, World of Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. 323.

³ For example see: Jennifer Fisher, "Tactile Affects," *Tessera*, 32, 2002, pp.17-28; Constance Classen, "Feminine Tactics: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetic in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen, Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005, pp.228-39; and essays in Rosemary Betterton, *Unframed: Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2004. Contemporary links between women's experience and touch often derive from Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. For an excellent discussion of the nuances of touch within feminist performance art see: Peggy Phelan, 'The Returns of Touch: Feminist Performances 1960-80', in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Lisa Gabrielle Mark ed., Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007.

⁴ On the diversity of the artists see Mark Glazebrook, 'Unit One: Spirit of the 'Thirties', in *Unit One: Spirit of the 30's*, London: The Mayor Gallery, 1984.

⁵ Paul Nash, "Unit One," *The Times*, Monday June 12 1933, p. 10

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Herbert Read, ed., *Unit 1: The Modern Movement in English Architecture Painting and Sculpture*, London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1934, p.12

⁸ According to Harrison, Read modelled Unit One on the Paris group Abstraction Création publications of artworks with accompanying artist's statements. Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, London: Allen Lane, 1981, p. 249.

⁹ It is likely that Hepworth was holding a pebble since Nash had already likened her work to such. See Paul Nash, 'A Painter and a Sculptor,' in *The Week-end Review*, 19th November 1932, p. 613. Michael Phipps of the Henry Moore Trust, Perry Green has confirmed that Moore's sculpture remains unidentified.

¹⁰ Read, *Unit 1*, p. 15.

¹¹ Herbert Read's 1934 volume on Moore opens with the sculptor standing beside a finished 'Mother and Child' carving, his left arm draped around its shoulders.

¹² Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1933, p.144.

¹³ While Read was no conventional connoisseur, his work as a keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum between 1922 and 1931 (a home for some of the most eminent English connoisseurs of the early-mid twentieth century) and as editor of the *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* from 1933 meant that he was steeped in that terminology and practice. For biographical details see James King, *The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990. For an good overview of European connoisseurship see Mansfield Kirby Talley, 'Connoisseurship and the Methodology of the Rembrandt Research Project', *The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 8 (2), 1989, pp.175-214.

¹⁴ Harrison, *English Art*, p 248.

¹⁵ The stress on direct carving had long antecedents within English art criticism; John Ruskin had written extensively on the ethical and aesthetic superiority of hand-work, ideas that had been expounded by William Morris, both of whom Read and his circle were familiar with. Eric Gill, Gaudier-Breszka and Jacob Epstein had pioneered direct carving techniques in England before the war. For a detailed discussion of direct carving in its European context see Penelope Curtis, *Modern British Sculpture: From the Collection*, Liverpool: Tate Gallery Publications, 1988, p. 29.

¹⁶ R.H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1932, p.99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 96.

²² *Ibid.* p.102.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Kineton Parkes, *The Art of Carved Sculpture*, 2 vols., vol. 1, London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1931, p. 22.

²⁵ Anne Wagner interprets this image as Hillier whittling a piece of wood which would further emphasise its allegiance to carving). Anne Middleton Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 144.

²⁶ Adrian Stokes, 'Miss Hepworth's Carving', in *The Critical Writing of Adrian Stokes*, Lawrence Gowing ed., London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p. 309.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 310.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Adrian Stokes, 'The Stones of Rimini', in *The Critical Writings*, p. 232.

³¹ Ibid. p. 231.

³² Ibid. p. 232.

³³ Ibid. p. 235.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 231.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 230.

³⁶ Barbara Hepworth, *Pictorial Autobiography*, London: Tate Gallery, 1986, p. 25

³⁷ Hepworth was not married at the time. She and her first husband John Skeaping divorced in 1933. The Unit One exhibition was held in April 1934. She married Ben Nicholson in 1938.