

Tactility or Opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith: Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg on *The Art of Sculpture*, 1956

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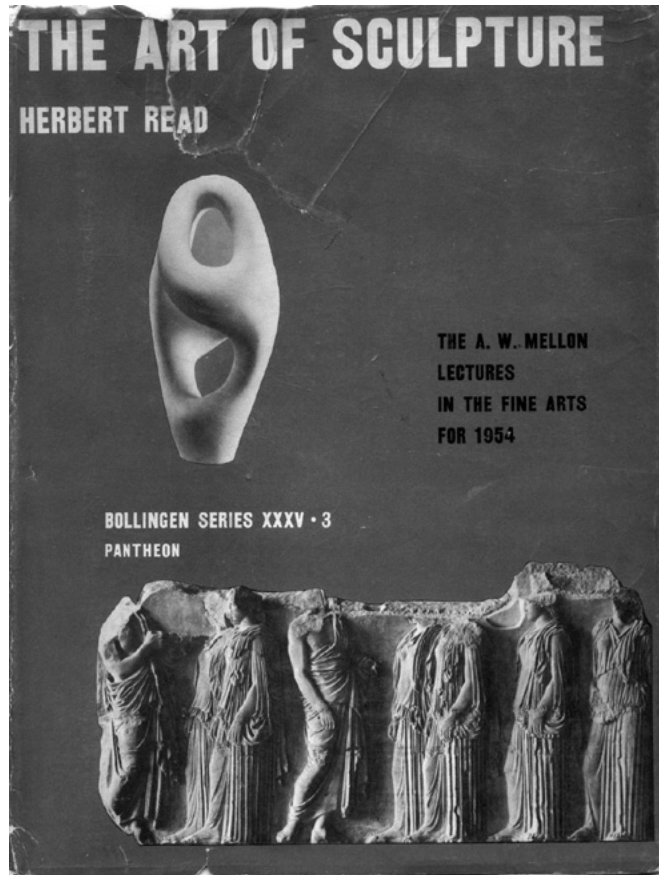
WRITING FOR AN AMERICAN AUDIENCE IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK Review* just before Thanksgiving in November 1956, the prominent critic Clement Greenberg lashed out at Herbert Read. The occasion for this attack was Read's 1956 book *The Art of Sculpture* (fig. 1).¹ Greenberg quipped: "Sir Herbert has already betrayed his discomfort with painting; now he betrays it with sculpture."²

Late in 1953, Read had traveled to the United States to teach for seven months at Harvard University, and to give the Mellon lectures at the National Gallery of Art in the Spring of 1954.³ These lectures were published two years later as *The Art of Sculpture*. In them, Read put forth a wide-ranging history and theory of sculpture that spanned the gamut of human culture from the pre-historic era to contemporary art. Read had often concerned himself with sculpture,⁴ but in this book he set out to establish a systematic and prescriptive theory of the medium. That is, he argued for a core set of evaluative aesthetic criteria that would apply equally to world sculpture.

It was, perhaps, this ambition that incited the wrath of Greenberg. His review was biting and at times petty, but its bile was a direct response to Read's own aspirations with the book. Read did not let Greenberg's review pass unremarked, and the two luminaries would continue to slight each other throughout the next decade. What follows examines the central art-theoretical issue at stake in the Read–Greenberg scuffle, that is, Read's emphasis on tactility versus Greenberg's on opticality. The discussion will focus on Henry Moore and David Smith, the favoured sculptors exemplifying Read and Greenberg's respective views. It becomes clear that the exchange between Read and Greenberg was more than a clash of egos or a specialists' debate. It was a contest in the battle for a public image of the emerging post-war internationalist modernism.

Read's *Art of Sculpture* argued for an aesthetics rooted in the medium's physicality. Sculpture was not just an artform to be looked at; it was meant to be *felt*, with and through one's own experience of embodiment. This was especially the case for modern sculpture, which should be understood as "a three-dimensional mass occupying space and only to be apprehended by senses that are alive to its volume and ponderability, as well as to its visual appearance."⁵ Sculpture's volume and bulk, its weight and mass, and its

Figure 1
Cover of Herbert Read's *The Art of Sculpture*
(New York: Pantheon Books, 1956). Reproduced
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occupation of space were all taken by Read to be the essential characteristics of the medium. In so privileging these physical traits, Read attempted to counterbalance the “visual prejudice,” as he called it, that corrupted post-Renaissance sculpture. While one apprehends the sculptural object primarily through vision, Read further argued that the viewer needed a sensitivity specific to physicality and weight. He wrote:

The specifically plastic sensibility is, I believe, more complex than the specifically visual sensibility. It involves three factors: a sensation of the tactile qualities of surfaces; a sensation of volume as denoted by plane surfaces; and a synthetic realization of the mass and ponderability of the object.⁶

The term “ponderability” is crucial in this account. In thinking about a sculpture, we assess its weight and mass rather than merely treating it as a three-dimensional image. Even if we merely contemplate the object, we must take its physicality into account.⁷ Illusionistic sculpture in the post-Renaissance tradition, Read implied, sought to efface or to overcome materiality and physicality, and throughout the *Art of Sculpture* the figurative traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, are subject to his frequent scorn for this reason.

In his account Read displaced the visual with the tactile and offered a new history of sculpture that brought together Western and non-Western examples under one umbrella. Drawn from, among others, prehistoric, Archaic, pre-

Columbian, medieval, and modern sculpture, all of Read's defining examples manifested his central criterion: that sculpture should be considered "art of *palpation*—an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects."⁸

By definition, Read's book tackled the specificity of the medium. From the Renaissance *paragone* to Lessing's *Laokoon* to modernist art criticism, the distinct provinces of the arts have been a source of debate. No one in the twentieth century has been so identified with medium specificity as has Greenberg. His seminal essay of 1940, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," put this concept at the foundation of modernist art and criticism.⁹ This commitment continued throughout his writings and served as the basis for his defence of abstract painting. Just a few months before Read's lectures, Greenberg had reiterated this position once again as the very basis for aesthetic value in art, saying that the "extension of the possibilities of the medium is an integral factor of the exaltation to be gotten from art, in the past as now."¹⁰

For Read to say, as he did in the passage cited above, that the plastic sensibility, and by extension the medium of sculpture, was "*more complex*" than visual sensibility was tantamount to an attack on those axioms Greenberg held dear. For him, it was above all visuality that was the most compelling issue for contemporary art. No doubt, Greenberg understood Read's book as the challenge it was, on his own terms, to his aesthetics, his view of contemporary art, and his position in art criticism in the 1950s.

Greenberg did not care for Read's version of modern art and was particularly suspicious of the psychological and social agency the latter gave to artistic production.¹¹ Beyond their differing methods and theoretical frames, Greenberg especially took offence at what he saw as Read's misreading and dismissal of abstract expressionism, which Greenberg championed as both quintessentially modern and American. In 1955, just a year before the publication of *The Art of Sculpture* and Greenberg's review, Read had written a critical appraisal of the international trend toward gestural abstraction he saw emanating from Pollock's example. The "blotchers," as he called Pollock and his followers, created painting that was "a reflex activity, completely devoid of mental effort, of intellection."¹² He continued:

Some people see ghosts, or receive telepathic messages: others do not. Some people, in the same way, respond to a vaguely suggestive mass of paint. We may envy them, but at the same time suspect that the experience has nothing to do with art.¹³

This negative characterization of abstract expressionism festered and coloured Greenberg's opinion of Read and of British criticism and art. In 1962 Greenberg had still not forgotten Read's 1955 essay and cited it in a polemical piece entitled "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," that, in turn, spurred another *mêlée* between the two critics.¹⁴ When Greenberg said that Read "betrayed his discomfort with painting" in his review of *The Art of Sculpture*, he undoubtedly had that 1955 critique of abstract expressionism in mind.

Surveying Greenberg's writings in the 1940s and 50s, it becomes clear that he reserved a special disdain for things British, especially sculpture.¹⁵ He often voiced his suspicion of British art criticism as a whole and, at various times, attacked others such as David Sylvester, Douglas Cooper, and Lawrence Alloway.¹⁶ As part and parcel of his defence of the vigour of American art, he denigrated those critics and their competing voices, always remembering to remind his

readers of their nationality. His unflinching use of “Sir Herbert” to refer to Read was a means of signaling his target’s Britishness for an American readership and casting a shadow of dilettantism and preciosity. The most internationally visible and successful postwar British art was sculpture, and Greenberg increasingly targeted it in the 1950s. In reaction to Henry Moore’s burgeoning international popularity and the ascendancy of the so-called Geometry of Fear sculptors, both of which were closely identified with Read, Greenberg’s writings of these years were riddled with attacks major and minor on British sculpture.¹⁷

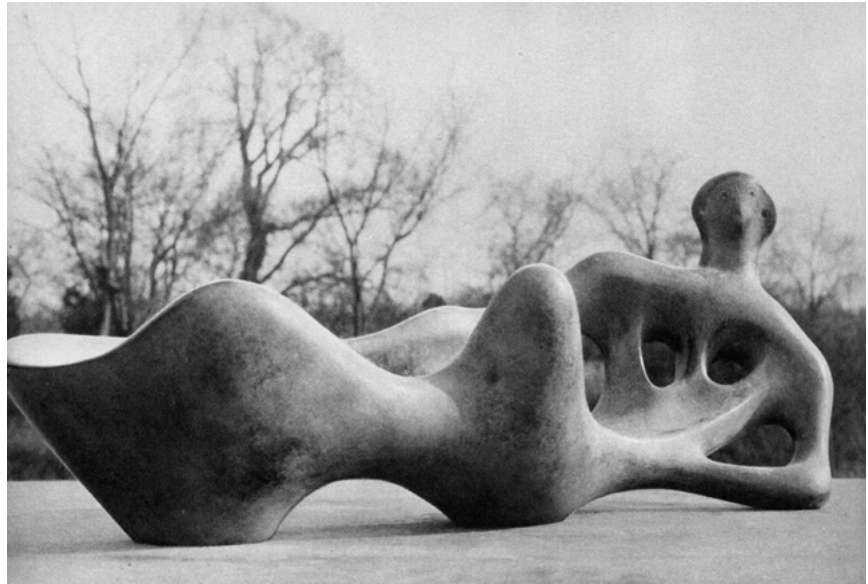
It should be recognized that it was sculpture that was of increasing concern to Greenberg, beginning in the late 1940s when he had begun supporting David Smith as the counterpart to the abstract expressionist painters. He equated Smith’s importance with Jackson Pollock’s, saying that Smith was “the only other American artist of our time who produces an art capable of withstanding the test of international scrutiny and which . . . might justify the term major.”¹⁸ Greenberg’s view of the history of sculpture was simple, and it culminated in Smith. In short, Auguste Rodin had revived the medium while simultaneously infecting it with pictorial effects. The subsequent generation reacted with an ever-greater simplification of sculptural form toward the unitary and monolithic—the “roundness” of his review entitled “Roundness Isn’t All.” Greenberg argued that Constantin Brancusi provided the quietus of this trajectory with his ovoids. Concurrently, Cubism, collage, and the constructions of Pablo Picasso initiated new parameters for sculpture in which solidity was fragmented. This led to an increasingly vibrant incorporation of space into sculpture as it became open, linear and ultimately more optical. Smith’s welded work was heir to this new tradition.¹⁹ In contrast to Read’s preference for sculpture that was carved and biomorphic, Greenberg advocated the combined and the linear. He saw sculpture of the kind produced by Smith, and later Anthony Caro, as paradigmatically modernist. In 1958 he nominated it as exemplary even as he admitted the paucity of examples: “the new construction-sculpture begins to make itself felt as most *representative*, even if not the most fertile, visual art of our time.”²⁰

Such construction-sculpture, as we will see, had second-class status in Read’s 1956 analysis, which forthrightly placed Moore at its centre (fig. 2).²¹ This attitude was readily apparent to any reader of *The Art of Sculpture*, and to counter this prejudice Greenberg ridiculed Read’s emphasis on touching and tactility. He reduced Read’s theoretical model to a simple question of handling works of art, ignoring the larger aims of the book almost entirely. Greenberg wrote:

I doubt whether he realizes what he is saying. Of all the works of sculpture that have moved us, there are very, very few that have not provided their decisive satisfaction through the eyes. I have heard of no one who let his pleasure in a piece of sculpture wait upon his handling of it, and of very few who have succeeded in actually touching most of the pieces they admire.²²

Granted, there are moments in Read’s book that open themselves up to such reductivist critiques. There is, in particular, one unfortunate point in *The Art of Sculpture* where Read states: “Ideally each reader of this volume should be provided, at this stage, with a piece of sculpture to hug, cuddle, fondle—primitive verbs that indicate a desire to treat an object with plastic sensibility.”²³ Even in this quote, however, one gets a sense of the way that touch and tactility

Figure 2
Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), plate 206, Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1945. Bronze, L: 44.5 cm (17½ in.). Reproduced by permission of Princeton University Press and The Henry Moore Foundation



have a metaphoric level that Read stressed throughout his analysis, and it is this level that Greenberg chose to ignore.

Tactility is the central concern of Read's view of sculpture, and it is a theme that is inextricable from his understanding of the medium.²⁴ This view of sculpture he undoubtedly developed out of his close relationship with Henry Moore. Moore's concern with such concepts as direct carving and the integrity of materials privileged a view of sculptural activity and aesthetics rooted in the tactile. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in his widely quoted statement "The Sculptor Speaks" of 1937, in which Moore said:

This is what the sculptor must do. He must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it were, inside his head – he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualizes a complex form from all round itself; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realises its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air.²⁵

This quote makes clear the extent to which a tactile response—even if imagined or virtual—overlapped and interlaced with the predominantly visual aspects of aesthetic appreciation and comprehension for Moore. Read took up this imbrication of embodied tactile response and visibility in his own aesthetics of sculpture, and it is no coincidence that he quoted this very statement from Moore on the first page of *The Art of Sculpture*. With this quote, Read positioned Moore unabashedly as the apotheosis of sculpture, a message that was clear to any who read the book. Greenberg sneered that "[Read] seems to believe in the sculptor Henry Moore as he believes in no painter living or dead."²⁶

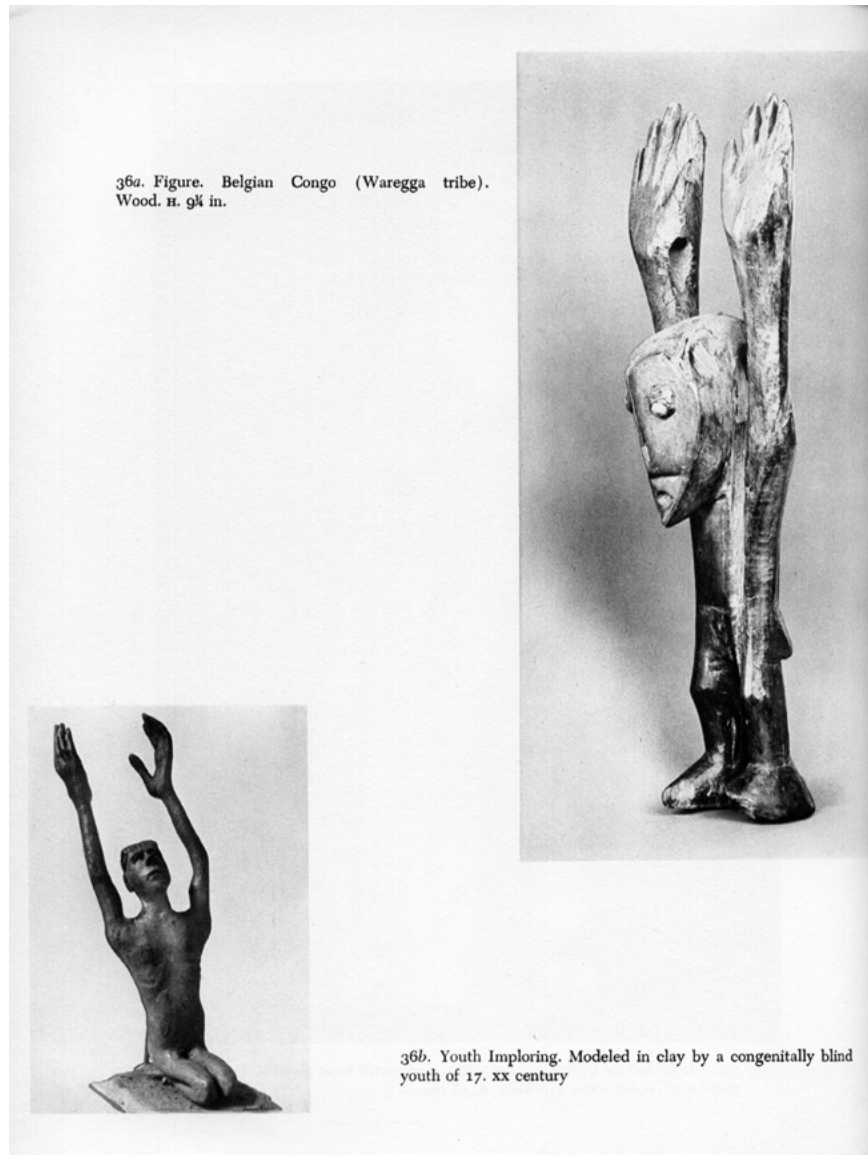
The concept of tactility borrowed from Moore was not, as Greenberg hoped to imply, merely limited to actual touching and fondling of works of art. It was, for Read, a complex perceptual affair in which the visual aspects of form were coordinated with a relative sense of the object's physical traits such as

weight, volume, and mass. He traced a dialectical history in which the tradition of the large-scale public monument and the small, hand-held amulet were the two archetypal origins for freestanding sculpture. The amulet's portability and manipulability provided the catalyst for sculpture's independence from architecture and initiated the realization of sculptural form as truly three-dimensional. Modern sculpture in the form of Moore found a synthesis between the grandeur and civic function of the monument and the intimacy of the touchable amulet. In this schema, a sense of scale and physical relationship was crucial, and the concept of tactile values provided Read with the synthesis of these fundamentals.

Both the making and viewing of sculpture, Read argued, could not be divorced from the sense and experience of physicality and embodiment. He illustrated this concept by reproducing a sculpture made by a congenitally blind teenager (fig. 3). Having never had the ability to see another person, the young artist's image of the human form was built up entirely of bodily experiences. Read explained:

Figure 3

Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), plate 36a, Figure, Belgian Congo (Waregga tribe). Wood, H: 23.5 cm (9¼ in.). Plate 36b, Youth Imploring. Clay. Reproduced by permission from Princeton University Press



The general form of the sculpture is built up from a multitude of tactile impressions; the features that seem to our normal vision to be exaggerated or distorted proceed from inner bodily sensations, an awareness of muscular tensions and reflexive movements. This kind of sensibility has been called *haptic*.²⁷

In this small sculpture of an imploring youth, the upper extremities are exaggerated and expanded, and we can imagine the figure's mental focus on the act of reaching to the heavens to be literalized in the hands. The blind teenager visualized what it feels like to make this imploring gesture, not what it looks like to others. The feet, by contrast, are ridiculously understated, Read concluded, because the pose and subject matter require relatively little of the bodily attention which is, instead, concentrated in the reaching hands.

The blind teenager in Read's account served as confirmation that the haptic sensibility—one's accumulated experience of embodiment and bodiliness—proceeds independently of vision. It illustrated, for him, the fundamental sense that we bring to the sculptural encounter. When a sighted person came to view a sculpture, he argued, the comprehension of the object's physicality was no less directly related to one's experiences of one's own body. In this manner, Read attempted to counter what he saw as the visual prejudice infecting many conceptions of sculptural aesthetics. Sculpture was most effective and true when it activated this haptic sensibility. It did so through a stimulation of touching and tactility, even if this remained an imaginary or virtual potential (fig. 4). That is, touching and tactility provided the most direct interface between the exterior world and one's own embodiment. The activation of this interface is what differentiated sculpture from the pictorial arts. He stated:

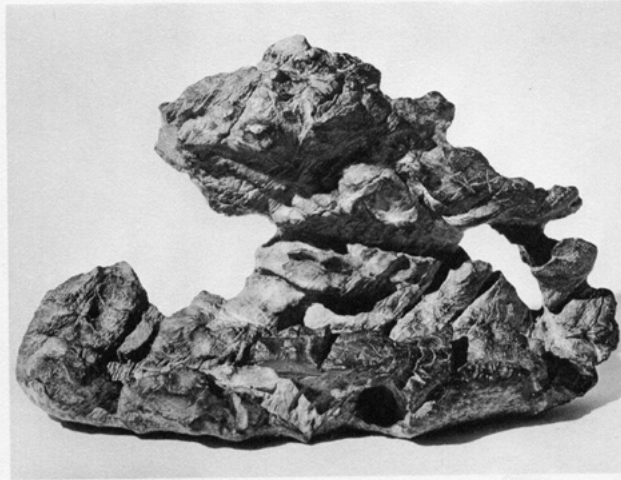
sculpture is primarily an art of "touch-space"—is always and should have been—whereas painting is primarily an art of "sight-space"; and that in both arts most of the confusion between theory and practice is due to the neglect of this distinction.²⁸

He then proceeded to distance his own theory from Bernard Berenson's concept of the "tactile imagination," which Read characterized as solely the representation of three dimensions in painting. He contended:

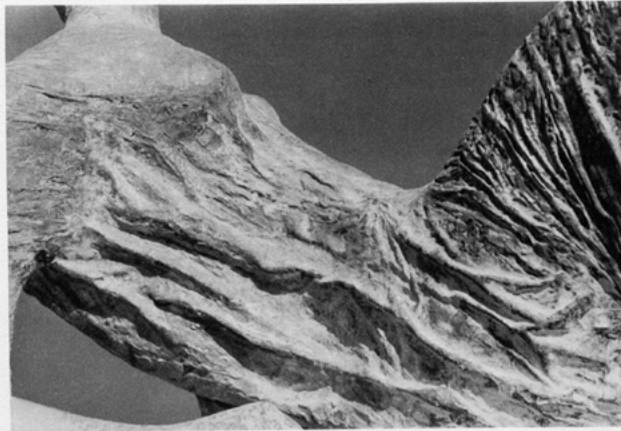
For the sculptor, tactile values are not an illusion to be created on a two-dimensional plane: they constitute a reality to be conveyed directly, an existent mass. Sculpture is an art of *palpation*—an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects. That, indeed, is the only way in which we can have direct sensation of the three-dimensional shape of an object. It is only as our hands move over an object and trace lines of direction that we get any physical sensation of the difference between a sphere and a square; touch is essential to the perception of subtler contrasts of shape and texture.²⁹

In this manifesto for sculpture, it is important to note that Read did not necessarily argue that the viewer must touch the sculpture in order to appreciate it, as Greenberg would have us believe. Rather, it was the aggregate experience of tactility that provides us with an ability to assess ponderability and the non-visual traits of any object. Our haptic sensibility and our sense of the physical

Figure 4
 Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), plate 224a, rock sculpture, Chinese, date uncertain. L: 61 cm (24 in.). Plate 224b, Henry Moore, detail from a reclining figure, 1951. Bronze. Time-Life Building, London. Reproduced by permission from Princeton University Press and The Henry Moore Foundation



224a. Rock sculpture. Chinese, date uncertain. L. 24 in.



224b. HENRY MOORE. Detail from a reclining figure. 1951. Bronze.

environment are both closely tied to our own ever-developing repertoire of tactile and physical experiences. This was the basis for an appreciation of sculpture for Read, and it was decidedly un-optical.

Opticality, by contrast, occupied a central and defining position at the heart of Greenberg's aesthetics.³⁰ Just as he argued that artistic media should strive to isolate what is essential and proper to them, so too did he contend that the viewer's encounter with the object was primarily and properly a visual engagement. He had little sympathy for the bodily sensations and sensibilities that Read discussed. In his review of Read's book, he wrote, "Sculpture does invoke the sense of touch—as well as our sense of space in general—but it does so primarily through the sense of sight and the tactile associations of which that sense is capable."³¹ Greenberg reacted strongly against Read's attack on visuality, and he made certain to reassert the primacy of the optical throughout his review.

The Greenbergian concept of opticality is most often identified with his essay "Modernist Painting" but it is first put forcefully into play in his discus-

sions of sculpture of the preceding years.³² Greenberg believed that sculpture must strive to overcome its obdurate objecthood in order to offer a compelling visual experience. In direct contrast to Read, Greenberg argued that the most important modernist sculpture transcended its materiality to offer a purely visual experience. It had the potential to provide, in this regard, an optical encounter superior to that of painting and its inherent illusionism. A painting—because of its flat surface and conventionally rectangular shape—always carried with it the potential for the depiction of depth, figure–ground relationships, and spatial illusionism. As he famously said:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness . . . The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it . . . is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension.³³

By contrast, sculpture did not necessarily struggle with the pull of pictorial illusion. The figure–ground relationship that immediately suggests depth in a pictorial field does not concern the freestanding statue, the background of which is the space shared by the viewer.

This potential of sculpture to create a complex visual experience of form worked best for Greenberg when actual space was incorporated into the work. He was not, however, thinking about the sculpture of an artist like Moore or Hepworth, despite the latter’s reputation for piercing the monolith. In Greenberg’s view, true modernist sculpture left behind the solidity and roundness that Brancusi perfected. For him, Moore was an anachronism. The new way had been opened by Picasso with collage and construction, and culminated in Julio González “drawing in space” and, ultimately, David Smith (fig. 5).³⁴ In effect, Greenberg’s polemical history of modernist sculpture assumed an evolutionary leap comparable to a change of species. From this perspective, he could never see Moore’s carvings and figures as anything more than Neanderthal.

Welded and constructed sculpture was superior, for Greenberg, because it had the potential to be linear and graphic, to repudiate solidity, and consequently to incorporate actual space. Not all that was welded or iron would necessarily take advantage of these potential traits, and Greenberg wrote against sculptors, such as the Geometry of Fear sculptors, who did not explore opticality as the primary aim of constructed sculpture.³⁵ In the work of which he approved and of which Smith was the central practitioner, “space is there to be shaped, divided, enclosed, but not to be filled or sealed in. The new sculpture tends to abandon stone, bronze, and clay for industrial materials.”³⁶ Already in 1948, he had argued: “What is of the essence is that the construction is no longer a statue, but rather a *picture* in three-dimensional space, and that the sculptor in the round is liberated from the necessity of observing the habits of gravity and mass.”³⁷ With this privileging of sculpture’s immateriality in mind, it is easy to see from where his utter disdain for Read’s antithetical beliefs derived. Opticality and constructed sculpture were defined in relation to each other, and together became a determining theme in Greenberg’s aesthetics. Despite his overriding enthusiasm for painting, it was again sculpture that provided the test case in his system.

Writing a decade later in 1958, Greenberg summed up this interconnection between modernist sculpture and opticality:

Figure 5
 David Smith (American, 1906–1965), *Baron's Moon*, 1958. Steel and paint, 85.1 × 52.1 × 16.5 cm (33½ × 20½ × 6½ in.). Gift of Mrs. Morton G. Schamberg, 1992.99. The Art Institute of Chicago. © Estate of David Smith/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo © The Art Institute of Chicago



Under the modernist “reduction” sculpture has turned out to be almost as exclusively visual in its essence as painting itself. It has been “liberated” from the monolithic as much because of the latter’s excessive tactile associations, which partake of illusion, as because of the hampering conventions that cling to it. But sculpture is still permitted a greater latitude of figurative allusiveness than painting because it remains tied, inexorably, to the third dimension and is therefore inherently less illusionistic. The literalness that was once its handicap has now become its advantage.³⁸

Notably, Greenberg remembered to include a brief dismissal of the tactile in this praise of construction-sculpture as the fulfilment of modernist aesthetics. It is highly unlikely he would have included this mention of the tactile without at least a partial reference to Read in mind. Any doubt is dispelled by the subsequent pages in which he repeatedly attacked the haptic and enshrined the optical. He continued: “The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone, and eyesight has more freedom of movement and invention within three dimensions than within two.”³⁹ For Greenberg, the eye was paramount, and construction-sculpture presented the paradigmatic experience of opticality.

The contrast could not be more striking when Read wrote about the visual:

It is a false simplification to base the various arts on any one sensation, for what actually takes place, in any given experience, is a

chain reaction or *Gestaltkreis* in which one sensation touches off and involves other sensations, either by memory association or by actual sensory motor connections. An art owes its particularity to the emphasis or preference given to any one organ of sensation. If sculpture has any such particularity, it is to be distinguished from painting as the plastic art that gives preference to tactile sensations as *against visual sensations*, and it is precisely when this preference is clearly stated that sculpture attains its highest and its unique aesthetic values.⁴⁰

Herein lies the source of Greenberg's objection. There is no "tactile sensation" not mediated through the optical. In his review, he wrote of "sculpture's dependence upon the association of virtual tactility with actual visibility,"⁴¹ clearly seeing tactility as superfluous to sculpture's aesthetic potential. He was correct to note Read's somewhat indefensible denigration of the visual in preference for the haptic, but Greenberg pursues this point to the extreme opposite position, arguing that matter and touch are of little importance. Read published his *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* in 1964, in which he made an implicit reply to Greenberg's critique. He wrote: "The inner truth of growth and form is revealed to touch rather than to sight; touch at least has the sensational priority, and if it is objected that the spectator does not normally apprehend sculpture by this means, it is the spectator's loss."⁴²

There is little to be gained by adjudicating this match. Both Read and Greenberg took their judgments about the primacy of the tactile or the optical as axiomatic, and both entrenched themselves in partisan and teleological accounts of sculpture. The underlying concern for both was to write a history of sculpture that justified their favoured artists—Moore or Smith—making them appear as if they were the necessary and logical conclusion to the evolution of modern art. The debate about sculptural aesthetics was, in other words, also a debate about who was the exemplary modernist sculptor.

Read's advocacy for Moore was clear. By transforming Moore's emphasis on tactile imagination into the core value for sculpture, Read implied that the sculptor's technique and works could be nothing less than the fulfilment of sculpture's essence. In the concluding pages of *The Art of Sculpture*, Read offered a list of exemplary works from the great epochs of sculpture; Moore's work is the only post-Renaissance sculpture in his pantheon.⁴³ Read's book did more than merely praise Moore, however. It also took aim at the linear construction-sculpture that was so dear to Greenberg. For Read, this work was, simply put, not sculpture, even though he admitted that it could still be viable as art. He wrote of the tendency toward the constructed, assembled, and graphic:

The temptation is to go further than this and to create . . . objects with linear outlines that define space but do not occupy it. At this point, as I suggested, a new art is born: a negative sculpture, a sculpture that denies the basic elements of the art of sculpture as we have hitherto conceived it, a sculpture that rejects all the attributes of palpable mass. I do not deny that an art of great possibilities is conceivable in this direction, but technically it would be classified in any museum not as sculpture but as wrought ironwork. It is an art that in the past was not despised.⁴⁴

This passage is polite and cool but nevertheless damning. One imagines when reading this page of Read's book that he had the galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum in mind. In the future, Moore would be centre stage in the sculpture court, and Smith would be exiled to the upstairs mezzanine among the gates and grilles. Smith and his ilk, Read had no hesitation saying, not only did not produce sculpture but furthermore represented an evolutionary regression in his modernist teleology. If Greenberg saw Moore as outdated in what he once called his "archaic artiness,"⁴⁵ then Read understood the optical focus of a sculptor such as Smith as no less backward and anachronistic. Rather than modern, Read wrote, "I am inclined to see in linear sculpture a return to the visual prejudices of the Renaissance or perhaps to the surface dynamism of the Middle Ages."⁴⁶ He later characterized this heritage of visual prejudice as mere "mannerism in modern sculpture."⁴⁷

Read's arguments about construction-sculpture were fraught with contradictions and complexities. He had earlier been an advocate of the Geometry of Fear sculptors, many of whom he had, at that time, classed among those working in constructive techniques.⁴⁸ Read's commitments to this group were strategic in relation to his aspirations for British culture abroad. He did support these artists earlier in the 1950s, but the 1956 *Art of Sculpture* represents a re-assertion of Moore's primacy as the paradigmatic modern sculptor *and* as the proper model for future developments. Read's 1964 *Concise History of Modern Sculpture* later returned to this point, subordinating again those younger sculptors he had originally supported and revising his own phrase "geometry of fear" as a useful label.⁴⁹ Beyond this shift in the mid-1950s, one can also understand Read's contradictory critique of construction-sculpture in the *Art of Sculpture* and after as a deliberate attempt to differentiate among artists who pushed welded and constructed sculpture into the linear, optical "drawing in space" that Greenberg held dear, and those who did not. None of the British practitioners of welded sculpture embraced its optical and, in Read's equation, antitactile possibilities as did Smith. In fact, many of them turned back to casting their assemblages soon thereafter.

Throughout *The Art of Sculpture*, Read positions his argument against the antithesis of true sculpture which, for him, was the denial of ponderability and tactility that construction-sculpture facilitated. A struggle for the medium of sculpture, he argued, had erupted in the course of modernism, and Moore was the paladin in his crusade with his carvings. Smith, by contrast, is largely ignored by Read throughout his writings. Smith is entirely omitted from *The Art of Sculpture* and is only mentioned twice, briefly, in his later *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture*. Moore, by contrast, has over 30 different references in the index to the latter and 16 illustrations to Smith's one. In Read's writings, Smith was most likely a casualty of the conflict with Greenberg, who was the sculptor's most vociferous supporter and who pushed an interpretation of Smith based almost solely on opticality. More fundamentally, however, Read made a concerted effort to subordinate constructed sculpture, whether Smith's linear and optical constructions or the welded or cast assemblages of British artists such as Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, or Geoffrey Clarke, as an ancillary avenue in contrast to the ponderability exemplified by Moore.⁵⁰ He argued "Without a doubt a crisis now exists; it will have to be resolved by a return to the tactile compactness that by definition is the distinctive attribute of sculpture."⁵¹ In turn, the other work must be relegated to a

different category, implicitly lower in the hierarchy of media. At the close of the book he wrote:

What I have asserted—and nothing in my aesthetic experience has ever weakened my conviction on this point – is that the art of sculpture achieves its maximum and most distinct effect when the sculptor proceeds *almost blindly* to the statement of tactile values, values of the palpable, the ponderable, the assessable mass.⁵²

Read's anti-optical and pro-tactile agenda is perhaps nowhere as succinctly put as in those words "almost blindly."

Greenberg understood the challenge of Read's book, and his review of it coincided with a major article he was writing on David Smith, also published in the winter of 1956. In that article, he contrasted Smith to the current state of sculpture and the "inflated reputations" of the likes of Moore, Marino Marini, and Alberto Giacometti. More directly, he set Smith in opposition to what he ironically called the "awakening" of the Geometry of Fear sculptors with their "Cubist artiness" and "anaemic elegance." He nominated Smith without hesitation as "the best sculptor of his generation."⁵³ This was by no means a new position, and he had made similar laudatory claims over the past decade.⁵⁴ Read's *Art of Sculpture* presented the challenge it did not just because of the two critics' difference of opinion about sculptural aesthetics, but because it openly praised a sculptor Greenberg deplored as well as implicitly dismissed the artist Greenberg had chosen to champion.

Greenberg wanted for Smith an international reputation such as that achieved by Moore. By the mid-1950s, Moore had emerged as the quintessential public sculptor for the postwar era. His archetypal figures seemed to embody the aspirations of a generic and embracing internationalism rooted in universal humanist values. Moore was a household name. He had been supported and popularized internationally through British Council exhibitions, and he had a particularly strong presence in North America.⁵⁵ Greenberg must have been aware that in 1955 Moore had been given a major commission for the main sculpture for the new headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), effectively placing him at the centre of the United Nation's aspirations to cultural internationalism and modernism.⁵⁶ Greenberg jealously looked at Moore's international position and desired it for Smith. In the closing paragraph of his 1956 article on Smith he wrote:

What is desirable is that [Smith's] works be more widely and publicly distributed, here and abroad, so that they can present their claims in person. And perhaps to be hoped for most of all is that he receive the kind of commission that will permit him to display that capacity for large scale, heroic, and monumental sculpture which is his more than any other artist's now alive.⁵⁷

It was this question of public sculpture that fueled Greenberg and Read's analyses. Simply put, both understood that sculpture, more so than the other arts, has an important cultural function as the public embodiment of ideals. Sculpture's exemplarity has never been unassailable, but the medium labours under the presumption of its civic role and importance. It is significant that both Read and Greenberg allude to this unique position of sculpture, and for both public sculpture remains the ultimate guarantor of international

success and future viability. It is sculpture's very obdurate physical nature that contributes to its longevity, and the monuments of the past determine how that past is remembered. Read said as much when he argued in his book, "From time to time a civilization falls from grace, and art is destroyed by fanaticism, taxation, and war. But the monuments remain—monoliths along a path that for four hundred centuries is otherwise unmarked."⁵⁸ Read's teleological narrative positioned Moore, as the creator of archetypal images in enduring stone and bronze, as the fulfilment and ultimate manifestation of this belief.

Read later reiterated this position in a 1962 essay that reflected back on his book. Redoubling his effort to argue for a public ideal for the medium, he wrote that sculptors such as Moore:

aim to create objects which focus and crystallize emotions that are not so much personal as public, and stand in relation to society, not as representations of the external world, much less as expressions of the artist's personal consciousness or feeling, but rather as catalysts of a collective consciousness.⁵⁹

As both Read's and Greenberg's comments demonstrate, they argued so fervently about sculpture precisely because of its potential place in society at large. They both could not but have had in mind when writing in 1956 recent events such as the 1951–53 competition for the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner, at the time the largest international competition for a public sculpture, or Moore's 1955 commission for the UNESCO sculpture. Greenberg knew that Smith had submitted to the American preliminary competition for the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner but was not chosen to be among the eleven finalists exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1953.⁶⁰ The results of the international competition were dominated by British artists that Read, who was a member of the selection committee, had supported—one of whom, Reg Butler, was given the ultimately unrealized commission.⁶¹

Just a decade after the close of the Second World War, the global distribution of cultural activity was still in flux, and both Read and Greenberg had nationalist agendas they pursued with their art criticism. As the most ardent proponent of a modernism defined through American art, Greenberg saw Read's universalist account of the medium of sculpture as a challenge to his vision, to his understanding of modernist art, and most importantly to his aspirations for American cultural ascendancy on the global stage. Moore and Read represented the competition—both being the more established and accepted representatives of internationalist modernism. In this regard, the scuffle over the *Art of Sculpture* played out on a microcosmic level the larger, global battle between the two primary victor nations for the public face of modernism in the decade after the close of the Second World War.

Both Read and Greenberg understood these stakes, and the implications and motivations for the debate about tactility and opticality extended beyond a quarrel about the proper aesthetics of sculpture. Both writers were deeply committed to their own definitions of modernism, and both hoped that it was in public sculpture that their favoured artists would provide an enduring monument to their own view of modernism for the newly reconstituted postwar international community and for history.

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Notes

- 1 H. Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956).
- 2 C. Greenberg, "Roundness Isn't All: Review of *The Art of Sculpture* by Herbert Read," *New York Times*, November 25, 1956, pp. 62–63, reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. J. O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 3, p. 270. This was not his first dismissal of Read; see also *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 122, vol. 2, pp. 146–47, 287, and vol. 3, pp. 254–55.
- 3 Read's lectures began in March 1954. Aldous Huxley was initially scheduled to give the lectures that year but canceled due to illness. See J. King, *The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 274–77.
- 4 For an overview, see T. Friedman, "Herbert Read on Sculpture," in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, eds. B. Read and D. Thistlewood, exh. cat. (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1993), pp. 103–18. A valuable discussion of Read's position in relation to sculpture in the 1950s can be found in R. Burstow, "The Geometry of Fear: Herbert Read and British Modern Sculpture after the Second World War," in *ibid.*, pp. 119–32.
- 5 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. ix.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 7 Read's emphasis on the physicality of the sculptural object drew upon a central theme for the history of sculpture and, in particular, for modern sculpture in Britain since the late nineteenth century. For discussion of the renewed emphasis on sculptural physicality and its contribution to the emergence of modern sculpture in Britain see D. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). For a related argument, see D. Getsy, "Privileging the Object of Sculpture: Actuality and Harry Bates's *Pandora* of 1890," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (2005), pp. 74–95. On these issues' transmission to and development by Read's contemporaries, see A. Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
- 8 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. 49.
- 9 Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 23–38.
- 10 Greenberg, "Symposium: Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?" (1953), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 156.
- 11 See Greenberg, "Roundness Isn't All," for examples.
- 12 Read, "A Blot on the Scutcheon," *Encounter* 5, no. 22 (1955), p. 56. The occasion for this piece was an exhibition organized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. There were eight countries represented and a total of 44 artists and 165 paintings, but Read's critique clearly singles out Pollock, and by extension abstract expressionism.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 14 Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name" (1962), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, pp. 135–44; and Greenberg and Read, "A Critical Exchange with Herbert Read on 'How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name'" (1963), in *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 145–49.
- 15 See J. Hall, "Clement Greenberg on English Sculpture and Englishness," *Sculpture Journal* 4 (2000), pp. 173–77. As Hall notes, in the 1960s, the exception was his advocacy of Anthony Caro. See further R. Krauss, "How Paradigmatic Is Anthony Caro?" *Art in America* 63, no. 5 (1975), pp. 80–83.
- 16 In addition to those references cited above, see Greenberg, "The European View of American Art" (1950), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 59–62.
- 17 A clear example is Greenberg, "David Smith" (1956–57), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 275–79.
- 18 Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" (1947), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, pp. 166–67.
- 19 This history is repeated throughout Greenberg's writings. The most direct manifestations of it can be found in his essays "Cross-Breeding of Modern Sculpture" (1952), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 107–13; "David Smith," in *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 275–79;

“Sculpture in Our Time” (1958), in *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 55–61; and “Intermedia,” *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 2 (1981), pp. 92–93.

20 Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 60. A similar claim was made in an earlier manifestation of this argument: “[T]his new ‘genre’ [of sculpture-construction] is perhaps the most important manifestation of the visual arts since cubist painting, and is at this moment pregnant with more excitement than any other art except music.” Greenberg, “The New Sculpture” (1949), in *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 319.

21 There are two main exceptions: first, the younger Geometry of Fear sculptors whom Read had supported earlier in the fifties, and, second, Naum Gabo, with whom Read had a close friendship and to whom (with Moore and Hepworth) *The Art of Sculpture* is dedicated. Read himself returned to this inconsistency in a later essay: H. Read, “The Ambiguity of Modern Sculpture,” in *A Letter to a Young Painter* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962), pp. 211–32. Also, in his later survey of modern sculpture, Read attempted to accommodate in one analysis the trajectories represented in his mind by Moore on the one hand and Gabo on the other, but he continued to hesitate to call the work of Gabo, Pevsner, and others “sculpture.” H. Read, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1964), pp. 14–15, 106–8. This latter contradiction was apparent to many in Read’s circle. Eileen Agar remarked, “Even [Read’s] great friend Henry Moore told me that he had sleepless nights at first when he heard that Read was prepared to support Naum Gabo, whose work was so completely different that it seemed to cut at the base of what Henry stood for—solidity and form.” E. Agar in collaboration with A. Lambirth, *A Look at My Life* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 130.

22 Greenberg, “Roundness Isn’t All,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 272.

23 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. 72.

24 I disagree with James Hall when he says that this focus is a “one-off” in “Herbert Read (1893–1968): *The Art of Sculpture, 1954*,” in *The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts: Fifty Years* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, 2002), p. 38. Read continued to apply and adapt such concepts as the importance of touch and the sensation of ponderability in later works including Read, *Lynn Chadwick* (Amriswil: Bodensee-Verlag, 1958); Read, “Ambiguity of Modern Sculpture,” in *Letter to a Young Painter*, and Read, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*.

25 Henry Moore, “The Sculptor Speaks” (1937), in *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations*, ed. A. Wilkinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 194.

26 Greenberg, “Roundness Isn’t All,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 270.

27 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. 30.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

30 The identification of Greenberg with the primacy of opticality is so widespread that it has led to frequent mischaracterizations of his project. For a brief assessment of this problem, see M. Fried, “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 19–23. As Fried notes (p. 58 n. 5), one of the most important critiques of modernist opticality and of Greenberg is R. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993). A thorough analysis of Greenberg and the implications of his account of opticality can be found in C. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

31 Greenberg, “Roundness Isn’t All,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 272.

32 Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, pp. 85–91; Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” in *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 313–19; and Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” in *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 55–61.

33 Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960), in *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 90.

34 For an account of this general trajectory, see C. Giménez, *Picasso and the Age of Iron*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1993).

35 For instance, Greenberg, “David Smith,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 276.

36 Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 58.

37 Greenberg, “Review of a Joint Exhibition of Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo” (1948), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 226. Emphasis added.

38 Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 59.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. 70. Emphasis added.

41 Greenberg, “Roundness Isn’t All,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 272.

- 42 Read, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*, pp. 15–16.
- 43 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, pp. 117–19.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 45 Greenberg, “David Smith,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 276.
- 46 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, pp. 115–16.
- 47 Read, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*, p. 25.
- 48 On the Geometry of Fear, see Burstow, “The Geometry of Fear,” in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, pp. 103–18; M. Garlake, “Identifying the Geometry of Fear,” in *Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear*, ed. J. Hyman (London: James Hyman Fine Art, 2002), pp. 4–5; and J. Hyman, “Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear,” in *ibid.*, pp. 6–11. See also above, note 21.
- 49 Read, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*, pp. 218–22 and 245–56.
- 50 For instance, Read would reiterate the centrality of ponderability and the values of *The Art of Sculpture* in the slightly later Read, *Lynn Chadwick*, p. 8.
- 51 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, p. 103.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17. Emphasis added.
- 53 Greenberg, “David Smith,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 276–77, 79.
- 54 See for instance Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of David Smith, David Hare, and Mirko,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 140.
- 55 M. Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 232–39; and H. Seldis, *Henry Moore in America*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1973).
- 56 See C. Pearson, “Hepworth, Moore and the United Nations: Modern Art and the Ideology of Post-War Internationalism,” *Sculpture Journal* 6 (2001), pp. 89–99.
- 57 Greenberg, “David Smith,” in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 279.
- 58 Read, *Art of Sculpture*, pp. 122–23.
- 59 Read, “Ambiguity of Modern Sculpture,” in *Letter to a Young Painter*, p. 226.
- 60 See J. Marter, “The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art: The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition,” *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (1994), pp. 30–31.
- 61 See further R. Burstow, “Butler’s Competition Project for a Monument to ‘The Unknown Political Prisoner’: Abstraction and Cold War Politics,” *Art History* 12, no. 4 (1989), pp. 472–96; R. Burstow, “The Limits of Modernist Art as a ‘Weapon of the Cold War’: Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner,” *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1997), pp. 68–80; and A. Lapp, “The Freedom of Sculpture—The Sculpture of Freedom: The International Sculpture Competition for a Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner, London, 1951–3,” *Sculpture Journal* 2 (1998), pp. 113–22.