

Artist Boss

Anthony Caro's studio assistants and
issues of legacy in British sculpture.

Jenny Dunseath
Mark Wilsher

Artist Boss examines the role of studio assistants, raising questions concerning the status of production, originality, authenticity and authorship within the tradition of twentieth-century British sculpture.

Focusing specifically on Anthony Caro (1924–2013) for his employment of studio assistants, this monographic study offers insight into the connections underlying sculptural production. The book proceeds with interviews and correspondence together with critical essays that provide examples of a production-led methodology in action.

Based on hours of taped conversations and correspondence with Caro and his assistants, *Artist Boss* is an intimate interpretation of the artist and his ways of working. Those closest to Caro in the studio speak frankly about what life was like working for the British sculptor. It provides immediate access to artists' thought processes, and insight into a range of perspectives on the frequently contentious and widely discussed role of the artist's assistant and modes of sculptural production.

The book reveals the context within which Caro worked, how that influenced him and those artists he worked closely with. Interviews and correspondence with assistants (from 1966 to the present day) illustrate the different ways in which the evolution of sculptural language has been negotiated. Some artists become guardians of the tradition, some fight against it, while others struggle to break free.

With original material and unseen images, this first full-length study reveals Caro's working relationships and provides personal insight into the practice methodologies of sculptors.

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First published in 2016 by Wunderkammer Press

Wunderkammer Press
Bath School of Art and Design
Bath Spa University
Sion Hill
Bath BA1 5SF

Printed in the United Kingdom

ISBN: 978-0-9935511-0-9 [paperback]
Artist Boss: Anthony Caro's studio assistants
and issues of legacy in British sculpture.
Jenny Dunseath and Mark Wilsher (eds)
91 Illustrations

Design: Extra Strong
Type: AauxPro

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Essay: Artist Boss

ANTHONY CARO'S STUDIO ASSISTANTS AND
ISSUES OF LEGACY IN BRITISH SCULPTURE

Jenny Dunseath
Mark Wilsher

**“Generosity and sharing provide
an alternative to contemporary
individualism and the traditional
role of the romantic artist
as a solitary genius”¹**

(Lind 2005, p. 66)

Making art is a form of collaboration: between artists and curators, critics, buyers, audiences, those who commission and those who judge. As cultural theorist Brian Holmes reiterates, 'even the lone artist in their studio is dependent upon contributions from others'.² Successful artists have always used assistants to enable a greater volume of production or to deal with the more mundane parts of the process. Sculpture, with its greater physical demands and complicated, messy processes, has often demanded the most help. In the nineteenth century the establishing of a working studio was a key point in a commemorative or monumental sculptor's working life, and there are numerous accounts of the studios of artists such as Thornycroft and, of course, Rodin.

This study looks at the studio of Anthony Caro, perhaps the greatest sculptor of late twentieth century Britain. We are publishing for the first time a series of original interviews and responses from Caro and his assistants that focus specifically on the role of the studio assistant in the making of sculpture. How did this affect the production of signature works? What new kinds of production are enabled? Does the role of a studio assistant sometimes grow to become collaboration? But also, and just as interesting, what is the impact on the artistic lives of the assistants and how do we perceive its legacy for sculpture today?

Based on many hours of taped conversations and responses with several generations of studio assistants, *Artist Boss* allows more intimate access to the work of Anthony Caro. It provides insight into his thought processes, and opens up a range of complex perspectives on the sometimes-contentious role of the artist's assistant and the collaborative mode of sculptural production. Across five decades of production, those closest to Caro in the studio speak frankly about what life was like working for this internationally renowned artist. The study describes the context that brought forth many acknowledged art historical masterpieces, and the impact working together had on the careers and lives of the artists he worked closely with. With original material and unseen images of the studio, this first full-length study sheds light on the working relationships of Caro (1924–2013) and provides first-hand insight into the studio methodologies of mid-career and emerging artists in his orbit. New perspectives are given on the working practices of three more British sculptors; Oscar Nemon, Sir Charles Wheeler and Henry Moore.³

The historic use of studio assistants is well documented, but recent shifts in modes of production and the kind of sculptural training available through an art school education invite us to look again today at this traditional role and its impact on making. The interviews and responses take place with artists at different stages in their careers, from around the UK and across the Atlantic. They reveal as much about human endeavour as they do about creative careers, education and art.

The varied responses illustrate the different ways in which the evolution of sculptural language has been negotiated. Some artists become guardians of tradition, some fight against it, while others find themselves caught in a struggle to break free.

Working as an assistant to a more established figure is a rite of passage for many artists. It offers a window into the creative process, a glimpse of a professional career in the art world, and a modest income. For over fifty years, Caro worked with numerous people in many different capacities: his longstanding role as tutor at Saint Martin's School of Art perhaps the most well known.

This publication necessarily represents an incomplete selection of studio assistants, defined as those employed to work directly toward the production of Caro's work. It is by no means a definitive or exclusive selection and does not represent all who worked for and with him.

We do not include, for example, the close relationships he had with architects such as Frank Gehry, Tadeo Ando and Norman Foster; artists such as skilled sculptor Hamish Black, or specialist ceramicist Hans Spinner.⁴ It does not reflect the well-documented lineage of his students: William Tucker, Phillip King, Tim Scott, Richard Deacon; or those who would later react against his legacy: Bruce Mclean, Barry Flanagan, Gilbert and George, to name a few.

Here we focus on the intimate relationship between a studio assistant and the Artist Boss.⁵ In this relationship, the assistant is typically employed at the outset of his/her career, paid to produce work for and with the artist, to learn and respond to the artist's instructions. This is a snapshot reflecting studio assistants across generations who were willing to respond and contactable at the time of writing.

The interviews and responses all reflect individuals talking about their own experience, work and values. After much consideration, it became apparent that a conversational approach would be more akin to the experience of daily studio conversations described by many. They are presented in the format in which they were originally given to provide a documentary insight into this unique experience. When the voice of your employer resounds loudly in art history, it becomes essential to be able to maintain the honest and distinct voice of each participant.

The written responses capture the thoughts and internal monologues of the artists. The transcribed interviews capture the meandering tangents and the unguarded inflection of how the artist responded at that moment in time. Some were shared posthumously, some were written decades after employment. The fallibility of memory and overarching concern of what will be held in print was palpable. Often what is inferred, implied or omitted was just as important as what was said. The uninterrupted transcripts and responses all give form to a larger developing and reflective conversation.

Caro started employing studio assistants in 1966, claiming he was 'absolutely useless at making things', and with the employment of assistants, the process of making was made 'a hundred times easier'. He would often hire recent graduates or artists in the early stages of their careers, and here similarities can be drawn to an apprenticeship, where skills are learned from the experienced master while the pupil earns a wage.

As Tim Marlow and Karen Wilkin identify in their forewords, Caro's studio nurtured people and challenged work. Caro and Patrick Cunningham discuss how imperative it was to employ people 'on your wavelength'. For Caro, decisions were tested on other people, as Willard Boepple's response explores: 'He thought outside his head'.⁶

The community produced by the studio was an important feature of Caro's working methodology. The testing of work on assistants, critics, writers and guests is perhaps suggestive of the studio as a directed community, affirming his role as the Artist Boss.⁷

The interviews reveal a high turnover of assistants. Working relationships in the studio were paramount. Caro wanted to maintain a 'freshness' and interest in the working environment. The majority of assistants were employed during or after

studying for a bachelor's degree or master's. A large number worked for approximately three years, with many returning to work part-time while sustaining their own practice. Others would work for a short duration to complete a body of work or finalise projects, and a few stayed for decades.

Travelling between the UK and US, Caro employed assistants in both countries as required. Some would travel in order to work and would eventually settle, helping to affirm bilateral transatlantic relationships.

Many assistants continue to maintain their own practice. A few provide insight into working exclusively on Caro's practice and subsequent changes in careers. Interviewees discuss how experiences in the studio would feed into their practices and roles as heads of department (Winchester School of Art, Bennington College and Winthrop University), teachers, technicians and tutors in establishments across the UK and US, often becoming unofficial recruitment agents for the next generation.

The interviews present a celebratory but sometimes complex account of the master/assistant dynamic. Regardless of Caro's persistent, inquisitive nature, there is no doubt about who was ultimately in charge.

Guy Martin notes that 'friendly exchanges of ideas can occur, but only at the master's pleasure', while André Fauteux remembers that 'Caro's self-centredness was exceeded only by his generosity'. Patrick Cunningham clearly understood his role and how he 'may have participated and helped, but he [Caro] said when it's finished'. In the end, individual tastes are not quite absorbed within the overarching goal. As John Gibbons describes, 'He likes Mozart and I like Bach'.

With a group of young artists working together under the eye of a benevolent master, the comparison to apprenticeships and art school education is inevitable. In their interview, Neil Ayling and Olivia Bax discuss the transition from art school to the working studio, reflecting on the different opportunities that each provide.

The shifting role from student to employee for an established practitioner is an exciting domain, and is particularly interesting when assistants begin to articulate their own practice ideals in comparison to Caro's work. Beth Cullen-Kerridge describes how she could only make 'Caro-esque sculptures for years after', and the 'borrowing' of ideas is touched upon by Willard Boepple, Ian Dawson, John Wallbank and John Gibbons.

One of the initial motivations for this research was to trace the complex paths of influence that run in both directions between master and assistant, and how they might become legible in the artworks themselves. The work and responses produced by assistants reveal a huge amount of information about a process of thinking through making, materials and the shifting notion of sculpture itself across generations.

Recurrent questions Caro would ask were 'Is it sculpture?' and 'What is sculpture?' There was a strong impetus to produce work that purposefully pushed the boundaries of the definition of sculpture. But definitions have since blurred, and practices shifted. In a 2012 study of the discipline of art, Van Winkle recognised that 'there are no longer any criteria to determine what it means to be a visual artist'.⁸ The definition is no longer exclusively based in the idea of material, process or technique.⁹

The questioning and re-evaluation of sculptural terms by the assistants reveal an important shift in sculpture legacy. To question and re-evaluate the sculpture Caro embodied was paramount to many of the assistants. The interviews reveal an awareness of the shifting dynamic around the idea of a specifically material practice. Many expose

their internal struggle with the agenda of then and now; relationships between theory and practice and polemic definitions of sculpture.

By taking Caro and his impact on art education in the 1960s as a pivotal moment in British sculpture, the responses reflect on a fundamental shift from hands-on, process-based studio sculpture towards the expanded field and a post-medium condition. The works and responses produced by his assistants explore a kind of learning that is rooted deeply in the processes of the studio, and in spending time with someone committed to medium specificity.

An art school education today is very different to that of forty years ago. Current orthodoxy in British art education is that students are taught holistically and are not limited to media-based pathways. In his provocatively titled book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, James Elkins recognises that there is no longer 'a hierarchy of genres, a sequence of courses, a coherent body of knowledge, or a unified theory or practice'.¹⁰ Today, professional career skills are taught alongside studio practice, and with student debts hanging in the background there is an acute awareness of possible career paths and ways of making a living.¹¹ In his interview, Jon Isherwood offers discussion about the impact of professionalisation on US art education, identifying an important juncture in higher education provision today.

The interviewees speak candidly about wanting a career in the art world; some commented that employment in the studio validated their career choices, but that the experience provided them with 'business balls' not otherwise obtained in art school learning. Alongside honing their technical skills and gleaning something of art-world etiquette, the role model of Caro coming to work each day gave a unique insight into what it takes to sustain a high-level international reputation. As Gavin Morris discusses in his interview, Caro had a 'hard line and relentless work ethic'. The studio environment provided the assistants with a working model, a direct example of learning by doing, daily studio activity with making and remaking, and a hard-working ethos.¹²

The micro-economy of the studio, with teamwork at its core, emphasised a division of labour that maximised exploration and productivity. Assistants speak of the unique work environment and the perception of the role by their peers. Discussions reveal the shifting economic pressures impacting on individual career paths and trends in employment.

The socioeconomic impact of the job went far beyond monetary gains to affect confidence and dedication, and provided vital support networks for the artists. Perhaps, as Lind suggests, legacy is the notion that coordinated effort and collaboration is the intrinsic critique of individualism and profit-seeking.¹³

In his interview, Ian Dawson discusses a shift in employment for young artists in the 1990s. As art production by specialist large-scale fabricators increased, the traditional assistant's role declined both in esteem and availability. Although this might have meant more day-to-day technical work in fabrication to order, the special quality of contact with the artist was perhaps lost.

The concept of a learning community, where personal relationships and face-to-face transactions facilitate the most effective learning, is echoed throughout all the interviews. This isn't a model whereby the master imparts knowledge to the student, but one in which everyone continues to learn through ongoing discussion and debate. In their seminal book *Situated Learning* from 1991, Lave and Wenger identify a 'community of practice that

promotes learning'.¹⁴ Attention is diverted from the solitary experience that draws from the personal and inward to what psychologist Donald Winnicott describes as a cultural experience or 'shared reality'.¹⁵

Young assistants brought new knowledge, opinion and energy into the studio, ensuring that art making never settled into the known and comfortable. It was, perhaps, a unique space of freedom in British art history, thanks to the resources that Caro was able to draw upon.

Caro had several studios during the course of his career, including a garage in Hampstead and a converted piano factory in Camden. He would work in the studio every day right up until his death in 2013, directing assistants to assemble new compositions, solving problems and experimenting with new materials. There are many interesting details and stories about particular pieces contained in these interviews that shed light on their production.

All the assistants stress the value of making and the importance of a well-established working process, which provided the free space in which the work could progress. Patrick Cunningham and Tim Peacock speak of their dedication to and enthusiasm for making work entirely for someone else without the pressure or distraction of their own work.

For others the influence of the experience on their practice is rich. Guy Martin 'learnt to nourish my own work', André Fauteux 'learnt to extend myself in all respects... and not accept the comfortable, to push further' and Shaun Cassidy identifies 'an interest in discovery as opposed to sustaining an ideal vision'. William Fausset cites how 'important discussing the work is with people'.

For some, the enduring impact of Caro's work is something to be more directly negotiated. James Wolfe, André Fauteux, Hywel Livingstone, Jonathan Gildersleeves and Shaun Cassidy's responses return us to questions of the modernist ideals of rationality, geometry and abstraction that have evidently been given new urgency by their experience. All of the artists have sympathies with the work of their employer, but how do you find your own individual voice under the weight of that monumental influence?

Caro's own assistantship to Sir Charles Wheeler (1942–44)¹⁶ and his well-documented role as assistant to Henry Moore (1951–53) is reflected in discussions about his employment of assistants.

As many of the interviewees discuss, the role gave them far more than just a wage. It provided a shared experience, an insight into a studio methodology and an example of how to operate as a sculptor. All the experiences speak of the kind of learning that cannot be replicated exclusively in the studio or through an art school education.

The interviews and responses raise awareness about artists' ambitions for their work and their careers, and what they had hoped to gain from the assistant role. There are many tensions and dilemmas, especially after spending several years in the sculpture studio. Can one assist and be fully focused on one's own practice? Or can it rather be a source of engagement with art and the art world? Is an assistant meant to be nothing but a skilled pair of hands, or is it important that there is an individual artistic practice to inform the decisions that are made?

The title of our project reflects issues of authorship that cut across almost all of the interviews. One effect of this publication is to problematise the current

reading of sculptural production, which still tends to foreground authorship and the self-expression of the individual artist's hand. While it is clear that processes and decisions are evident in all stages of the creative process, it is especially relevant when artists are held up as emblematic of anthropomorphic self-expression prior to the challenges of postmodernism. Art writing around Anthony Caro's work has tended, from the beginning, to focus on the idea of the artist's unique sensibility – his way of arranging forms, his touch. We would like to unpick this idealised notion a little, not to undermine his achievements but to explore his actual working methods in greater detail and with more recognition of his directing and orchestrating skills.

With the long-term use of assistants, studio experiences and actions are reordered, reshaped and experienced differently by those involved. The potential to change the nature of the activity itself through 'shared experience and interactive negotiation' introduces a new dynamic.¹⁷ Collaborative practices between artists, or between artist and audience, are increasingly paradigmatic within contemporary production, and this project locates the roots of such relationships within the traditional artist's studio system.

With issues of ownership and authorship already jumping between discussions throughout this book, to edit and standardise the original interviews seemed one step too far. We have kept various irregularities because it is important to give an honest representation of the complex and multifaceted insights that individuals provide.

The use of oral histories and responses within this context allows us to reinsert narratives of production, pedagogy and economics into our understanding of British sculpture and, in doing so, expand the convenient but reductive shorthand of art history. These voices reveal shared experiences that resonate around thoughts of lineage, sculptural connections, and approaches to production and understanding in the studio, with an emphasis on 'thinking through making'¹⁸ at the core. The conversations, interviews, responses and essays place individuals within a wider context, and simultaneously remind us that the larger narratives of art history were built from the work of many individuals.

The interviews are arranged broadly chronologically based on the period the assistants were employed in the studio. They are all held within a two-part conversation between Caro and his assistants, and finish with the voice of the longest-serving assistant. We intersperse the interviews with critical essays that subdivide the decades and elaborate upon themes raised. The external voices of the essays extend conversations to help trace the changing definitions of the themes of legacy, production, authorship and pedagogy.

In his essay 'Making a show of yourself', the sculptor, author and curator Dr Michael Petry offers insight into the global shifts of current sculpture production. With reference to other artists' studios (Bernini, Rembrandt, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Joana Vasconcelos and Angela de la Cruz to name a few), he draws attention to historical modes of making alongside contemporary examples to show the context of sculpture production today, discussing issues of authorship, brand and style.

One of the overarching themes of this whole project has been that art making is a collaborative process, and in his short essay 'Omnivorous, restless, decisive: Caro in context', Sam Cornish compares works produced between 1962 and 1977, and argues against the interpretation of Caro as 'an isolated generator of sculptural ideas'. Art history tends to focus on individuals rather than communities; the cliché

of the inspired expressive genius rather than the realism of day-to-day experimentation and productivity in the studio. In this essay, Caro is seen as an artist constantly alive and responding to the work of others in his milieu.

Expanding upon the notion of communities, Professor K. Patricia Cross of the University of California, Berkeley, illuminates a pedagogic approach. Here we reprint her 1998 essay 'Why learning communities? Why now?', which explains a model of people learning together through situation, action and discussion that we believe so important in the current context. A scholar of educational research, Cross's essay is used to extend the recurrent discussions around apprenticeships, studio communities and the roles of teachers and tutors beyond an art discourse. This study seeks to revise our interpretation of British sculpture.

By documenting and studying the experiences of those who helped to make it, we aim to insert new narratives into art history. By engaging scholars with the need to enquire into these methodologies, this study aims to set the foundations for fresh analyses of creative identity, artistic practices and the economics of art in the modernist period and beyond.

¹ Maria Lind, 'Complications: on collaboration, agency and contemporary art', in *Public: New Communities*, 39 (2009), p. 66. <public.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/public/article/viewFile/30385/27912>. This text expands on the author's 'The collaborative turn', *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005), p. 15-31; and 'The future is here', *Framework: The Finnish Art Review*, 6 (January 2007), p. 56-9.

² Brian Holmes, 'Artistic autonomy and the communication society', in *Third Text*, 18:6 (2005), p. 53; cited in Lind, 'Complications'. This quote is followed with 'this is especially true for many male artists who have been able to rely on more or less invisible support from surrounding women' (p. 53).

³ Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951, <sculpture.gla.ac.uk/about/index.php>

⁴ Similarly we do not include – but want to acknowledge – specialists who worked for Caro: artist Garry Doherty, who worked on surfaces and colours; internationally acclaimed British photographer John Riddy, who photographed much of Caro's work; artist Jaana Fowler, who made thousands of 1/20th scale models of Caro's sculptures; and the dedicated PAs who work tirelessly to maintain the day-to-day running of the office.

⁵ The term Artist Boss is used in response to Dean Kenning's discussion of Miwon Kwon's text 'One place after another: notes on site specificity', *October*, 80 (Spring 1997), p. 85-110; about current interpretations of authorial presence in his article 'The artist as artist', *Art Monthly*, 337 (June 2010).

⁶ Willard Boepple 'Anthony Caro: 1924-2013', *Abstract Critical*, (published online 19 November 2013). <abstractcritical.com/note/anthony-caro-1924-2013>

⁷ Lane Relyea and Barry Schwabsky discuss ideas of the studio as a space of sociability, bricolage, and ideological resistance to acknowledge them as networks and social spaces. Lane Relyea, 'Studio unbound' in Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (eds), *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 341-355. Barry Schwabsky, 'The symbolic studio', *ibid.* p. 88-99.

- 8 Camiel van Winkel 'Chapter 4: artists and critics in the culture of design', *During the Exhibition the Gallery will be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism*, PhD Thesis (Amsterdam: Valiz uitgeverij, Faculty of Humanities, Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), 2012), p. 165. <hdl.handle.net/11245/1.366403>
- 9 Key books that encapsulate much of the rethinking on aesthetics of modern sculpture include Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), William Tucker's *The Language of Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974) and Thomas McEvilley's *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
- 10 James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
- 11 Reference to Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999.) Singerman places an art degree in a historical framework and ideological context, arguing that where artists trained made a difference in the forms and meanings produced. He demonstrates how the university structure performed a critical role in the production of modernism in visual arts.
- 12 As Heider (1958) and Wiener's (1974) attribution theory suggests, here the assistant or learner develops a self-attribution explanation of effort direct from experience. Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1958). Bernard Weiner, *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1974).
- 13 Lind, 'Complications' (2009), p. 66.
- 14 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991). This book developed the idea that learning 'is a process of participation in communities of practice, participation that is at first legitimately peripheral but that increases gradually in engagement and complexity', p. 138.
- 15 Donald Winnicott, 'Chapter 1: transitional objects and transitional phenomena', in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).
- 16 Sir Charles Wheeler was one of only two sculptor presidents of the Royal Academy of Arts (1956–66). The other was Caro's student Phillip King (1999–2004). Discussed by Penelope Curtis, *Modern British Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 14.
- 17 Excerpt from Chris Follows's discussion on LPP, 'How can tacit and explicit knowledge be communicated and experienced online?', *Process.Arts* (published online 8 June 2011) <process.arts.ac.uk/content/how-can-tacit-and-explicit-knowledge-be-communicated-and-experienced-online> in response to Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning* (1991).
- 18 A term applied by Professor Tim Ingold in his lecture of the same name (Scotland: University of Aberdeen, 2012) and later in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Oxford: Routledge Press, 2013).

“Relationships do play a part in my work. When an assistant starts out there is not much of a relationship but this grows as time goes on.”

Anthony Caro, 2010

Artist Boss presents a series of interviews with Anthony Caro's (1924–2013) studio assistants and critical essays that explore the role of artists' assistants to raise questions concerning the status of production, originality, authenticity, and authorship within the tradition of twentieth-century British sculpture.

From varied backgrounds, the assistants' responses illustrate the different ways in which the evolution of sculptural language has been negotiated. They provide immediate access to artists' thought processes and an insight into the complexity of changing roles. Collectively they reflect and offer a range of perspectives on the frequently contentious and widely discussed role of the artist's assistant and modes of sculptural production.

ISBN 978-0-9935511-0-9



9 780993 551109 > £21.99

