



**ALISON WILDING
"CONTRACT"**

**Henry Moore Foundation Studio,
Halifax**

October 18, 2000 – March 4, 2001

Alison Wilding's sculpture is irreducible - a notion I've arrived at, I think, more by way of contrast than any other route. In APOCALYPSE [1], for example, much of the work seemed very reducible: a certain easy conceptualism, in which ideas seem able to be expanded or contracted as required - in the Royal Academy, expanded! Wilding's work belongs to, and continues in, a different tradition of art-making which is at risk of marginalisation because of the clamour surrounding art which essentially trades in content: it can be assimilated verbally, conveyed verbally. Wilding's sculpture has its own language: it grows from and is concerned with things which remain inexpressible in materials or media other than those in which she works.

Not surprisingly, she dislikes talking about her work, feeling that by doing so even she is shutting down ways into that work. It's an uncomfortable experience for her. Her work is so much an extension of herself, it seems to me: to be asked to discuss it somehow forces her to split part of herself off and stare at it. Talking with her recently, I noticed her sort of doodling in sculpture (fiddling with materials grabbed from the studio table) as she talked and thought - an equivalent, then, of biting one's nails.

She has placed on display at the Henry Moore Studio in Halifax eight large sculptures: four in the long lower room, down the centre of which marches a continuous line of corroded iron pillars, and four in the high-ceilinged and top-lit space which is adjoining. This represents a departure for the Studio, so named because it has been seen as "a laboratory" - a place, moreover, where an artist can be allowed to fail. The deal has been that if he or she concludes the normal three or four month stint there and feels nothing has resulted which is satisfactory enough

to exhibit, then never mind, nothing for the public. Only a private charity could set up something like that! In truth, it has never happened - there's always been something on show at the end of each residency. Wilding herself had such a residency some years ago. This programme has been placed on hold with the sudden death of director Robert Hopper late last year.

Nonetheless, Wilding's work fits in with that former "artist-centred" approach to the extent that she's showing us an incomplete project, a work-in-progress. Some of these sculptures have been exhibited before though they have never been seen altogether nor given the context they are now being given. Which is: these works belong in a planned sequence of works all commissioned by a single patron and linked to the sixteen stages of Christ's Passion. So one patron (the Henry Moore Foundation) is showing work achieved through support given by another patron. The existence of this patron, however, has not been revealed publicly before, and even now he continues to be anonymous - and that's after twelve years, so those wanting the name may have to be patient.

The Passion has not been a constrictive theme, more a ghost of an armature, supplying a series of beginnings to the artist. Wilding's anxiety is understandable: she is reluctant to have audiences searching eagerly for figurative references in these apparently abstract sculptures. In these days of easy meanings, where every work of art, it seems, must be accompanied by an explanatory text on the wall to tell us what it's "about" and what the artist's "concerns" are, some might say Wilding is being perversely obscure... But what her art yields to the person prepared to spend time with the work is not, as she said to me, "that kind of meaning."

We can juggle these things, though. I can enjoy both the formal strengths of Wilding's work (and what Paul Bonaventura has well described as "the formal risks" [2]) also the inventiveness yet purity with which she chooses materials, the warmth I find in her work - and at the same time, having spent time with, for example, *Disposition*, and having been told it relates to "Christ Brought Before Pilate" I can dare to see the massive solid concrete disc as suggesting power and likewise see the rubber sheet on the floor with its almost comic upstanding hair-like protuberances as fragility. And yet, as Wilding says of the story, "At the heart of this episode ... is both conflict and stand-off." Whilst of the sculpture she notes herself: "the space [between the two component parts] is tense and compelling." [3] Which is the stronger? One is reminded of the old folk tale of the oak and the reed.

Likewise, in the case of *Deep Water*, relating as it does to Christ's entry into the (militarily occupied)

city of Jerusalem, I can look at the central tall metal shape and see resonances of watchtowers and of siege - though Wilding herself says of this sculpture only that it is "baroque"[3] so I may be seeing something unintended, but that's not such a crime. At the same time I can enjoy the artist's use of cloth to suggest water - which is also resonant as a Christ symbol. Wilding alludes in her notes [3] to the magician's cloth - Christ in a show of humility, working up the crowds maybe, miracle worker.

One of the central characteristics of postmodernism is that it questions the liberal humanist orthodoxy, bringing back for discussion aspects of culture that had been banished by the materialist, rationalist paradigm. In particular, there is an awareness of how religious behaviour has continued to manifest itself within this apparently secular culture. Simon Morley [4]

Various recent exhibitions as well as the work of artists such as Susan Hiller, Bill Viola and Mark Wallinger (whose *Ecce Homo* in Trafalgar Square Wilding much admired) are all cited by Morley to support his view that there has been a resurgence of interest in what he is careful to call "the religious impulse" (i.e. rather than religious belief.) Perhaps we're reaching here towards the recent fashion for talking about the Sublime?

As for Alison Wilding, odd though this might sound, I think it invasive to enquire what her beliefs are. I would doubt she'd call herself a Christian. I doubt even whether she would use the term "spiritual." Some artists, particularly those who are interviewed a lot, have a story: in a gradual and haphazard way, they've composed it - the details of their lives they're willing to talk about rise like a lump of bread dough into a "profile", a "character." Wilding will have none of this.

It's interesting at this point to refer again to my conception of her work as being so much an extension of herself, her being. She's a private person and her work is private in the sense that it doesn't yield meaning in a simple way, indeed it often includes references to concealment. *Seal* (linked to *The Entombment*) provides a good example: a chunk of rock has been partially inserted into a polypropylene square-sectioned, slightly tapering box-like shape. This has an open top, but it's too tall for the average person to see over that top edge and so see into the void within. Yet there is enough translucency in the material for us to see (sometimes - it depends on the light) a ghostly image of the rock within. A recurring theme, too, has been a partially concealed sphere (as in *Echo*) and overt references have occurred in both sculpture and drawing to the human brain - the place where all

the mysteries, and the passions, are to be found. In the Halifax show, we see this recur in *Red Skies*, a piece referring, in the Passion story, to *The Agony In The Garden*. Perhaps the most persistent theme in Wilding's work is duality - a tension between two elements. It's a reverberant theme: on occasions, at least, we all experience the tug of competing things (loyalties, desires maybe) pulling us, as we say, in two different directions. In this context, I guess one would focus on good/evil, spiritual/carnal ... and life/death (the Passion ends with the burial). In other words, the Biblical story has flowed into a stream of visual themes and recurring motifs in Wilding's work, enriching it rather than diverting it.

There is no Wilding story, then - except in that stream, the rolling continuum of her work. But now, in *CONTRACT*, another story has been shown to us: the Passion. Contemporary English has shut down the meanings of this evocative word: we're left with one - roughly, a good fuck. "To be passionate about" has been so over used in advertising and journalism (because it has a sexual overtone) the phrase means little more than "enthusiasm". Coming from the Latin for suffering, we need to remember this was once a grand and terrible word, denoting anguish, emotions which tear people to pieces, love that will destroy. The story has, of course, been a source for art, drama, and music for two millennia. Indeed, one might argue, it all adds up to a daunting weight of tradition hanging from the shoulders of any artist tangling with it now. That an artist probably doesn't feel this is perhaps a measure of recent secularisation, and a measure too of the multiplicity of faiths which now exist in our culture. It is another consequence of these changes that to use such a source - the central story of Christianity - is not the "Establishment" action it would have seemed as recently as the 1960's.

With Emin, Hurst and Saatchi endlessly in the news, Wilding's decision to show her work in this way (tinting the show *CONTRACT*, and "outing" her patron, as it were) is an interesting one. I recall, when I was full-time in the art world in the 1970's, I felt that such funds or resources as I had to deploy, coming as they did from the public sector, were in some way superior to what might be available from private capital: so my socialism directed me. Not dissimilar was the heartfelt belief of some involved in early postwar socialist politics that charity was an unpleasant business which the benign State would replace. Becoming a full-time writer myself in the 1980's, I began to see things differently, seeing people with their hands on the levers of the public funds machinery who were themselves its beneficiaries. I don't wish to be making facile accusations: I'm referring to complex issues of shared value-systems and the like. It is obvious great swathes

of creative work remain beyond the pale in terms of that public fund sector, and those who seek such funds must cope with the demand for explanation and justification inevitably built into the process of obtaining them.

I recall now a talk with Ron Haselden [5], an artist who takes the view that working in the public art sector, as he often does, isn't so different from showing in galleries. Anyone with whom an artist works, whether that person hands over public funds or private wealth, has an input, an effect. It might be "an agenda", it might overwhelm, but it might equally be a precious stimulus, a challenge, or a support. The title here, CONTRACT, was doubtless carefully chosen: it denotes an exchange, not a seeking on one side and a granting on the other. In legal terminology, a contract is created by "consideration" - one person does something significant in reliance upon a promise made by another. And in this instance, it's a private contract.

In the area of contemporary art in which we locate Alison Wilding, the Passion project is probably unique. It reminds us, of course, of artists working for the church - once one of the principal patrons of art, after all - of eras when major projects, perhaps taking years to complete, would be undertaken. In our own era, there are still artists who work over many years to complete an agreed project for the renovation, augmenting or changing of a church, though a devotee of contemporary art might locate much of this work in the area of craft. Coincidentally, Wilding's piece *Echo* was exhibited recently in Winchester Cathedral and she enjoyed the fact the piece looked good there, that there were ways it related to the cathedral's architecture and to its contents.

Wilding speaks highly of her patron, of his knowledge of art, of the rigour in his approach to her work. She sketches a friendship built on mutual respect and constantly recharged by tough argument. As any good artist, she's tough on herself too. Wryly referring to the whole project as "probably deeply, deeply unfashionable" she went on to tell me that she's glad it's come along ... "because it's been so difficult."

Hugh Stoddart

[1] "Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art", Royal Academy, London SW1 Sept - December 2000

[2] Catalogue for "Intensities", Abbot Hall Art Gallery 1997.

[3] Information leaflet to accompany CONTRACT.

[4] Art & Christianity Enquiry Bulletin, Oct 2000.

[5] Art & Architecture Journal, no 53, 1999.