

Crossing Boundaries in Sculpture: From Tradition to Diverse Expressions

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Abstract: This paper explores how sculpture, as a medium, has transcended traditional boundaries and evolved into a diverse form of artistic expression that engages with both physical and social dimensions. Tracing the evolution from traditional materials and techniques to modernist breaks and conceptual art, this study delves into key turning points, including the shift towards abstraction, the role of the readymade, and the influence of site-specificity. It also examines how contemporary sculpture serves as a dynamic platform for addressing social, cultural, and political issues, fostering public engagement and transforming public spaces. By analyzing these developments, this paper highlights sculpture's growing role as a medium that not only reflects but also shapes societal narratives.

Keywords: Sculpture; Abstraction; Site-specificity; Artistic expression; Cultural narratives

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1. Definition of sculpture

Traditionally, sculpture has been defined as the art of shaping materials such as stone, metal, wood, or clay into three-dimensional forms. While this definition remains valid, the evolution of sculpture throughout the 20th century has expanded these traditional boundaries. Artists began exploring beyond conventional materials and forms, pushing the dimensions of space, time, and media. Sculpture is no longer confined to a static physical presence—it can now manifest through dynamic forms, virtual representations, or implied spatial expressions, challenging traditional material limits.

2. The evolution of sculpture as a medium

In contemporary contexts, defining “sculpture” has become increasingly complex as the boundaries of the medium continue to expand. Sculpture has not only undergone transformations in terms of materials and forms, but it has also evolved into a medium in itself, embracing a comprehensive inquiry into materials, space, content, and concepts. Sculpture now occupies and extends into space, serving as a vessel for spiritual

expression, engaging with social issues, and creating experiences that transcend physical perception. It has become a powerful means of engaging with reality. Each significant turning point in the history of sculpture has contributed to its ongoing development as a medium, reflecting broader cultural and social shifts ^[1].

2.1. Modernism's break from tradition

The modernist period marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of sculpture. During the early 20th century, sculpture experienced a major break from tradition, influenced by a rethinking of historical and artistic production. Modernism introduced a departure from traditional materials such as stone and bronze, as artists began to experiment with unconventional materials, techniques, and forms. Found objects, industrial materials, and everyday items, as well as performance, video, and sound, became new avenues for artistic expression. Sculpture evolved from a purely aesthetic form to a medium of social critique, addressing issues of identity, race, gender, class, and environmentalism.

2.2. Abstraction and the readymade: Redefining form and material

Early modernist artists like Constantin Brâncuși reimaged form and space, moving sculpture away from figurative representation towards more abstract forms. They sought to capture the essence and spirit of things rather than simply reproducing their external appearance. In 1917, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a simple urinal presented as an artwork, radically disrupted conventional approaches to sculpture and exhibition. By recontextualizing ordinary objects, Duchamp's readymades rejected traditional representation and created new layers of meaning. This shift became a vital paradigm for later artists exploring materials, forms, and concepts. The convergence of abstraction and the readymade allowed artists to transcend and deconstruct traditional forms, paving the way for experimental innovation in modernist sculpture and opening up new creative possibilities for future generations.

2.3. Exploring space: Sculpture's three-dimensional nature

In addition to creating new artistic meanings and breaking away from traditional materials, sculpture's exploration of its own spatial (three-dimensional) properties has never ceased. This exploration has long been recognized as one of sculpture's most defining characteristics. For instance, Isamu Noguchi's 1947 work *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars* conceptually expands sculpture's three-dimensional nature to a cosmic scale. The piece depicts a human face with a one-mile-long nose, symbolizing the anticipation of space travel. Noguchi once said ^[1], "Everything is sculpture. Any material, any idea without hindrance born into space, I consider sculpture." His work reflects deep attention to the message and sensations it conveys, asserting that sculpture should interact with its surroundings to form a cohesive whole with its environment. This concept represents an expansion of sculpture's third dimension—the way a sculpture extends into and is experienced within space, encompassing interactions with viewers, the environment, and the surrounding spatial context. This third dimension involves the sculpture's location, scale, environmental factors, and the perspectives from which it is viewed. It also includes changes in the sculpture's materials, texture, form, and structure, making it highly flexible and difficult to define by a single, agreed-upon standard ^[2].

2.4. The avant-garde and conceptual art: Expanding boundaries

Starting in the mid-20th century, with the rise of avant-garde and conceptual art, the definition and boundaries of sculpture were further challenged and expanded. Avant-garde artists continued to reconceptualize sculpture,

introducing a more idea-driven practice that emphasized the importance of artistic concepts and thought over the physicality of materials and forms. For example, Joseph Kosuth's work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) transformed a simple wooden chair into an object of debate, even bewilderment. By displaying a real chair, a photograph of the chair, and the dictionary definition of a chair, Kosuth explored the relationship between concept and language: "But is this sculpture?" "Which representation of the chair comes closest to the 'real' chair?" These open-ended questions are precisely what the artist invites us to ponder—how art constructs meaning. This conceptual approach to sculpture breaks away from materiality, steering sculpture toward a medium of ideas.

At the same time, conceptual art also challenged how sculpture is displayed. Artists began to think about how sculptures interact with exhibition spaces and audiences, creating more participatory and experiential environments. Claes Oldenburg's large-scale public sculptures, such as *Clothespin* (1976), placed sculptures within everyday settings, encouraging audience engagement and interaction. This focus on audience experience transformed sculpture from a passive object of observation into a medium that co-creates meaning with its viewers.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, piles of cotton threads scattered across the floor, redwood logs rolled into galleries, tons of earth excavated from deserts, and wooden fences encircling volcanic craters were all embraced within the realm of sculpture. The traditional understanding of "what is sculpture" became increasingly blurred, making it ever more difficult to define ^[2]. Amid the tension between modernism and postmodernism, sculpture gradually evolved into a medium reflecting the cultural and social values of the time—dynamic and continuously evolving, connecting art with the transmission of social messages.

2.5. Sculpture as social commentary: Joseph Beuys and social sculpture

Joseph Beuys, a prominent figure of the "Social Sculpture" movement, redefined the role of the artist as a bearer of social responsibility, encouraging artists to integrate their art into social life to foster societal change. Beuys famously asserted in the 1970s that anyone could create art using any object or action. From his perspective, the act of shaping life itself could be seen as a sculpture marked by social significance. One of his most iconic works, *7000 Oaks*, created in 1982 in Kassel, Germany, involved the planting of 7,000 oak trees across the city. He viewed this act of planting as a form of social sculpture, uniting people to cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for the environment.

2.6. The expanded field: Rosalind Krauss and the theoretical rethinking of sculpture

Not only did artists explore diverse practices during the 1970s and 1980s, but the field of sculpture theory also saw ongoing discussions about the medium's transformation. A key figure in these debates was art theorist Rosalind Krauss. In her 1979 essay, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Krauss introduced the concept of the "expanded field," arguing that sculpture was no longer confined to the traditional idea of a standalone object or material form. Instead, it could encompass installations, site-specific works, and other forms that deeply interact with time, space, and the viewer. This essay had a profound impact on both the art world and art historical scholarship, and it remains one of the most cited texts today, representing a theoretical rethinking of the nature of sculpture. Krauss described the groundbreaking forms and freedom emerging in sculpture as part of its "expanded field," emphasizing the liberty of defining something surprising as sculpture. This expansion opened up new levels of possibility for the medium.

Krauss further developed her ideas in her 1981 book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, where she

argued that sculpture is not a fixed, static object but rather a fluid, dynamic presence that can change and be reinterpreted over time. In her 1985 collection *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Krauss explored the notion of originality and its role in modern sculpture, asserting that originality is a myth perpetuated by modernist art discourse. Instead, she suggested that sculpture's true value lies in its ability to engage with and disrupt established artistic conventions and traditions.

Looking back at the postmodern evolution of sculpture, we see its growing diversity and inclusive attitude, as well as the integration of a wide range of materials and techniques. This development also reflects a shift toward methods that engage viewers more directly, prompting reflection on how sculpture is experienced. Richard Serra's controversial 1981 work *Tilted Arc* is an example. Installed in the plaza of the Federal Building in downtown Manhattan, the sculpture split the space in two and drew criticism for its imposing, oppressive presence, with calls for its removal. After nearly a decade of debate, *Tilted Arc* was dismantled in 1989. However, even after its removal, the work continued to challenge the question of "what is sculpture?" Serra's innovation lay in transforming sculpture from a polished object on a pedestal to something that intruded into the viewer's space, often uncomfortably. Serra claimed his goal was to create an experience for the viewer rather than just an object to be looked at. This approach reflects sculpture's shift toward installations and immersive works that invite us to think about the interplay between the artwork and its elements. Such site-specific works blur the lines between object and environment, making the artwork a space for negotiation between the two. In other words, certain sculptures are incomplete without viewer interaction. By engaging with the piece through their interpretations and perceptions, viewers actively participate in shaping the meaning of the work.

2.7. Site-specificity and the viewer's role

In contemporary contexts, site-specificity remains a key focus in the relationships sculptural works form. Emphasizing the site and place reflects sculpture's sociological stance—its uniqueness involves not only the physical and material conditions of the location but also the social and institutional relationships that give meaning to these spaces. Sculpture has become a medium for exploring questions of identity, history, and power, using tangible physical forms to convey complex ideas and emotions. By acknowledging the complexities of form, materiality, and context, we gain deeper insight into the power and meaning of sculpture as an art form ^[3].

For instance, Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), exhibited in the industrial ruins of Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Factory, featured a sphinx-like female figure made of sugar, evoking the historical ties between sugar production, slavery, and exploitation. Walker's work challenges traditional notions of beauty and power, offering a poignant psychological narrative of historical conditions from a contemporary perspective. By displaying the piece in such a location, Walker questioned the essence of monumental sculpture, prompting reflections on who sculptures represent and for what purpose they are created.

2.8. Sculpture as a dynamic medium: Engaging with social issues

At present, as many monumental sculptures are being removed, both historical and contemporary sculptures are under close scrutiny, leading to a reconsideration of their representational function and purpose. Artists are harnessing the power of sculpture not only to create aesthetic experiences but also to explore and address socially relevant issues. Sculpture is evolving into a dynamic medium for probing and challenging social, cultural, and political concerns. It acts as a catalyst for social commentary, cultural reflection, and collective participation, capturing the complexity of human experiences and revealing pressing issues such as social development, ethical dilemmas, and ecological concerns.

Revisiting the idea of “social sculpture,” an important feature emerges—its potential to serve broader communal interests. Sculpture can engage larger groups, guiding positive change, and even fostering healing effects. Moreover, sculpture possesses the ability to transform public spaces. It can promote social interaction and community engagement, with many artists and curators recognizing its potential. Through reclaiming and revitalizing neglected urban areas, sculptures create gathering spaces that foster a sense of belonging and encourage participation. Placed in public spaces, sculptures invite viewers to reflect, engage in dialogue, and connect with their surroundings, promoting collective identity and community awareness.

2.9. Community engagement and public spaces

Collaborating with local communities, artists often invite them to participate in the creation and interpretation of sculptural works. Through workshops, public facilities, and community projects, sculpture becomes an empowering tool, fostering a sense of ownership and allowing individuals to shape their collective environment. A notable example is *A Day in the Life of a Shenzhen Citizen* (2000), where the project involved casting life-size bronze figures of 18 citizens from different social classes and professions. Curator Zhenhua Sun noted that the project initiated a “community consultation” process where residents expressed their views on the work’s direction. This social inclusiveness was reflected not only in the representation of ordinary people as subjects but also in the collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach and community participation.

3. Conclusion: Rethinking the future of sculpture

The history of sculpture reveals how the medium has transcended traditional boundaries to take on new forms and meanings. From its origins as a representational art form to its current role as a medium that engages with contemporary issues, sculpture has continuously pushed its limits. Today, sculpture is not only an artistic expression but also a means of reflecting and shaping societal narratives.

As we move forward, the definition of sculpture will continue to evolve, reflecting the changing social and cultural landscape. More important than the materials and techniques used are the spiritual, social, and expressive dimensions that sculpture embodies. By maintaining respect for traditional sculpture while embracing new modes of expression, we can fully appreciate the future possibilities of this dynamic and transformative medium.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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