

# RA

**Teacher Resource**

For teaching Key Stages 3–5



# Phyllida Barlow RA



Cover image: Phyllida Barlow  
in her studio, 2018. Photo: Cat  
Garcia. © Royal Academy of  
Arts

(left) *untitled: stack*, 2019  
Cement, Hessian scrim, paint,  
plywood, polycotton, spray paint,  
steel and timber,  
324 x 107 x 90 cm  
Courtesy the artist and  
Hauser & Wirth  
© Phyllida Barlow.  
Photo: DawkinsColour

(right) *untitled: female*, 2018  
Construction, 335 x 60 cm  
Photo: © Royal Academy of  
Arts, London





## Phyllida Barlow RA

*untitled: stack, 2019 (detail)*

Cement, Hessian scrim, paint, plywood, polycotton, spray paint, steel, timber, 335 x 60 x 80 cm

On free display at the RA on the stairs to the first floor in Burlington Gardens as part of the exhibition Phyllida Barlow: *cul-de-sac* (Until 23 June 2019)

Artwork: Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.  
© Phyllida Barlow  
Photograph: © Royal Academy of Arts, London  
Photography: DawkinsColour

**‘My relationship with making sculpture has to be adventurous [...] I like to use chance, to allow for accidents or mistakes to become part of what I’m doing’**

Quote from *Phyllida*, 2019

## Who is the artist?

Phyllida Barlow RA (born 1944) is known for her precarious-looking structures that take over and redefine the spaces that they inhabit. Barlow studied at Chelsea College of Art (1960–1963) with the Slade School of Art (1963–1966). She later taught at both art schools. In 2006 Barlow was invited to create an artwork, *Untitled Red/Brown*, in the RA’s courtyard. She is probably best known for her two more recent commissions, *dock* in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain in 2014 and *folly* in the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017.

Barlow makes imposing, large-scale sculptural installations using inexpensive, everyday materials or off-cuts including cardboard, fabric, wood, polystyrene, plaster and cement. Her experiments with these materials result in giant, bold and colourful three-dimensional (3-D) artwork. She also does vibrant 2-D drawings, often in acrylic, as part of the process of creating her 3-D sculptures. There is a sense of urgency in the creation of her installations which appear both familiar and purposeful, despite their abstract forms.

## What is the artwork?

Barlow’s exhibition presents her interpretation of a residential *cul-de-sac*, forcing visitors to leave through the same door through which they entered. The artist has created a series of perception-altering installations and sees her structures as being ‘anti-monumental’ and ‘restless objects’.

The artwork *untitled: stack, 2019* is located in the niche on the stairs to the first floor in Burlington Gardens, external to the main exhibition in the Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler galleries.

For this work Barlow started with a sketch and then brought together off-cuts of materials from her studio. The structure is tall, thin, upright and authoritarian, like a column made of stacked red-orange wooden poles that tower above you. The multiple timber layers of the column are visible, exposing how the work is made.

The tops of the wooden poles are wrapped in painted yellow, blue, orange and red fabric, bound together with cement whilst allowing ribbon-like pieces to hang down.

The application of gestural colour is clearly visible. The structure gives the illusion that it is weightless, defying gravity, whilst being anchored at the base. It is reminiscent of the Giant Redwood trees of Sequoia National Park in the USA, or maybe a funeral pyre ready to be set alight. The individual posts have a giant matchstick-like quality to them, something both celebratory and intimidating in the strong vertical forms and the dynamic twists of fabric wrapped around each timber post.

Barlow’s work has been created with the RA gallery spaces in mind. She describes her studio as a kind of rehearsal space for her work. She often finishes the works when they are being installed. Her relationship with her work is a private one during its creation in the studio but once in the gallery space she sees it as a form of choreography, encouraging the audience to interact with it.

## Key words list

installation

site-specific

space

anti-monumental

colour

timber

polycotton

cement

paint

PVA

## Questions for students

Look at the list of materials used by Phyllida Barlow to create *untitled: stack, 2019*. What is the difference between plywood and timber? What are scrim, polycotton and PVA? Are the materials she uses precious or easily available recycled off-cuts? Why do you think she chooses to use these more malleable materials? What effect does their use have on her work?

What is an installation? How does this differ from a sculpture? How might an installation change the way you encounter a space?

Barlow's work could also be seen as site-specific. What does that mean? Why might the artwork change from its creation in the studio to its installation in a gallery space?

Barlow's work has been described as 'anti-monumental.' What is the definition of a monument? What do you think she is trying to achieve in her work by being against 'monumental'? She also sees her work as 'restless objects'. What do you think she means by this?

The artist is keen on multiple-interpretations, seeing the audience as the third protagonist (after the exhibition space and the work itself) who choreographs their own experience, and circumnavigates the space and the artwork.

What is a protagonist? Think about your viewpoint of *untitled: stack, 2019* in particular its scale, and how you interact with the structure. What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel?

Barlow's works are often named 'untitled' followed by how she describes them during the making process. How do you think the title *untitled: stack, 2019* relates to the finished artwork?

Look at her RA Diploma Work (currently not on display, left), titled **untitled: female**.

How does the title of the artwork, *untitled: female*, relate to its form?

## Useful links

### Videos

Extract from *Phyllida*, 2019.  
The clip can also be viewed outside the exhibition entrance.

Tate Britain Commission: Phyllida Barlow

British Council, UK at the Venice Biennale, British Pavilion: Phyllida Barlow, 2017

### Articles

10 minutes with... Phyllida Barlow RA

'Do you destroy your work? I do.'  
– Phyllida Barlow and composer Harrison Birtwistle discuss creativity



# Art activities for the classroom

## Title

Untitled: installation

## Work of art

Phyllida Barlow RA

*untitled: stack, 2019*

## Related exam themes and curriculum links

### Art & Design

Using a range of techniques and media, increasing students' proficiency in the handling of different materials, recording their observations in sketchbooks, and analysing and evaluating their work and that of others

### Exam themes

Human body, habitats, assembled, spaces, texture

## Resources and materials

Cardboard

Paint

Plaster

Fabric

Polystyrene

Wood

String/wool

Paint

Glue

Off-cuts

Brushes

Tool kit

## Learning outcomes

Create a site-specific installation to change the way the audience perceives the space, whilst experimenting with different media.

## Activity outline

Inspired by Barlow's artworks create your own site-specific structure or installation responding to a space within your school building. It could be a cupboard, the school reception, a corridor, the hall, or even the toilets.

When creating your work, you will need to consider how the chosen space can still be used for its purpose, for example corridors will still need to be accessible by students. Make sure that you get permission to complete your installation in your chosen location

Sketch your artwork, thinking about its scale and how you will present it (for example, standing on the floor, connected to the walls in some way, or hanging from the ceiling). Think about how the audience's perception of the chosen space might change once your artwork is installed.

Barlow's structures appear to be handmade and tactile. How can you recreate this in your own work? Will you allow your audience to touch your creation? Which of the everyday materials and off-cuts will you use to create your design and how will you connect or disconnect them?

How will you know when your work is finished?

Like Barlow, start creating your artwork in your classroom (or studio) but you may need to move into the space it will be installed in, maybe several times, to help you complete it. The final installation may need to be done at a quiet time, after or before school hours. Observe how the pupils and teachers encounter your artwork once it is installed. You could ask for feedback. Make sure that you document your work *in situ*.

**'Finishing a work is the hardest thing. There's always something more I want to do. It's a restless activity.'**

**'The spaces, the silences in between, are as much a component of the work as the thing itself.'**

'Do you destroy your work? I do.' – Phyllida Barlow and the composer Harrison Birtwistle discuss creativity, interview in RA Magazine 2018

## Extension for KS4/5

Think about how Barlow has used colour in her work across her career. How has her use of colour evolved? What colours are found in *untitled: stack, 2019* and what could their significance be?

She talks about the 'untidiness of urban living' with the colours and shapes from places like roadworks and building sites feeding into her work. How have you used colour in your work?

Find out about other artists who, like Barlow, have used non-traditional everyday materials, including those who were part of the Arte Povera movement. Experiment with a wide range of materials to achieve differing qualities ranging from the handmade, exposing the processes and gestures, to a more pristine finish. Which materials did you prefer to use and why? Think about using these materials when creating your future artwork.

## Further research

**Arte Povera** was a radical Italian art movement from the late 1960s to 1970s whose artists explored a range of unconventional processes and non-traditional 'everyday' materials. The term was introduced by the Italian art critic and curator, Germano Celant, in 1967.

Arte Povera was less about a lack of money and more about making art without the restraints of traditional practices and materials.

Leading Arte Povera artists included Alighiero Boetti, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio.