

‘Sculpture’ (Untitled Paper)

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When I started to think about how I was going to speak about ‘Sculpture’ I found it difficult to find a place to begin. I still find myself, on occasion, at a loss for words when, during informal conversation, people ask me what I sculpt in. This is a question that doesn't seem to get any easier to answer, a question I am frustrated by yet one I feel resigned to. Frustrated because the broad perception of sculptural practice remains bound by associations with classical processes of carving and modeling. Resigned because, for all the ideas, technology, processes, cultural shifts, and conflated boundaries that have occurred in other fields, sculpture can appear mired in a space between monument and formal decoration. However, if we consider how, for many of us, sculpture encountered in a public site is a more frequent occurrence than an encounter in a gallery, it becomes clearer as to why carving and modeling have a remarkably tenacious grasp on the common imagination of sculptural practice despite frequent furors that have erupted in public over diverse sculptural works.

I began to think about what was it that might be abetting this sluggish view of sculptural practice. This is of course no easy path and I acknowledge in this presentation I am not able to attend to these ideas in a more concentrated manner. I have, however, isolated an idea. And this idea begins with an excerpt from the film *Edward Scissorhands*.

VIDEO (1) Peggy goes to castle and finds the garden (2) Peggy meets Edward – “What happened to you?...Those are your Hands?”

Edward Scissorhands was directed by Tim Burton and released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1990. I searched for it as one among several films I could recall that contained ideas about the creative process, had artists as characters, or referred to sculptural processes. In the film Edward (played by Johnny Depp) is a young man created by an elderly inventor who lives in a vast, largely empty castle on hill above a small, newly formed, pastel-shaded American suburb. It is a parable that sets oddity against normalcy, love against hate, fear against courage. Closely modeled on the story of *Frankenstein* and bearing similarities to David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, Depp's character is a loving and gentle freak who is temporarily embraced by a

community and subsequently turned upon and cast out as something monstrous, unbearable and evil.

Although he has no hands, and is fitted with scissor blades instead, Edward can deftly carve magnificent shapes out of hedges, women's hair, dog coats, and enormous blocks of ice. His is a virtuoso performance in one of the most traditional realms of sculpture – that which is concerned with reducing, hewing and modeling form. What is interesting to observe as the film progresses is the conflation that occurs between Edward's physical monstrousness and the monstrousness of his creations. We see Edward move between finely tuned attention to the smallest of details – a young leaf or a fine curl of hair – to the frenzied concentration of sculptural creation, and eventually the willful and enraged destruction of his own work.

The product of misinformation and misinterpretation, we might think of it as a story about how sculpture turns foul, both in the sense of Edward himself as a kind of kinetic sculpture: invented, made, created, formed by the inventor, and also of his own sculptural works: near the end of the film Edward, provoked into a hacking rampage, amputates a leg off a carefully clipped dinosaur hedge and creates a hideous, demonic arboreal effigy in the window of the neighbourhood evangelist. Run out of town, Edward returns to a sequestered life in his empty castle. Safely removed from the public view, and fortified from criticism and accusation, he continues to work without an audience.

VIDEO (3) First gardening scene with Bill Boggs. Edward shapes the hedge. "Well I'll be darned!"

Although *Edward Scissorhands* knowingly operates on the level of fairy-tale and the surreal – and may appear somewhat of a stretch to begin a discussion of sculptural practice with reference to such a world – it is a fine example of the pervasive romanticism that exists in the portrayal of artists or creative personalities in film. It is also one of very few movies that depicts an artistic or creative practice as 3-dimensional and avoids the more usual focus on artist characters as painters. Movies with artists as characters are usually serious attempts at character interpretation, contain cloyingly romantic ideals about the working methods of artists, or are pointedly ironic.

Edward Scissorhands contains elements of the last two categories. It is a film which, no matter how odd, draws on and conveys traditional sculptural practices and depicts

large scale outdoor works. I am interested in its portrayal of a kind of mythical sculptural practice that contributes to commonly held perceptions about what sculpture is. I am also interested in how we might connect ideas of monstrosity (defined as what is abnormal, hideous or unnatural in size or structure) to the way sculpture has frequently been received in the public sphere.

VIDEO (4) (5) Scenes with Fundamentalist woman... "He is straight from the flames of Hell" to "Don't worry Edward – she's just an old loony."

Aspects of drama and tragedy are evident in sculptural history, but they are particularly noticeable in the battles that have been fought and the debates that have raged around sculpture in public sites. If we view Edward as an artist, it is not difficult to equate the female fundamentalist in the film with members of the public or city councilors who have viewed the work of contemporary artists as corrupt (be that morally or financially). Dianne Wiest and Alan Arkin as the entrepreneurial Peggy and Bill Boggs might be kindly commissioners, people who maintain their faith in the work and in the artist. Winona Ryder as Kim is the character who has a kind of “art epiphany”. We could say that her exposure to Edward and to his work, particularly the beauty of his ice sculptures, changes her life for the better.

VIDEO (6) At the dinner table... "You can't buy a car with cookies, now can you?"

So, we might ask, can this really happen? Can sculpture cause us to hate and to love? Can it change us? And our answer would be...of course not! *Edward Scissorhands* is a celluloid dream – a shimmering world of make believe where sculpture is a powerful force and where the artist, with the purity of a child and a distinct physical oddity, must remain separate from his community. Yet we could also argue that sculpture in public has catalysed responses that veer towards these kinds of emotional extremes.

Sculpture has a history of being vulnerable to attack and vandalism as well as being the object of civic affection and protection. An excellent overview of this is offered by Harriet F. Senie in her 1992 book *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation and Controversy* published by Oxford University Press. Senie traces the development of public sculpture through a lineage that begins with statues and monuments, progresses through the modernist project of art-in-architecture programmes (with tax incentives for allocating one percent of a building budget towards art purchasing or commissioning); the development of social policies of

urban renewal where culture and the arts were envisioned to play a major role in the revitalisation and re-enchantment of city life to arrive at a type of public practice where artists direct their work towards local environment, its histories and present communities in subtle and constructive ways.

VIDEO (7) (8) Second garden scene. Edward shapes and styles the hair of dogs and women.

Throughout her discussion Senie is also concerned to address the concept of ‘the public’ as a term fraught with difficulty. Similarly, in the catalogue for *Public Practices* (a South Island Arts Projects venture that took place in Otago and Southland, New Zealand in 1993) John Barrett-Leonard also focused on the term ‘public’ as contestable and divisible, suggesting that the phrase ‘the public’ remains “unanalyzed, homogenous and straightforward.” Rather, he suggests, we should consider “the public as a sphere, as a non-physical space of meeting and debate, that provides one with the possibility of admitting sharp difference and variation in opinion and experience.”

VIDEO (9) Edward in court...”Yeah, but will he be alright out there Doc?” (10) Ice sculpture scene – Kim dances beneath Edward at work.

The notion that sculpture can be experienced in vastly opposite ways is evident in this quote from Senie’s book:

“What has been art to museum goers (a relatively small elite) became to the public such things as insults, irrelevancies, fire hazards, anti-people, and insidious threats to security.”

VIDEO (11) (12) (13) Edward’s provocation and rampage. Running scene. “Get out of here! Go! Run! You Freak!”

Arguments that can, and do, take place between the aesthetic and conceptual aims of a public artwork and the expectations of a community have one of their most famous and vitriolic moments in the row surrounding Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. Serra’s monumental steel work was (among other accusations) publicly targeted for encouraging or assisting “anti-social behaviour”. Another case was George Sugarman’s 1978 work titled *Baltimore Federal* – seen as a potentially threatening,

monstrous “platform for speaking and hurling objects by dissident groups...its contours would provide an attractive hazard for youngsters naturally drawn to it, and most important, the structure could well be used to secrete bombs or other explosive objects.”

As an example of what was perceived by a public to be monstrous, *Tilted Arc* holds a significant place in sculptural history. Commissioned by the General Services Administration Art-in-Architecture programme and installed in New York’s Federal Plaza, Lower Manhattan in 1981, *Tilted Arc* was a site-specific work conceived by Serra as an integral part of the site and also a purposeful alteration to the site. Confronted with public acrimony towards the work – particularly from the workers who traversed the plaza and took their lunch breaks there – Serra repeatedly stated in the bitter court proceedings that ensued “to remove the work is to destroy the work”.

Although the aesthetic integrity of the work was eloquently argued for by many of Serra’s contemporaries, among them his dealer Leo Castelli, *Tilted Arc* was consistently framed as an affront, an anomaly, a disruption, a Berlin Wall, a monolith, a monstrous, rusting hulk. It was removed from Federal Plaza in 1985 and placed in storage due to the artist’s insistence that it could not be relocated to another site. Planters and seating were sited in the plaza shortly after *Tilted Arc* was dismantled. Harriet Senie argues that in most disputes about a sculptural work in public sculpture is the victim. It becomes the focus of vandalism and hatred and is left vulnerable to attacks and public seizures. Senie proposes a programme of public art education that works to make art “understandable” instead of, in her words, “frightening”.

Mistrust, or suspicion leveled against an artwork and its potential to be co-opted, to act as an agent for subversive or anti-government activities, is a response to the American political system and its belief that threat can be housed anywhere. Such dark thoughts have not (yet) been extended towards public sculpture in New Zealand. Instead, artworks and public sculptures in particular have endured other, more standard, accusations. A part of this history was documented in the 1987 National Art Gallery exhibition *When Art Hits the Headlines: A Survey of Controversial Art in New Zealand* curated by Jim and Mary Barr. Here are several examples:

1963: The purchase of Barbara Hepworth’s *Torso II* by the Auckland City Art Gallery is approved by the City Council, but when a photograph of the work appears in the newspaper the Town Hall is inundated with complaints. Councillor Tom Pearce goes to the press claiming: “Miss Hepworth may be a sculptor with an international

reputation, but this piece of bronze costing 1000 pounds looks to me like the buttock of a dead cow washed up on a beach.” A petition is organised that results in the Mayor cabling Barbara Hepworth with a message to disregard the letter of purchase that had been sent by airmail. The work is later gifted to the gallery by an anonymous party.

In 1964 Michael Smither’s scrap iron sculpture *Victoria Reigns* is declared an affront to the monarch by New Plymouth’s Victoria League when it is displayed at the Public Library. They state, “it would be an insult to anyone to put that thing there and call it art”.

1967: Brought to New Zealand by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, the Marcel Duchamp exhibition tours Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. The media in Wellington claim it to be “the rudest and crudest show ever held at the National Art Gallery”. Duchamp’s readymades are withdrawn from display for the opening function in Wellington. At the Robert McDougall Art Gallery two of Duchamp’s works are withdrawn from the exhibition. The gallery director, Mr W. S. Baverstock defends his decision by stating that “there are many people who would be inconvenienced if undesirables came along to gloat at *Fountain* and *Please Touch*. It’s anti-art and anti-gallery art”. The works are retained in the director’s office where they can be viewed by artists on application. An unknown someone places a chamber pot among the other readymades and this provokes a silent march of about 200 people – many from the art school.

Also, in 1967 Don Driver’s sculpture *The Magician* is withdrawn from display in the New Plymouth Public Library. Mrs P Wunsch says of the work “it could not be ignored. It was large, prominently displayed and vividly painted. It shouted at you”.

In 1968 vandals throw red, green and white paint over Molly Macalister’s sculpture *Little Bull* in the Hamilton Botanic Gardens.

1972: Mr Graeme Newland submits a sculpture “as a joke” into the Hansell’s prize for Contemporary Sculpture and is selected by University of Canterbury Art School lecturer Tom Taylor as one of 26 finalists. Newland claims he titled the work *Twisted World* because “it had to be a crazy world to call some of this stuff art”.

1975: *The Evening Post* runs a story with the heading “Billy Apple Sculpture Annoyed Fire Brigade”.

In 1977: Councillor Mrs W. I Elliott claims that the purchase of Christine Hellyar's *Country Clothesline* for \$270 by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery for its sculpture court is "the last straw". During the controversy a banner is hung outside the gallery announcing "Govett-Brewster Lunatic Asylum – home for mentally disturbed artists".

In 1983 threats to vandalise, shoot and blow up a proposed 12-metre-high statue of Christ, by Roderick Burgess are included in 252 objections to a Waitemata Harbour Planning Authority hearing.

1985: After a heated debate and concerns by residents who "have to look at the bum", the Waimairi District Council rescinds its decision to relocate Llew Summers' sculpture *Family Circle*. It is allowed to remain in position at Redwood's Manse Place subject to "appropriate shrub-planting".

And, in 1987 vandalism finally forces the Strata Arts Trust to remove 3D figures made by Debra Bustin from the roof of a Wainuiomata bus shelter. The figures were part of a contract undertaken by the trust to make art part of the community. Residents in Wainuiomata had already organised a petition against the work.

So, it would seem we have had a lively history of complaint about sculpture, and artwork in general, in New Zealand – to which we can add recent debates in Christchurch about Neil Dawson's *Chalice* and Andrew Drummond's *Millenium Bridge*. If this seems to be an almost inevitable consequence of art-in-public and the expenditure of public money on commissioning or purchasing of artwork, things become murkier if we consider why sculpture goes public in the first place and, what we could call, its ensuing 'life' in the urban environment. What becomes apparent when looking through *When Art Hits the Headlines* is how controversy – debate that has been so intense – is gradually forgotten and, if the work is left in place, how it becomes increasingly remote from any provocative associations it may have had at its initial installation.

At this point it is possible to suggest there is a kind of fading that occurs in the life of an artwork. This idea is discussed in an essay by the critic Clement Greenberg called *The Art Object and the Esthetics of Impermanence* where Greenberg references a proposal made by Marcel Duchamp that there is a time limit on paintings, or "the short life of a work of art". Duchamp considers that the stimulating power of the work itself can only last 20 to 30 years, after which it "dissolves and the work dies."

The work of art, like an irradiated substance, is something that slowly loses its immanence – or what Duchamp called its “smell or emanation”. For Duchamp, the artwork was only a “temporary centre of energy which gives rise to psychic events.”

This is an insight we may usefully extend if we consider the life of our existing public sculptures. What are the prospects for a work to remain a “centre of energy”? No work of art in this country has been actively and continuously hated, loathed, or objected to for any significant length of time. With a view to monstrosity, what has been considered flagrant, abnormal, outrageous, ugly, oversized or shocking in many of our public sculptural works has, more often than not, abated and been put to rest. In response to Duchamp then, should we consider that they have “died”?

This is indeed a gloomy outlook, and by no means do I wish to demoralise those kindly commissioners, those Peggy Boggs, from their faith and support for sculpture in public; nor to dissuade anyone from future investment in such an enterprise. However, in this country it is not difficult to notice that many of our public sculptures – artworks that have become ‘fixtures’ in parks, in malls and plazas, in the foyers of buildings and on street fronts – are in various stages of death: fountains with still water; wind sculptures stiffened with inactivity; neon gases that have ebbed; bodies and objects patinaed, rain-stained and overgrown.

The Austrian novelist Robert Musil wrote: “There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments,” and we may draw an analogy here to a process of disappearance that many public sculptural works undergo. Not only do we quickly become reconciled to a new sculpture in our midst, but after time many of us fail to see it at all. Yet, if we extend Duchamp’s idea of the aroma or emanation of a work of art, like the smell on an absent loved one’s garment, can we re-attune ourselves to a sculpture’s qualities and presence?

In the introduction to her seminal work *Passages in Modern Sculpture* Rosalind Krauss endorses this sense of presence as being particular to the project of sculpture. She asserts with positivity that sculpture “develops a tension peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing.” As its audience, we can also find ourselves peculiarly suspended at this junction, caught between motion and rest. This ambivalence, constituting both our assessment and our awareness of a work of art in public, is something that may never be at a far remove from our relationship to the sculpture around us. There is something endearingly substantial, something that connotes effort and industry embedded in the visual

language of public sculpture. There is also something disconcerting (and perhaps “frightening”) about form, structure, history, or ideas that become so materially evident, solidly real and fixed.

By association, the issues that surround how public sculpture is funded, who’s interests it serves, who asked for it in the first place, and how diverse ‘publics’ respond to it are lengthy and layered. These are not new arguments by any means; however, they are concerns that have become increasingly attended to by contemporary artists who work in public and the organisations that they work with. The point I would like to finish with is one that comes from a book I have recently been reading titled *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* by Andreas Huyssen. In a discussion about what he perceives to be a growing obsession in contemporary society – that of memory tangled and confused by an increasing ability to forget – Huyssen identifies what he calls the “public sites of memory” as the museum, the memorial, and the monument. He says:

“The museum and the monument both offer something that television denies: the material quality of the object. The permanence of the monument, formerly criticised as deadening reification, takes on a different role in a culture dominated by the fleeting image on the screen and the immateriality of communications. It is the permanence of the monument in a reclaimed public space, in pedestrian zones, in restored urban centres, or in pre-existing memorial spaces that attracts a public dissatisfied with simulation and channel flicking.”

In this way, we might view a new role for sculpture in public as encouraging a slowing of time and pace, promoting the pause, the halt, the arrested moment. The notion of the freeze frame, or the technology of the “still-advance” fall into alignment with the time taken to pay attention to a sculpture, especially those that are sited within increasingly dense urban sites. Sculpture, if we are willing, can reveal itself slowly and unhurriedly and can be a fine reward for revisiting that which we may have thought dead.