

# Con-‘Temporary’ Sculpture

Australian sculpture conservator Anne Cummins relives her study tour to sculpture parks, museums and galleries in Dallas, New York and London to meet with artists, fabricators, conservators and collection managers of contemporary sculpture. The trip taken in June 2009 was granted by the Gabo Trust-IIC Travelling Scholarship.

In the cultural sector, there is a trend toward considering the artist’s attitudes towards the ageing and conservation of their contemporary artworks. Yet in my experience in Australian institutions, the curatorial or directorial staff often has the initial and ongoing contact with the artists. In the ensuing dialogue, conservation issues are not always raised or are often not a priority.

For this reason, the focus of my tour was to examine both the artists’ perspectives and the conservators’ and collection managers’ experiences in approaching the conservation of contemporary sculpture.

## Artist interview techniques and INCCA

In order to interview key international artists and the foundations of deceased artists, whose works are in Australian collections, I was keen to find out what formats institutions were using to interview artists. Among the institutions visited, several including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and Tate, London had devised their own proforma Artist Questionnaire forms. Conservators in smaller institutions tended to use the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) as a resource to download proforma questionnaires.

The general consensus was that, when interviewing artists about their work, it is important to keep the questions as open as possible to promote broad discussion and enable elaboration by the artist. Otherwise, dead-end yes/no answers are likely. The INCCA *Guide to Good Practice; Artists’ Interviews* document (<http://www.incca.org/artist-participation>) discusses the pros and cons of using remote written communication or face-to-face communication to obtain a response from the artist. An interdisciplinary collaboration between conservators and curators, and recording the interview with audio or video in front of the artist’s work were deemed to produce the best results. The Tate also emphasised the importance of obtaining copyright permission from the artist so the information gathered can be shared on a site such as INCCA.

## Visits to artists and fabricators

I met with artist Antony Gormley at his London studio. I was interested in exploring his intentions for the ageing and care of his sculptural installation *Inside Australia* (2002), comprising 51 sculptures installed over four square kilometres on Lake Ballard, a remote salt lake in the desert of Western Australia. I recorded the interview with an mp3 player, transcribed the interview and uploaded it to the INCCA website.

The interview was invaluable for understanding Gormley’s general attitude toward his public artworks, notably that he is very involved in the fabrication and ongoing maintenance of his works and is “keen to honour the history of the making”.

An *Insider*, one of Antony Gormley’s cast iron sculptures forming the *Inside Australia* installation on Lake Ballard, Western Australia



Photo: Anne Cummins ©Antony Gormley, courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery

In some cases, this resulted in conservation recommendations that were contrary to best preservation advice. One example concerns the salt ‘socks’ that tend to grow up the legs of the figures where the water level of the lake has risen. As the water recedes white salt crystals grow on the metal and pinpoint corrosion is starting to develop in this area. The usual conservation advice would be to wash off the salts during regular maintenance, however the artist was keen for the salts to stay and show the interaction of the environment with the sculptures. He thought there shouldn’t be corrosion as the metal is stainless steel, so I explained that was a misnomer especially in an aggressive saline environment.

Gormley was adamant that he’d prefer to discuss conservation approaches with conservators when issues arose with his work. He believes that one of the qualities of an object is that it exists in time and he stated “it slightly worries me that conservation issues could overtake aesthetic response or become more important”.

In Brooklyn, New York, I met with one of Dennis Oppenheim’s fabricators who indicated that Dennis is more interested in the concept of the art than its physical fabrication. Once the artist has sketched his idea and has plans drawn up by architects, he leaves the manufacture to the fabricators.

These two examples demonstrate that artists are as unique as their artworks; they need to be approached as individuals on a case by case basis about each specific work. Some artists like Gormley are proactive about the manufacture and care of their work and welcome contact from conservators grappling with the best way to conserve and present their work, while others like Oppenheim are more concerned with the concept and form of the work in space rather than the details of its material nature, manufacture and longevity.

## Artist Foundation visit

During my visit to the Meadmore Foundation in New York I learnt that before he died in 2005, Clement Meadmore gave permission for the Foundation to cast editions of his works until a preset quota was filled. The quota is as follows: 8 for small works, 4 for medium sized works and 2 for large/monumental works. Posthumous works are produced by his fabricator in Connecticut according to the original specifications set by the artist.

During his lifetime Meadmore witnessed the deterioration of his COR-TEN or *weathering steel* works and did not want his sculptures to be displayed in poor condition. Rather than repair or replace them with the same material that would continue to fail he approved of replicas being made in aluminium and painted black to replace the COR-TEN. These replicas are made by his fabricator in Connecticut. The damaged original work is destroyed and the replaced work is given the exact same edition number. These works live up to the term con‘temporary’.

This approach raises questions for the conservator concerned with preserving original materials and accommodating an artist’s original intention. The appearance, texture and changing colouration of a COR-TEN steel sculpture over time conveys a very different aesthetic and tactile experience to the viewer than a painted

Antony Gormley’s *Inside Australia*, salt ‘socks’ and corrosion



Photo: Anne Cummins ©Antony Gormley courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery



Clement Meadmore’s *Flippant Flurry* in COR-TEN steel (c.1977)



Meadmore’s *Flippant Flurry* painted black (2010) at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, Australia.

Photo courtesy of the Meadmore Foundation © Clement Meadmore/VAGA. Licensed by VISCOPY 2010.

aluminium work. It suggests that for Meadmore, the concept and in this case the form of the sculpture is more important than the original material.

## Conservation and collection issues

One of the difficulties with recording and interpreting an artist’s intentions for their artwork for the first time, some considerable time after acquisition, is the need to rely heavily on the artist’s memory of a work that may have been completed many years ago.

A few of the conservators and curators I met with had experienced an artist’s change of mind on how they want their work to be presented or conserved. As the artist advances with their career they may, when revisiting a work, reflect - consciously or not - on how important or unimportant that particular work now is, with an associated change in attitude about its treatment. Ultimately conservators and collection managers weigh up the artist’s requirements and desires, taking into account the needs of the particular object and the collecting institution, to make the final treatment decision. This decision-making process introduces a considerable amount of subjectivity to the outcome.

The most overwhelming realisation from the tour was, that no matter where you are in the world, we are all struggling with similar problems in the conservation of contemporary sculpture, especially those displayed outdoors. Several institutions expressed that the pressure to loan works and to host outdoor events in sculpture gardens and terraces had resulted in an increase in damage to their works.

My findings from this study tour indicate that the artist’s determination to uphold their artistic concepts - even if it’s not their original intention - and the conservator’s focus on practical considerations for maintaining the physical qualities of artworks, may be at odds. However, by creating a dialogue between the parties concerned, imaginative and successful resolutions can be achieved.

A special thanks to the conservators, curators, artists and fabricators in Dallas, New York and London who generously gave their time, and shared their experiences.

## Biography

Anne Cummins completed a degree in Applied Science in the Conservation of Cultural Materials at the University of Canberra in 1991, specialising in objects and metals conservation. She worked part time for several years at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and freelanced starting her own business Sydney Artefacts Conservation in 1992, primarily to conserve outdoor sculptures. In 2002 she obtained a Master of Architecture in Heritage Conservation and in 2004 was a laboratory intern at ICCROM in Rome studying mortars and consolidants. She now has a thriving business in Sydney specialising in the conservation of objects and outdoor heritage items such as sculptures, monuments; historical, architectural and archaeological sites and artefacts and enjoys working around Australia and travelling the world.

