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Antony Gormley Land Body Memory

John K. Grande

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Antony GORMLEY

Land Body Memory

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN K. GRANDE

LONDON, ENGLAND, OCTOBER 2004

JKG: How did your project *Inside Australia* in 2002 come about — you surveyed the area didn't you?

AG: The original request came from Perth because it was for the Perth International Arts Festival. We went out and did a week surveying from the air and chose the western end of Lake Ballard, which is about 800 kilometres from Perth in the western desert. It was a beautiful site with almost 360 degrees of flat horizon all round it and this ironstone mound called Snake Hill, from which you could see for miles over the lake and the surroundings. There are a lot of salt pans in Western Australia but this one felt special: 17 kilometres long by 30 kilometres wide and the mound was about 110 feet high, with smaller, lower islands further down the lake.

I have never disassociated sites from their social context and I felt it was necessary to find the local community. The nearest town was a little place called Menzies; an old mining town of 110 souls that had had 10,000 inhabitants one hundred years ago. There was a large aboriginal population, and 68 of the 130 people we ended up body scanning had aboriginal blood.

Were these used in the same way as some of your early works?

Well, I had only used a scanner once before, to make the bodyform for the *Angel of the North*. What we were making were these very reduced bodyforms called *Insiders*. The idea was to abstract an attitude that life had inscribed in the body. The *Insider* is to the body what memory is to consciousness. It's a kind of residue, a thing that is in a way rather dark, alien, but curiously familiar. They look like those rock paintings in the Sahara, or inscriptions on the rocks of Siberia.

Petroglyphs.

They have this sort of minimal body alphabet, an inscriptive form. They indicate the form of the human body as an articulated, jointed, structure, like stick figures really...

The figures are almost Giacometti-like, stretched, thin, and vertical...

They work as antennae in the landscape. They are memories of particular people that individuals actually recognize. Antennae to pick up all sorts of things that might be in the land.

This desert area is a pretty neutral space you are working with.

Well it is and it isn't. The economy of the thing is the maximum sense of compression in the maximum extension of space.

The contemporary anthropologist Marc Augé from Paris talks about most public spaces not actually being spaces where people are part of the construct. They are just spaces we move through even though they are open, so-called public. On the contrary, they are places where the public is taken out of context, out of the privacy of the soul.

Yes. I think that is probably very true.

So you have taken the definition of personal image to a completely different, rural context, where the land has a memory and has not been disrupted, but you are confirming an urban metaphor.

I am not using an urban metaphor. We were working with the Wonga and Wongatha tribal language groups. This was their dreaming — nothing to do with Menzies.

How many components were there to this work?

Fifty-one. It was about identity memory and landscape. The thing was to try to find what lay beneath the surface, which is quite appropriate for the site because it has this white crystalline mono-surface. You stick something into it and you realize it is actually liquid mud. A whole dormant ecosystem comes back to life when the cyclones arrive — that became a metaphor for the whole project, searching beneath the surface for the three principal stories of inscription on the landscape: indigenous, pastoral and mining. Pre- and post-colonial.

How did the local community respond to it?

They were very worried about having to take their kit off. Once we had made con-

tact with the elders they reluctantly agreed to take part, and now they are quite proud of it.

Do they actually use the place now?

They talk to people there, people visit the place.

With the *Field* project we saw in Montreal, and that travelled in various versions in Europe, Japan and elsewhere, one did have this feeling of flying over the landscape, seeing all those figures in an enclosed space, and they were made from the Mexican land itself.

We tried, in a ritual way, to include elements from the actual place. The largest single piece of the Earth's crust in Western Australia is a rock that is between 2.5 and 1.8 billion years old. It is the largest bit of Achaean rock in the world. There are all these minerals: molybdenum, titanium, uranium, iridium, gold, copper, iron. We made an alloy of some of the minerals found locally in the castings. So the pieces are not just concentrations of people but also concentrations of minerals inherent to the landscape.

There is another work we have not talked about since we last met. The *Angel* is a major attraction and feature of the landscape in the north of England. Is it a hieratic inscription on the land? Is it symbolic for you?

For me it was an experiment. Can we make a totemic image in a time of doubt and uncertainty and deconstruction? It is a very dangerous thing to do because everybody is going to hate you for it.

An evolving structural symbolic form as opposed to a devolving one!

Well, is it evolving or is it actually the angel at whose feet history leaves a pile of junk, as in Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*? Is it actually angelic? The *Angel* is asking those questions. There is irony in the work. It seems a very clumsy messenger if it is one at all. I was trying to make something that would work as a focus for the collective body. People are attached to things that they make, and they made it up there: it is

Antony GORMLEY,
Inside Australia, 2002-
2003. Cast alloy of iron,
molybdenum, iridium,
vanadium and titanium.
51 insider sculptures
based on 51 inhabitants
of Menzies, Western
Australia. Commission for
50th Perth International
Arts Festival, Western
Australia, 2003 (installed
in Lake Ballard). Photo:
courtesy of the artist and
Jay Jopling/White Cube.



→
Antony GORMLEY,
Angel of the North
(Gateshead), 1995-
1998. Steel. 22 x 54 x
2.20 m. Gateshead
Metropolitan
Borough Council.
Photo: courtesy of
the artist and Jay
Jopling/White Cube.

their thing, and they have taken it to heart.

I think that ever since the so-called Iraq war, the way we are looking at imagery has changed. Symbolism seems more important even if in a paranoid way. People are looking for hidden messages. Do you think that is a regression?

Yes I do. It is less about matter and more about message. Hieratic and stylized imagery re-surfaces. In a sense, the digital age was about dematerialization and now the empty spaces look awesome and metaphoric. There is no direct message at all.

I suppose the *Angel* takes part in some of that. Perhaps it works for all the wrong reasons. It is a floating signifier. The *Angel of the North*, commissioned in 1994 and completed in 1998, identifies and objectifies the difference between north and south of Britain through an object. It is an economic divide: the soft white-bellied people in the south and the hard rugby-playing people from the north who get things done.

However, it is also about valuing collective attitudes and giving hope at a painful time: there are serious jobs sculpture can do. One is the resistance to the virtual.

That is one thing we have in common!

The difference between the *Angel* and totalitarian usage of sculpture is that it isn't a very specific inscription on the landscape. It is an open-ended sculpture. People can have their own relationship to it. That is why

shipyards as well, where the big Cunard ships — many great ships — were made. A time of 27 % unemployment. The industrial revolution kept coal and steel entwined. The angel is an image, hieratic, iconic, totemic.

... but it was severely criticized as something authoritarian...

Some newspapers called it *Nazi but Nice*. I was thinking about our relationship to tools and technology, linking this image of the Angel with the flight of the Kittywake and everything that happened to human art and technology from 1911 on. This is my answer to Kandinsky's concerning the *Spiritual in Art*.

All of your work has a spiritual or metaphysical quality.

I like the idea of making something with an enormous sense of purpose, but dealing with things that are very difficult to get a handle on.

In some sense your Angel of the North and the Australian desert piece are post-modern. You include the environment, the real world within the construct of your sculpture.

I still think of this piece as sculpture in the expanded field, engaging with the site.

And you did study anthropology earlier. Your approach always involves the objectification of a sculpture within a land that itself can be objectified within our culture. It makes a comment on the nature of manufacture and the image — its manifestation in whatever form — and you do not try to capture any kind of parochial message. You leave your work open and universal to whatever culture witnesses it.

I hope so. That is another thing that Jacques Derrida tried to deconstruct. There are no universals and the structure beneath our symbols is the body. The way we project subjective experience onto space: we talk about in front, behind, above, below. These are all proprioceptive qualities that we project onto that which is not us. I think that is a very good place to start and it's why I returned to the body. My return to the body is as an extended transformative space, not one limited by role, or attribute.

I also think you allow the viewer to participate more than many artists do in the perception of your work — something not so common in the art of our times.

Yes. That is the important part of the equation of making art, what Ernst Gombrich called the *Cebeholder's share*. Unless there is a sense of participation in the engagement, there is no real value.

Some of the art of our times dictates its message to us, does not enable a dialogue

to develop. The message is decided by the artists, and often the metaphors are purely mediatic. I think your work is very much about trying to come back into touch with ourselves, within ourselves. Not as some kind of mission, but simply as part of a natural language of living.

I would like to think that human creativity has to work with the organic systems we inherit through the biosphere. And that in some way the things we do should be capable of being integrated into the elemental world as imaginative extensions. I do not want to colonize space or frame it, but I would like to feel that the sculptures are a complement to it, or in continuum with it.

Art in the landscape works best when it is a footnote to that landscape that allows you to read it in a different way than you would otherwise.

Well I think it is also a catalyst to see a land or cityscape as an image of itself so that the real can become imagined and the imagined can become real. That is the exchange that art makes. So when you come across the Tyne River Bridge and you are going south and you see the *Angel* as this tiny thing sitting on the edge of the Teem Valley and the smoking factories, the *Angel of the North* is just this other thing, another presence in an industrial landscape. When you approach it over the moor it is in an agricultural one, witnessing the changing of the seasons and the crops. In another direction, it is in the company of tower blocks, social housing projects of a very high density. I am very interested in the way that, from every point of view, the *Angel* has a different context, but from every point of view it makes you reconsider those contexts in relation. It touches many areas of human life whether agrarian, industrial, or urban, and it allows you to look at those contexts as if they were pictures; through it, you can contemplate the complexity of human life as if you were not a part of it.

What upcoming projects do you have?

I am hoping to finally make the *Brick Man*, which is this building in human form. It will be 27 stories high but nobody will be able to get up there. A totally useless high-rise, where you will stand at the bottom of this building whose volumes echo your own. You will look into this dark and very acoustically alive place. If I succeed it will be made in China. ←

Writer and art critic John GRANDE's reviews and feature articles have been published extensively. John Grande's latest contributions include an essay for *Nature the End of Art*; Alan Sonfist and *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (www.sunypress.edu) and *A Biomass Continuity* in collaboration with Coco Gordon. He also curated *Eco-Photo* at Dorsky Gallery, New York in January 2005.



it is there. It lives on a hill that everybody can get to the top of, and you very rarely see the hill without somebody on it. My feeling about the *Angel* is that it is the hill, the sculpture and the people in relation to it. I feel it is a symbol of the painful change from the industrial to the virtual age. It was born of a very particular moment, after the closing down of the coal mines at the end of the 1980s, and the closing of the northern