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Paul St. George
Minumental, 1998

The Relative Scale of Things
David Musgrave

In the perception of relative size the human body enters into the continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale... The qualities of publicness or privateness are imposed on things. This is because of our experience in dealing with objects that move away from the constant of our own size in increasing or decreasing dimension... While specific size is a condition that structures one's response in terms of the more or less public or intimate, enormous objects in the class of monuments elicit a far more specific response to size qua size. That is, beside providing the condition for a set of responses, larger-sized objects exhibit size more specifically as an element.[1]

Anyone who has walked through the centre of a modern city will be familiar with the feeling of scale elicited by twentieth century architecture, the sense of human beings reduced to replaceable cells in a durable machine. To stand beneath an office building six hundred feet high is also to recognise that that building is well over one hundred times the height of an average adult human, and immediately a power relationship has been established. This, at least, has not changed since 1966, when Robert Morris wrote the above words. Scale has an inbuilt rhetoric, and it operates in both directions. To give an inverse example, in Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, J. Edgar Hoover is credited with a paranoid fixation on the presence of airborne germs, a fixation which stems from his apprehension of inhuman scale; being too small to see with the naked eye, Hoover's imagination involuntarily takes over, causing him to perceive the air in a baseball stadium as 'an all-pervading medium of pathogens, microbes, floating colonies of spirochetes that fuse and separate and elongate and spiral and engulf, whole trainloads of matter that people cough forth, rudimentary and deadly.'[2] Bringing a human being into the loop fills the abstract notion of scale with significance, and the presence of a human being is a precondition of any artwork.

Very few visual artists of international repute use the second extreme of scale to great advantage in their work, while remarkably many use the former. The monumental work, the sculpture, painting, photograph or projection that engulfs the spectator in a powerful display of accomplishment, remains the generally accepted means of securing a reputation. Once a work exceeds the dimensions of the viewer it aspires to the condition of an environment, and as such attempts to dominate the viewer's perceptions entirely, albeit usually for a short period of time. The implicit display of mastery is the subject of Paul St George's gently ironic practice.

His project involves two distinct processes: the first is to select works of twentieth-century sculpture that he deems 'important'; the second is to reproduce those works to a standard size, each one able to fit within a cube 10.5 cm x 10.5 cm x 10.5 cm. Punningly referring to their diminutive scale, the works are labelled 'Minumental' sculptures and are produced in editions of 250.

[1] Morris, Robert, "Notes on Sculpture", reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900- 1990*, Oxford: Blackwell,1997, p. 817.

[2] DeLillo, Don, *Underworld,* London: Picador, 1998, pp. 18 and 19.

Not every artist uses scale in an authoritarian way (Mark Rothko famously argued that the vast proportions of his canvasses created a greater bodily intimacy with the viewer than smaller, less worldly works), but St George tends to select works by those who do. Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, Britain's largest and most newsworthy piece of public sculpture since David Mach's incendiary submarine, has received the reductive treatment. All of the problematic associations with Fascist imagery that have generated controversy about the piece evaporate once the element of monumentality is removed, and *Minumental Angel of the North*, the domesticated offspring of Gormley's singular, commanding giant, has the character of decorative charm. St George has made a counter-claim against a Feng Shui expert's analysis of the pernicious effects of the original work, stating that in its Minumental form the *Angel of the North* can actually improve the spiritual dynamics of a room.[3] The comment is intended as light-hearted, but in this very intention the physical and ideological dangers of monumental sculpture are brought into focus.

The scale of a monument is not merely a blunt physical fact but also an explicit validation of a particular world view, an expression of a mode of perception that has met the various bureaucratic criteria that any publicly presented object inevitably must; 'public art' is not, of course, a term that usually refers to art made by or even for the public, just art that happens to exist lawfully in a public space. At the opposite end of the spectrum we could place graffiti, whose presence is not condoned by bodies funded with public money and therefore has a short life-expectancy, Recent history has proven, however, that even officially sanctioned expression can meet with successful resistance. The case of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (remade by St George to an approximate scale of 1/3500) became a cause célèbre when office workers who used the courtyard in which it was installed complained that it had destroyed the sense of community enjoyed by those who congregated there for lunch. It is hard to think of a better example of contemporary art's agendas abutting against the practicalities of everyday existence. After a protracted court case, which finds its satirical double in William Gaddis' novel *A Frolic of His Own* (Serra's *Tilted Arc* becomes R. Szyrk's *Cyclone Seven*, and the problem of segregation is transformed into the case of a trapped dog, but the positions articulated are uncannily similar), the wishes of those who used the space were respected and the sculpture was removed.[4] Many pertinent questions about the contract between artist and public were raised, questions which also preoccupy Paul St George. His Minumental *Tilted Arc* is unlikely to be regarded as a public nuisance, and also has the advantage that it is still in existence. In effect, the piece is a pathetic symbol of a cultural problem, a wry reflection on the social reception of art which identifies itself as advanced.

The *Tilted Arc* case is explored in depth in Anna C. Chave's article "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", the text that sounds the theoretical keynote of St George's enterprise. Chave systematically problematises the assumptions of minimalist art, framing, if not exactly exposing, the physical and semantic brutalities doled out by its exponents. The language of space, presence and domination is shown to be a connecting factor not only between various pieces of work, but also the ways in which the artists have discussed it. Morris' text has a deadeningly prosaic, almost mantric tone that beats home the principles that determine our ordinary bodily relationship with the world; in this respect it amply mirrors at least part of what minimalist art hoped to achieve. He provides an outline of not only his conception of the place of sculpture in the world of objects, but also a general theory of the relation of objects to people who

[3] See St George's Letter in *Art Monthly* no. 217, June 1998, p.15.

[4] Gaddis, William, *A Frolic of His Own,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, particularly pp. 31-40 and 285-293. The events described by Gaddis take a rather more tragic turn than in the *Tilted Arc* case. Before the sculpture can be lawfully removed, *Cyclone Seven* is “struck by a bolt of lightening, and its reluctant tenant found to have been released forever from the travails of earthly existence”. [p. 286]

experience them. This perspective places sculpture in the same material world as office buildings, missile silos, ballpoint pens and motor vehicles, an association which is more complex and problematic than it might seem. For Morris and Serra at least, the recognition of this parity of art objects with the elements of post-industrial life led to work which was often deliberately intimidating.

The recrudescence of the minimalist aesthetic over the last ten years in the work of, for example, Julian Opie, Damien Hirst and Rachael Whiteread, to stick to artists who have been minumentalised, clearly point up the social and political shifts that have occurred in the intervening period. While Chave can comfortably cross-reference the brutalities of US foreign and domestic policy in the 60s and 70s with the works produced by American artists prominent at the time, ultimately she concludes that the position they articulate is one of carefully gauged silence, "a kind of connoisseurship of non-commitment."[5] She goes on to argue that this in itself constitutes a political statement of sorts, one that plays out Adorno's conception of a technologically threatened subject who "raises its disenfranchisement to the level of consciousness, one might almost say to the level of a programme for artistic production,".[6]

Chave is able to sustain this argument in relation to Judd, Andre, Morris et al in a way that seem totally irrelevant to those who have recently adopted elements of the minimalist idiom. Hirst's work is titled in such a way as to prioritise individual and often intimately private experience over a broadly political one; Whiteread, too, despite infrequent and perfunctory references to the Thatcherite climate in which her generation thrived, invariably emphasises the relationship of her work to personal memories; Julian Opie is perhaps the only artist of these three who strives for genuine impersonality, but he does so in a way that suggests a potential responsiveness to the individual viewer - his titles are porous and inviting, offering suggestions to the viewer [*Imagine you can order these, Imagine you are driving]* for the mental manipulation of the otherwise mutely geometric work.

St George provides a meta narrative of such shifts through his editing process, offering a god's eye view without, however, making any grandiose claims for himself. He is at once engaged and detached, the former in the sense in which a craftsman is intimately involved with his processes, and the latter in that those processes are determined by a contemplative selection. The story elaborated above is, of course, only one of the possible routes it is possible to trace through the Minumentals. One might just as easily link, for instance, Meret Oppenheim, Richard Artschwager and Jeff Koons for their referencing of domestic and consumer goods in the century's art, or Joseph Beuys, Damien Hirst and Anya Gallaccio for their use of ephemeral, organic materials.

As a whole Minumental Sculptures will, St George claims, provide a "comprehensive summary of 20th Century sculpture", but this statement in itself means that the value of his selections is disputable. He might justly be accused of parochialism in his selections, since British artists who have come to prominence in the last ten years currently account for a high percentage of the selections, while not having had the time to secure anything like the kind of critical validation possessed by, say, Andy Warhol or Richard Long. A viewer of the project as a whole would have to conclude that this is part of the point: that is, the creation of a zone where it might be possible to think about exactly how Dan Graham measures up to Joseph Beuys, or Kerry Stuart to Phillip King. Their juxtapositions may be arbitrary or illuminating, articulate or inert.

The project might seem academic were it not for the fact that the commentary on offer is essentially a silent and ambiguous one: manufacturing Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* in metal at

[5] Anna C Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", *Arts Magazine.* vol. 64, no. 5, January 1990, pp. 44- 63, quoting in this instance Brian O'Doherty on the minimalists in 1966.

[6] Chave, "Minimalism", quoting Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* London: Routledge, 1984, p. 35.

a fraction of the scale of the original item dearly means something different to making and wrapping a miniature Reichstag. These tiny objects elaborate a subjective history of twentieth-century art, and quietly embrace the fact that the privilege of 'importance' is awarded arbitrarily by those who view and think about art. The importance of Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* is of an altogether different order to that of Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag* (the first contributed to the extension of artistic practice into the realms of language, the second is a singular and, for all its political reverberations, primarily physical gesture), and the fact that St George has made them both testifies only to his own recognition of their significance. They cannot be made to fit the same scale in any but the most literal sense.

The importance of a multiplicity of possible readings and routes through the work is accentuated by the fact that Minumental Sculptures exist in large editions. Despite the recent perceived increase in the accessibility of modern and contemporary art, the collection of most major works remains the preserve of a tiny, wealthy few. St George's stated egalitarian intention is to bring contemporary sculpture and its attendant debates within the reach of as many people as possible. We can choose whether or not to take him at his word. There is an element of knowingness to the Minumental sculpture series that is at odds with this altruistic sentiment. Without already being involved with the whole perplexing business of contemporary sculpture and its viewing, they might remain a peculiar and irrational sequence of objects. But then perhaps, contradictorily, an involvement with twentieth-century sculpture only makes the series even more puzzling. St George records all the conflicts, reversals, ambiguities and misreadings that run like fault lines through the art of the last hundred years, reflecting a wildly heterogeneous body of work which is impossible to consolidate since it shares no common factor other than the one arbitrarily imposed by St George. In a sense what we are left with is the opposite of a history. Here is a group of objects inviting configuration by the viewer, replicated evidence in a case that remains open.