ARTIST Q&A: BEN CAIN AND TINA GVEROVIĆ

Q: The University's first Public Art commission was to respond to the theme of "library", can you talk about your interest in this theme and how it is represented in Floating Garden?

B&T: The first thought is of the library - primarily holding books - that's in the immediate vicinity of our work, but another might be the botanical garden which is perhaps more of a collection than a library, but the two are similar nevertheless. The work was conceived of as a Library of materials. A library could be a collection, a resource, a place to take something from - material or immaterial - to learn, maybe sleep, digress, many other things besides; it's a calm and quiet place to sit and to be with others. The work we've made echoes some of these characteristics. Although it's not a broad inventory of materials in the way that the library nearby might be, it is a collection and display point for certain types of recyclable waste plastic that's ordinarily found on campus. You can't take these materials away, but you can look at them encased in the work and consider their daily life on campus and beyond. We also imagined that this concrete-plastic garden might be a place where we collate and present material experiments (objects?) developed during cross-department workshops, and in this way it would resemble a materials library. Material libraries are an important part of architecture/design/building education, and although this work doesn't pretend to offer any new research in terms of potential building materials, it does point to questions about the viable or desirable building materials of the future.

Q: The material of the sculpture uses and draws attention to the waste generated on campus. Where did this idea come from? How did you go about developing the material used in this piece?

B&T: We initially had a lot of different options in terms of the types of on-campus waste material we wanted to include, such as bio-waste (not human), glass, paper, card… But many of these options weren't feasible because of safety concerns. We wanted to highlight invisible production in the form waste materials that are potentially recyclable, and this eventually boiled down to plastics. In relation to the discrete violence done by plastics, Rob Nixon writes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."

There's an idea that one of art's purposes is to hold up a mirror to society, i.e. that it represents, and this sculpture functions similarly in that it represents consumer activity and shows outcomes or by-

products of that activity. It's also a representation and container of time, in the same way that a geological core sample is, since it presents a cross-section of human behaviour in some way. Digging through soil reveals stories about the way people have lived, what they produced and consumed. The surfaces of this work (which also suggest an interior) point to contemporary life as defined by the by-products of human existence, besides technological, medical advances etc. Plastics are also part of the human legacy. We wanted to show how we, as users of this site, and consumers and producers of the materials onsite, are inextricably bound to certain processes and materials such as "undead" plastics.

This is how James Marriott and Mika Minio-Paluello of Platform London describe the transformation of oil to plastic:

We can… "recognize a remarkable lifespan: crude oil formed 3.4 million years ago in rocks under the Caspian comes to rest on the bed of the Atlantic [as a fragment of a plastic container] for the next 10,000 years. Between these two stretches is a tiny window of transformation. It might take just 22 days for Azeri oil to be transported from beneath the Caspian to the Munchmunster plastics factory. Then the container could be moulded, filled, sold and discarded in the span of the following 40 days. In the space of only two months, this oil is extracted, transported, traded, transformed and transformed again before it is sold and ultimately trashed." (Quoted in *Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic* by Heather Davis)

The key problems with concrete, besides the fact that it requires an enormous amount of water to make it, and it's very difficult to break down, is that its formed at very high temperatures and this process impacts massively on the environment. After the first stages of research and a really informative conversation with Professor John Connaught at the University of Reading, we understood that Limecrete, which is cooked at a much lower temperature and is generally a lot less harmful, ought to be a key ingredient in the mix that we use to form the sculpture. Of course, alongside limecrete, sand and stones, recyclable plastics also form a high percentage of the aggregate. In the end the truth is that we've made a sculpture that doesn't 100% shift away from using harmful materials, that was not our intention. Our intention was though to make something that presents forward thinking about how we might use, re-use, and process materials in a more ethically-minded manner and according to a different type of economy.

We looked at lots of early research into concrete that employs surprising aggregates and yet still produces a form of concrete that's stable enough to build with. Architect John Outram's Blitzcrete was an important reference point, as was 'Green-Mix' concrete, and we looked at various articles such as "Greening the Mix" by Mary Burger (2008).

Q: In your initial proposal, you were originally considering lots of shapes – potentially constructing an environment out of spheres, bars, rods, blocks and even natural rock-like forms. How did you decide on the structure of the final sculpture?

B&T: Over time we realised that the most important aspect of the work is the material make-up of the work and the necessity to show textured surfaces in a simple and direct way, which lead to us wanting to use very basic forms. We also thought that scaling the work down was important in terms of avoiding unnecessary over-production, and that more human-scale forms might be more approachable. The initial plans were a little grand and in truth over-ambitious, and the final outcome is a form which sits in the landscape in a much less obtrusive way, it's a discreet and almost private little scene that relates directly to the fantastic URS building, and to the magnificent trees in the vicinity, but doesn't detract from or intrude upon those elements. The size and character were of course to some extend dictated by financial and health/safety constraints, but in fact the other ideas mentioned above are much more important.

Q: What about the placement of the Floating Garden. Can you reflect on the role this played in the process and why you chose the spot you did?

The immediate environment includes the URS building and some really wonderful ancient trees such as the Tupelo Tree *Nyssa sylvatica* and Cretan Maple *Acer sempervirens*. We tried to be very respectful towards both of these, and of course the work does point to human-generated ecological damage that impacts on the natural environment. The URS is formed partly of coloured concrete blocks. While the structure is complex it appears to be constructed from simple blocks (which is why some people call it the Lego building). We did consider the possibility of adding pigment to our work in order to colour it in a similar way to the URS but decided that it was important to refer to the URS without attempting to emulate it in an explicit way. We chose a spot that is partially obscured from the main paths in the area because we didn't want the work to feel monumental or to draw too much attention to itself, rather we wanted to site the work in a way that feels like it's part of an interior-like space. Obviously that area is external, public, but the fact that it's a little enclosed on all sides and even to some extent above by foliage, offers the sense of an interior room, and therefore maybe the possibility of being in public space at the same time as being slightly removed from the busy public areas.

Q: A participatory element is central to your concept. What are your hopes for how the sculpture will be used, and its ongoing impact on campus?

B&T: Participation might mean just sitting or standing on the work, eating one's lunch there, talking, kissing, watching the trees and other people… or it might mean making and siting specific objects on the work and therefore using it as a set of display units. We are also thinking about how people

might participate in generating a certain type of material superstructure through the way that they use and discard materials. Ordinarily the idea of a process of sedimentation involves cyclical transformation, decomposition, and humans of course participate in this process not only through offering their dead bodies back to the earth, but plastics are a sort of exit from that process?

We hoped that we might be able to run some workshops which would invite people to make objects that incorporated local waste and then to present these on the sculpture, so that the sculpture would become a platform not only for people but also for objects. Covid restrictions prevented us from doing this, but it is something that may take place in the future.

Q: How has being in the context of a University informed your work? Have you collaborated at all students and researchers during this time? Do you plan to in future?

B&T: The really exciting character of a university environment is its potential to function through trans-disciplinarity and cross-pollination. We wanted to set up conversations and workshops that included staff and students from different departments such as Fine Art, Architecture, Material Cultures, Building… Although we had some really promising conversations to this end, for example with John Caonnaughton (University of Reading Professor of Sustainable Construction) and Maria Vahdati (University of Reading Associate Professor of Construction Management & Engineering), again Covid imposed restrictions. We'd like to look into further funding possibilities that might support these cross-department activities in the future.

Q: The commission was awarded in Summer 2019, obviously things have changed in ways we could never have imagined since then –the piece was finally installed in the midst of a pandemic! Do you have any reflections on this process?

It was incredibly difficult to arrange installation during this time. And it definitely wouldn't have happened without the extensive and tireless support of Stéphanie Mitchell (University of Reading Arts Development Officer) who was just really brilliant, and Miranda Laurence before Stéph of course. Paul Harding (University of Reading Estates Project Manager) was also incredibly supportive throughout, and we're extremely thankful that he was so willing to share his knowledge and experience, and patience! Phil Brown at Other People's Sculpture both fabricated and installed the work, and him and his team helped us to make very careful and precise forms that both conform to numerous H&S limitations and are something that we're really happy with.

During this time, we're thinking in new ways about how to manage our working lives, emotional lives, social lives, and along with this there's a new investment in considering our complicity in natural disaster. We might think in a newly politicised way about what we buy, what we consume,

what we leave behind us and what happens to those materials that we leave. For these reasons, despite the challenges, it feels like the right time to be realising and sharing this work.

Q: As you know, this is the University of Reading's first permanent Public Art commission. Why do you think Public Art is important and what role does it have to play on University campuses?

B&T: The roles that it might play on campus are really defined by the work itself, and viewer-users of course, with each work no doubt suggesting different roles. In our case the roles are connected to awareness and close observation of the immediate environment and ones affect upon that, politicising daily on-site activities that relate to production and consumption, ideas about future-orientated fabrication techniques, public art having social functions as a meeting point, practical functions as a seat or a table.… amongst other things.

Of course, not all art's good, and certainly it doesn't need to aspire to usefulness, but it's easy to go along with a basic belief that art ought to be at the centre of any healthy society. What is art good for? Exploration and speculation, joy, release, expanding knowledge about selves and more importantly others, re-evaluating belief systems, communicating across and beyond languages, creating platforms for shared concerns, materialising ideas and feelings such that they might be better shared. In terms of its role, you perhaps have to ask that question of each and every work that you engage with?

Q: Do you see Public Art as something you will continue to do in your practice? Do you see your experience in Reading and with Floating Garden as something that will inform your future work?

Both of us, either collaboratively or independently, have been involved in public art, large and small-scale for some time but nothing that's really close to what we've realised here for the University of Reading. This experience has taught us an enormous amount about the logistics and administrative requirements of installing something of this nature in such an ecologically sensitive and highly regulated public space. Yes, we'd very much like to continue working on similar projects in the future, but we'd try to make sure that Stéphanie Mitchell is with us in some capacity!

This sculpture will definitely inform future work in many ways, such as the ways in which we use, re-use and problematise the use of certain types of materials.