

Garth Evans, with Ann Compton, *The Cardiff Tapes (2019)*

Chicago, Soberscove Press, 2023, 103 pp., 16 colour and 4 b&w images, \$18. ISBN 978 1 940190 33 4

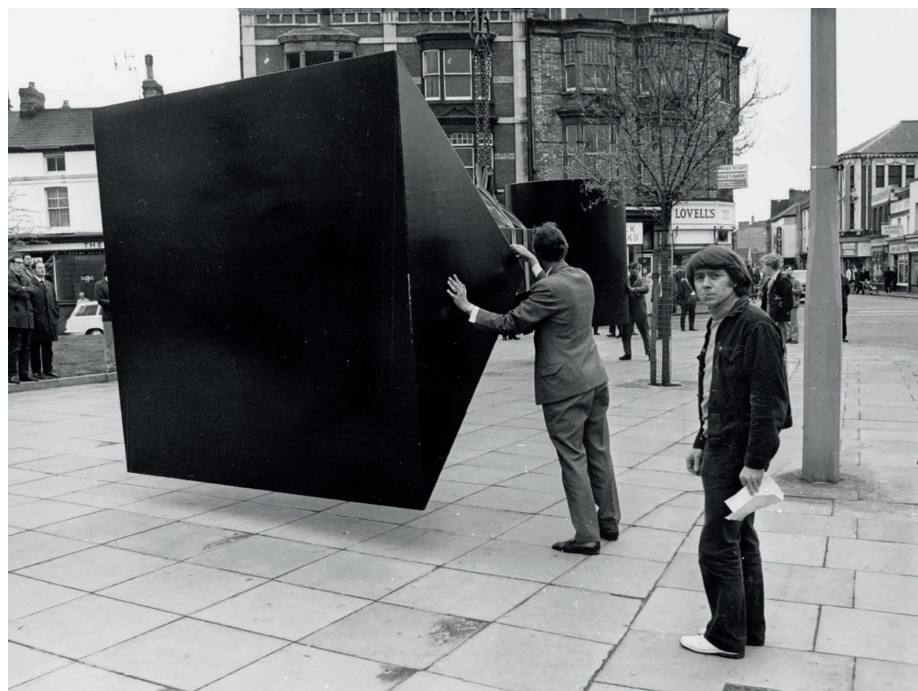
Standing beside his reinstalled public sculpture in the Hayes, Cardiff, in September 2019, microphone in hand, Garth Evans questioned passers-by about what they thought of the sculpture. His action was a repetition of what he had done when *Untitled (1972)* was first installed in this location in 1972 as part of the City Sculpture Project, a national project sponsored by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation relating sculpture to urban environments. A transcript of the recording Evans made in 2019 constitutes around a third (31 pages) of this slim illustrated volume, along with texts on 'Returning the Sculpture' and 'The Second Transcript' by Evans and a contextual essay, 'Anything but Simple', by Ann Compton.

Buoyed by the positive response to the 2015 publication, *The Cardiff Tapes (1972)*,¹ and renewed interest in the City Sculpture Project, this second publication, and the project to which it relates, aimed to return Evans's sculpture, *Untitled*, to the location in the Hayes Cardiff that it occupied for six months in 1972. While the first publication presented the original

recording Evans made in 1972 in transcript form, the more ambitious 2019 project involved restoring, reinstating and revisiting the original three-ton, forty-foot-long steel sculpture.

Its return to the city of Cardiff was planned to coincide with performances of a play by Leila Philip based on the original recording and a solo exhibition of Evans's work at Chapter. All these things happened, although not necessarily in the anticipated order. As the book details, the return of the sculpture was fraught with red tape, including a last-minute delay with a risk assessment.

As Compton discusses, engaging with a perceptive article by Sadia Pineda Hameed, the crowdfunding campaign for the project was the only aspect that garnered press attention. Hameed criticized Welsh arts institutions' choice to appeal to Welsh nationalism rather than to confront complicity in colonialism, and their unquestioning inactive traditionalism in the call to 'save our sculpture' and return it to Cardiff. Hameed criticized support for 'academic white conceptualism' rather than investment in new research, art and projects.² Hameed was unconvinced by what seemed a 'shoehorned and co-opted link to miners'. Evans had not disclosed this meaning in 1972, nor



1 Garth Evans (far right) next to *Untitled* on the Hayes in Cardiff, Wales, 1972
(photo: courtesy Garth Evans)

had he wanted to do so ahead of the second recording in 2019. His tribute was concealed and personal in the original work, and so it was easy for the motivation for the fundraising campaign to seem cynical and tacked-on.

Evans recounts how his sculpture for Cardiff came from a fragment of a failed commission to make a commemorative sculpture to steelmaking for Ebbw Vale (pp. 75–78). The City Sculpture Project offered an opportunity to make a sculpture that didn't demand any reckoning with social purpose. It assumed that art for the public was a good thing in and of itself while, somewhat cynically, art-washing the deadly products of its funder (am I right in noticing a cigarette between Evans's lips in the photograph of him next to *Untitled* in 1972 on p. 31?) (fig. 1). Evans's contemporary, sculptor William Tucker, wrote in 1969 that 'new armies of bronze generals and marble nymphs disguised in steel geometry and vermiform plastic have emerged to reap the harvest of a dead tradition, a temporary and invented public art'.³ This was a decade before Rosalind Krauss's observation about the failure of the logic of sculpture as monument, frequently cited in discussions of public sculpture.⁴

The 1972 City Sculpture Project was a failure, although, as Compton

observes in her text, it 'attracted a great deal of press attention which initiated a national conversation about the role of public sculpture' (p. 84). None of the sculptures were retained beyond their temporary six-month sponsored placement, several were vandalized in situ, and few found permanent homes in any public location.⁵

Conflicted feelings about the social purpose of artworks and the role of artists troubled Evans at the time of the original project. These were conflicts that he found difficult to reconcile personally and professionally, and were partly the reason why he 'forgot' the sculpture, or rather abandoned it, when he left the UK to take up a visiting professorship in the USA while it was still on display in Cardiff in 1972. And yet Evans's desire for public engagement, not afforded by the commission, led him to stage the slightly bizarre-seeming performance of asking passers-by – members of the sculpture's first public – what they thought of the sculpture and recording their responses. If Evans found it impossible to make a sculpture that had a social purpose, he sought out that purpose through different ways of being an artist, as a teacher or through placement in industry.⁶

And it is this socially engaged aspect of Evans's project that is perhaps most



2 Reinstalling *Untitled* on the Hayes in Cardiff, Wales, 2019 (photo: Hannah Firth)

1. G. Evans and J. Wood, *The Cardiff Tapes (1972)*, Chicago, Soberscove Press, 2015.

2. S. P. Hameed, 'The Save Our Sculpture Cardiff Campaign', *Wales Arts Review*, 15 December 2018, <https://www.walesartsreview.org/save-our-sculpture-questioning-cardiffs-priorities/>, accessed 2 August 2024.

3. W. Tucker, 'An essay on sculpture', *Studio International*, 177.907, 1969, p. 13.

4. R. E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', *October*, 8, spring 1979, p. 33.

5. Tucker's own work was to have featured in the Stuyvesant City Sculpture Project, but none of the cities to which it was offered were willing to host it. In Liverpool the city council likened Tucker's sculpture to the collapsed lungs destroyed by smoking the products sold by Peter Stuyvesant. The work in question is now in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. See J. Sleeman, *The Sculpture of William Tucker*, Aldershot, Lund Humphries, 2007, p. 18, and cat. no. 71, p. 87.

6. For Evans's placement with the British Steel Corporation, see K. Jackson, 'The problem with steel: Garth Evans' placement with the British Steel Corporation (1968–71)', *Open Library of Humanities*, 6.2, 2020, pp. 1–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.454>.

7. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', p. 33.

8. Discussion of these matters has featured extensively in this journal, for example in 31.1, 31.2, 31.3 (2022), 32.4 (2023) and 33.2 (2024), in articles, reviews and reflection, including those by Ray Barnett, Aviva Ben-Ur, Anna Dempsey, Lubaina Himid, Nickolas Lambrianou and Liberty Paterson. They have also featured in other publications, such as *British Art Studies*, 24, March 2023.

compelling today, which deconstructs and reflects on the project of 1972 and actualizes memory and meaning, aspects criticized by Hameed as missing from the crowdfunding call. One contributor to the recording – 10th Man – recalls climbing on the sculpture back in 1972 (p. 26). In discussing how the sculpture makes him feel, another – 25th Man – inadvertently answers the question Evans speculates about but doesn't ask. '[I]nstead of "What do you think of this?" I perhaps could have asked "What does this make you feel?"' (p. 75). The 25th Man's acknowledgement of the speech impediment that makes it hard for him to get his words out serves to make his contribution more poignant. It is the person who acknowledges his failure to speak who speaks most eloquently about feeling.

Restrictions due to Covid meant that the work remained in situ in Cardiff for longer than the planned six months. As Evans reflected, 'I succeeded in taking *Untitled* back to Cardiff, but in terms of what I wanted from this experience, the project was not successful' (p. 93 and n. 19). Transparency and honesty in the face of failure is something Compton recognized in Heather Peak and Ivan Morison's response to the destruction by fire of their *Luna Park* sculpture in Southsea in 2010, one of the comparative examples of public sculpture discussed in her text (and another project initiated, as was Evans's, by Hannah Firth and Chapter). 'As we considered the 2019 project alongside other public sculptures', Compton explains, 'the shortcomings of thinking about "success" and "failure" in binary terms became even more apparent' (p. 94). In failing to write a contextual essay about the development of public art since 1972, presenting instead an account of the thinking process and

discussions about the project, Compton's essay becomes a more searching enquiry into the complex relationships between sculpture, sculptors and publics. In so doing, the book and the wider project it documents, *The Cardiff Tapes (2019)*, becomes a successful project about failure, and speaks more eloquently of the potential for sculptures to be part of a conversation with their publics beyond the clamour and contestation of who and what they represent and for whom.

I failed to see the sculpture in Cardiff. I did see the artist in person, the exhibition and the performance of the play based on the 1972 Cardiff tapes at Chapter in September 2019. I finally got to see the sculpture in its new location in Pontypridd more recently, in 2023, on the campus of the University of South Wales. Evans had told me it was in front of the old School of Mines. 'It's a long time since I've heard it called that' was the response of someone on campus when I asked for directions. Even in that brief exchange the sculpture reactivated a history of that place.

The logic of sculpture as monument, which according to Krauss had failed, means 'It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.'⁷ From our vantage point in the twenty-first century we have witnessed that logic reactivated, occasionally violently in protest, as well as continued in respectful and sometimes controversial commemoration of achievement and loss.⁸ Public sculpture is activated by the actions and conversations that happen around it. Maybe not all artists would confront that dialogue in quite so direct a way as Evans did with *Untitled* in the Cardiff tapes in 1972 and 2019, but it is what makes the artwork public. Or even, what makes it art.

Joy Sleeman