

The Security of Sculpture

Julian Stallabrass

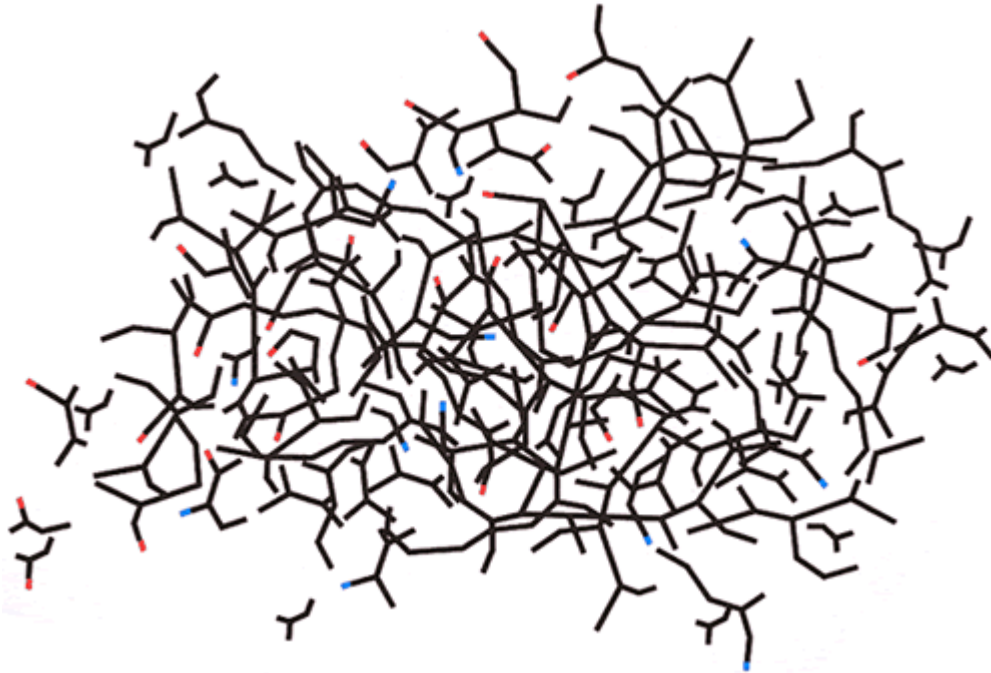


Figure 1 Proposed sculpture for Mesh Computers plc

A scene in the film *Fight Club* is likely to set the blood of any artist or critic racing, in fervent approval or revulsion. In it, the pugilist rebels dynamite the moorings of an ugly, spherical piece of corporate sculpture, sending it rolling down a long cascade to crash through the window of some fast-food chain. That oscillation of feeling may depend on what viewers think is being attacked, for the corporate sculpture appears to be a slippery object, part art work, part business propaganda. Sculptors often make several casts of a particular piece so a single Henry Moore, for instance, may have one existence in a civic space, another in a gallery, yet another presiding over the entrance to a bank. As with an image that can take on two distinct meanings (like a line drawing of a cube that sometimes appears to project out of the page, sometimes to sink into it) it is hard to hold the two elements together in the mind.

An intriguing exhibition currently on display at the Leeds City Art Gallery, and (with no little irony) funded by the Henry Moore Institute, brings these issues into sharp focus. Chris Evans has set up a body he calls the UK Corporate Sculpture Consultancy in which he acts as a facilitator and broker between companies and artists. He has been to the Gemini office park on the outskirts of Leeds to talk to the firms there about their requirements for a sculpture that would stand outside their offices, and has commissioned various studies from artists (Padraig Timoney, Toby Paterson and Graham Fagen) in an attempt to visualise the results. For an artist to take on such a role is nothing new but Evans' contact with the beleaguered companies of this area is highly revealing.

Evans has recorded his discussions with the businesses and displays them beside the resultant images. Company managers, it turns out, have well-developed views about appropriate and inappropriate forms. Banks and building societies like solid-looking sculpture, we are informed by one management consultant. Telecommunications, on the other hand, want 'something very sharp, clean and shiny. ... We're not a teddy bear factory so a warm fluffy image isn't appropriate. Matt black and shiny chrome spring to mind.' A computer manufacturer likewise wants a fluid-looking shiny chrome sculpture that will reflect the idea that their business is constantly adapting to changing markets and technologies. In a conversation which is the closest he comes to overt satire, Evans persuades a debt-collection company to symbolise its activities with a tiny sculpture of a Venus fly-trap.

All the companies have pressing practical concerns: that the sculpture should not obstruct their buildings and brand names, that it should not impinge on parking space, and that it should be resilient enough to withstand the iconoclastic attentions of the local residents. The computer firm, which is regularly robbed and ram-raided, wants their sculpture to double up as a barrier to protect the building.

With the general run of corporate sculpture, the kudos attached to ownership of the piece is generated by the separation between the art work and its function as propaganda. In the creation of a large, apparently useless object, an artistic temperament is allowed full rein, and the result has only a loose symbolic connection to the company's activities. The piece says simply: we have money to spend, and we do so in an enlightened way; or perhaps a little more specifically: this art is creative, innovative and 'cutting-edge', qualities that reflect the ethos of our company.

Evans' twist to this situation is first to offer his skills to companies that would not normally be in a position to commission such art (one, indeed, ceased trading before the show opened), and second to place himself fully at their disposal by taking their artistic requirements seriously. The result is, among other things, a sharp parody of Labour arts policy which is fixed on a vision of business and the arts fusing in symbiosis, business becoming cultural and creative, the arts profit-driven and productive. Evans' work also lets corporate sculpture step out from behind the veil with which it modestly covers itself, being revealed as a concrete, condensed sign of wealth and power in which artistic qualities are after all implicated. Evans has made some screenprints, simplified depictions of the sculptures which (as Will Bradley points out in his catalogue essay) seem familiar because they look like both a lot of contemporary art and many company logos. There is nothing strange about this: high art and corporate culture are necessarily locked in an embrace in which the giant tends to smother the midget. Only when the embrace is tightened so that the spine of the frailer body begins to crack is the relation revealed in its full absurdity.

Chris Evans: Gemini Sculpture Park is on show at the Study Galleries, Leeds City Art Gallery until 7th January 2001.