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Peter Randall-Page The Mind in Matter

John K. Grande

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Peter RANDALL-PAGE: The Mind in Matter

John K. GRANDE

Peter Randall-Page was born in the UK in 1954 and studied sculpture at Bath Academy of Art (1973-77). During the last 25 years his sculpture, drawings and prints have been exhibited widely in the UK and abroad, he has also undertaken numerous large-scale commissions. In 1999 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Arts at the University of Plymouth and lectures regularly in Britain and abroad. He is a member of the Design Team for the new Education Resource Centre at The Eden Project, Cornwall incorporating a very large granite sculpture within the core of the building. This huge 'seed like' sculpture is being hewn from one of the biggest pieces of granite ever quarried (167 tonnes).

Current projects include a large commission for the Department of Psychology, Cardiff University and other commissions for Fisher Square, Cambridge, Southwark Cathedral, London and a new bridge for the gardens of Dartington Hall, Devon. His recent sculpture for Trinity Gardens in Newcastle Upon Tyne won the 2006 Marsh Award for Public Sculpture. His work is represented in many public and private collections throughout the world including the Tate Gallery and the British Museum.

JG: When you started out as a sculptor was part of the beginnings of all of this to do with sacred geometry, or alternatively, observation in nature...

P.R.P.: I was always interested in geometry but it did not feature strongly in my early sculpture. My initial interest in making sculpture came from observation of nature and a fascination with patterns found in the natural world. The work of Constantin Brancusi was an important early influence when I saw his reconstructed studio in Paris. I was also inspired by ancient and non-European art, prehistoric figurines, and Egyptian sculpture for example.

I believe one of your earlier projects involved collaborating with Common Ground. You actually integrated your sculptures into the context of farming and rural habitat.

My first contact with Common Ground was in the early 1980s, they had a project which they called 'New Milestones', the brief was to make small works of the imagination embedded in the landscape.

The idea that art need not dominate but can be a detail in the environment...

Common Ground's philosophy was to use the arts as a way of reminding people of their subjective connectedness to their own particular place.

And do you think contemporary art can reflect an ongoing history? In other words art in any field can relate to the ongoing history of a place while remaining contemporary...

Yes. I think it can. People have always made things in the landscape that have an aesthetic and symbolic value. One of the things I have found very inspiring in places like Japan and southern Europe is walking in the landscape and coming across little Wayside Shrines. They are to do with peoples' beliefs and spiritual connection to a place. In 1990 Common Ground commissioned me to make work immediately around my own home in Devon. If art is to have any real value it needs to be part of our everyday lives. Art needs to be something which is in relation to people and place. Their idea was that most artists do not have a strong relationship with their immediate communities and landscapes, this was Common Ground's way of encouraging that connection.

Was there some response from the local community to these five sculptures you made as a result around the Teign Valley, and to the small garden you made in the village of Drewsteignton on the edge of Dartmoor.

Yes. Plenty of response. I had only lived there for about five years at that time. So I was a relative newcomer. I was excited but also quite worried that if it went wrong that I would have to move house. A lot of people imagined I would create great big bombastic sculptures in the middle of fields. I was lucky because the vicar in the

village was very supportive. I started out in a very modest way, part of an old wall had collapsed, so I rebuilt the wall, and included in it a niche with a small carving.

When you use symbols in your sculptures. Let's say they have a symbolic aspect, and one that includes patternings.

I'm not sure about the word symbol... Symbol to me suggests something pointing away from itself to something else. The language I use does do that to some extent. The forms might remind you of other things. I think we understand the unknown by relating it to the known, they are less symbolic than poetic. In poetry, you can combine disparate elements to build meanings not possible in prose.

Isn't part of the excitement of working in context and integrating sculpture this idea of bringing together one formal creation and building a language that relates to the form of a place or environment... sculpture in context...

Immediately you take a sculpture out of the neutral white space of an art gallery, its meaning changes in relation to its context.

Peter RANDALL-PAGE, *Seed* (working title), 2006. Granite. 4 x 3 x 3 m. Work in progress at Delank Quarry, Cornwall, UK. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



The right sculpture in the right place can be more than the sum of its parts.

In that sense what you are saying is that aesthetics has an immediate and relevant

function in the world we live in, rather than being something ignominiously sited to occupy space. Many sculpture parks fail by simply plopping works on a site with no relevance or relation to the places they have been put.

Yes. The sculptures I place in the landscape do not have any signs or labels. Too much interpretation gets in the way of direct experience.

Quite often when a work is unsigned and exists as a detail on site, people ask more questions about it. Who did this and why...It generates a sense of mystery.

Exactly. It is a much more intimate kind of encounter. Why did somebody take the trouble to make this object? And why place it in this place? This can start a train of thought. Explanatory plaques destroy this sense of personal discovery.

In a sense you retain the natural form of the stone, and you add in your particular patterning and surface effect. We see this in works like Give and Take (2003) or Sung-Woon (Constellation), a work you created for the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea in 2004.

I suppose this particular way of working came from looking at nature. Studying its forms and patterns. I began to realise that while one can see the underlying geometry in nature it is never absolutely rigid; there

is always variations, imperfections and idiosyncrasies.

Claude Lévi-Strauss commented that there is always a greater variation to forms in nature than can ever be produced by mankind.

Like Plato's idea of ideal forms pure geometry is an abstract concept.

As much a perceptual thing we are engaged in within ourselves...

Yes. The universe we live in has certain fundamental rules about the way things fit together. We are part of that universe and predisposed to recognising pattern.

Energy and matter.

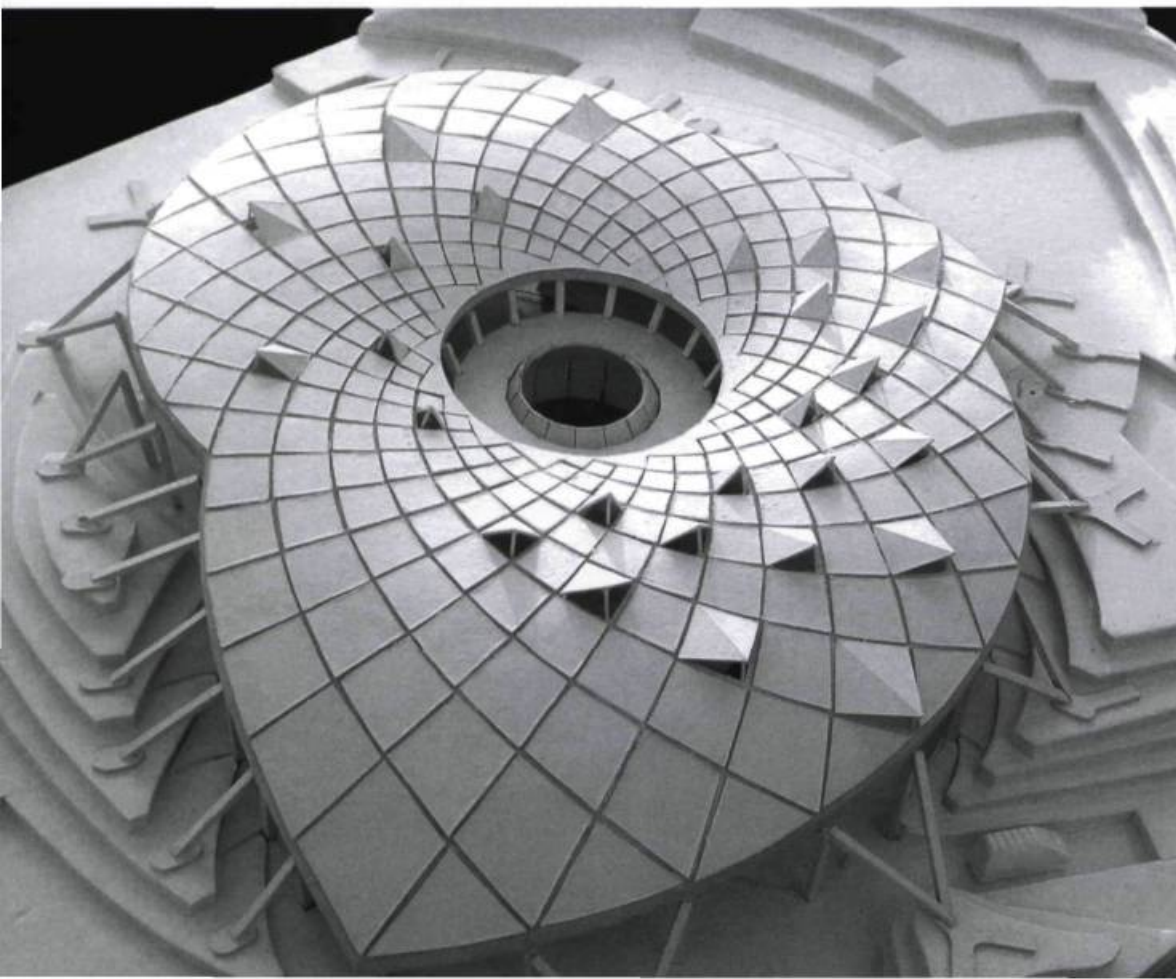
Nature seems to be in a dynamic tension between a tendency to order and a tendency to chaos. I began to think about ways of working which explore the underlying processes of growth and form rather than the outer appearance of things. With a work like *Give and Take* (2003) I have used a random shaped boulder and imposed geometric patterns on its surface. In this particular work the patterns are based on geodesic geometry. The geometry has to adapt to the random shape of the stone.

And you have just installed a large commission for the Department of Psychology, Cardiff University on the outer surface of a building for the Psychology Department.

My idea with the 'Mind Art' project was to create a wall mounted piece for the outside of a lecture theatre that made the viewer aware of the cognitive processes taking place when you look at it. It involves several levels of cognitive illusion.

May it have something to do with the way we encode what we look at in advance of recognizing what we see.

Peter RANDALL-PAGE, *Mind's Eye*, 2006. 1110 ceramic tiles. 8 x 16 m. Tower Building, Department of Psychology, University of Cardiff, UK. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Peter RANDALL-PAGE, *Give and Take*, 2003. Glacial granite boulder. 345 x 295 x 261 cm. Enabled by Sculpture at Goodwood. *Give and Take* was permanently sited within an amphitheatre of hard landscaping, designed by the artist in collaboration with the landscape architect Ros Southern, in Trinity Gardens, Newcastle, UK, 2005. Winner of the 2006 Marsh Award for Public Sculpture. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

We have such a propensity to see patterns in things. As human beings one of our defining characteristics is pattern recognition. The image was created by projecting onto the corner of a building viewed from the corner the pattern appears circular to the mind's eye but as you move away you realize that the ceramic plates are not in fact circular but oval. The eye and brain identify alignments of forms, and as you move along the street the image changes and becomes something entirely different. The tiles are made in pairs with a mirror image partner, our brains love to conjure with symmetry.

And you have made another project for native Amerindians right here in England.

Yes. In the 1730s the Mohegans sent a young chief to negotiate land rights with King George the Second. Unfortunately this young man caught smallpox and died, at that time foreigners were not allowed to be buried within the walls of London, so he was laid to rest at Southwark Cathedral south of the River Thames. The Mohegans have great interest in their history and wanted to pay homage to their chief. They contacted the Dean of Southwark Cathedral, and being familiar with my work, he suggested they get in touch with me. The Dean and I then travelled to Connecticut to choose a stone from their tribal lands, traditionally the Mohegans believe that when someone dies their spirit resides in a stone in the landscape. The stone I chose is like a small mountain. I have used the Mohegan symbol for the universe at the summit for the sculpture—and delineated the surface with linear patterns, like those used to symbolise the cycles of life.

Multiplication by Division (2000) suggests variant serial scales of sequencing and patternings.

This piece has to do with the extraordinary way in which nature can reproduce itself by subdivision. My understanding of geometry and mathematics comes either from observation of nature or direct experimentation. This piece consists of three spherical carvings in yellow limestone inscribed with circular lobes.

What is dimension? One thinks of microcosm and macrocosm...

An optimum size suggests itself for any sculpture and that is always in relation to the human body.

The Fullness of Time (2002) juxtaposes inbuilt stone forms into a terraced hillside.

This was a private commission and it became clear in conversation that the clients did not like the steep hill outside their house. I suggested the hill could be landscaped into three terraces, with three sculptures embedded into the landscape.

I was interested in the way that geometry underpins organic form. In the first carving the geometry is obvious, in the third it is hidden within organic fecundity.

Womb Tomb (2000) has an archaic cave feel, or a birth channel...

It evokes both the warmth of the womb and the chill of the tomb. I made it in Bavaria in southern Germany from a 75 tonne boulder. It was the culmination of a series of work that involved cutting natural boulders in half and working the cut surfaces in mirror image symmetry.

For the Eden Project you are working on an enormous 167 tonne block of Cornish granite to be sited at the centre of a new education building, The Core.

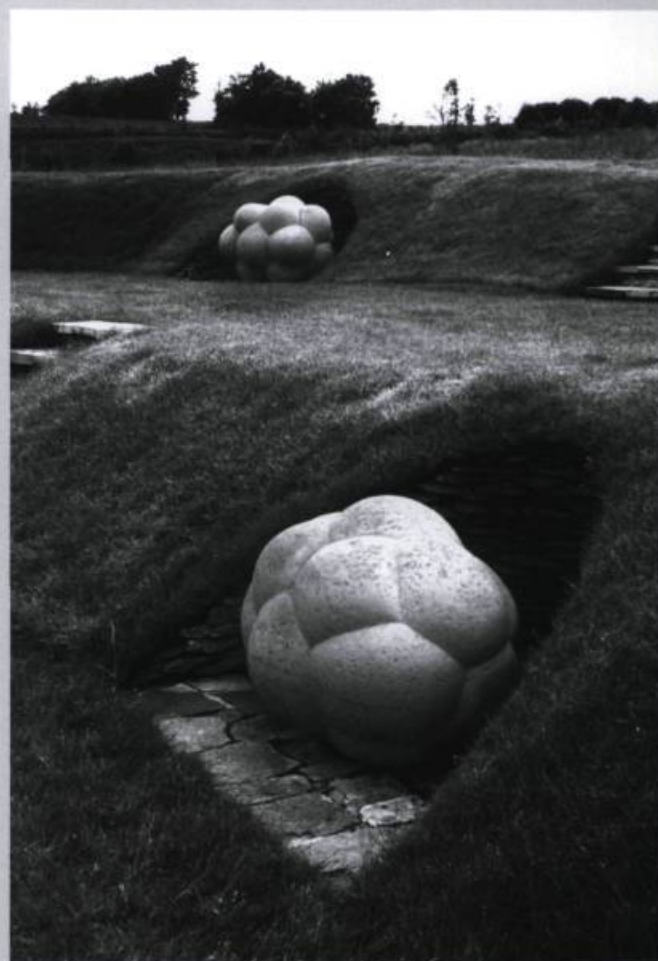
Yes. It is one of the biggest blocks ever quarried. For me the exciting thing with this project was my collaboration with the architect on the building itself. I was asked to collaborate with architects Grimshaw on the design of the building incorporating sculpture. The challenge was how to make a building with botanical imagery and symbolism in a genuinely contemporary way. Important buildings from different cultures and historical periods are full of plant imagery but we did not want to simply add decorative plant forms to the building.

So you wanted the plant and natural forms to be integral to the structure itself...

Exactly, I began to wonder whether the plant geometry I had been studying for many years could in some way form a structural basis for the building itself.

So the sculpture helps to define the building...

Well yes. It is a very joined up bit of architecture/sculpture collaboration. The initial models and sketches the architect came up with show a hollow centre with a lattice roof spreading out from it. We started to talk about how these patterns exist in nature. Numerically they are fascinating and also very beautiful optically. They relate to the Fibonacci sequence and the Golden Proportion. When we asked the engineers to analyse whether this geometry would work as a roof structure, they initially made calculations based on a very regular pattern with two identical sets of spirals. They said it would not work, as the roof timbers would have to be two metres thick at the perimeter. I realized they had not understood the true plant geometry. Eventually they made new calculations based on the geometry of plant growth, and said it was a fantastically strong structural system. Nature is always trying to be as economical as possible, to pack as



many seeds as possible into the head of a sunflower, for example. The really exciting thing for me was that my research into plant growth had come to fruition in the design of a new building. The geometry of the roof structure created a void at the centre. I had for some time been wanting to make a very large sculpture within its own specially designed chamber, controlling the light, and placing a large mass within a contained space. We began to think of this central space as a chamber to contain a massive seed like sculpture based on the same geometry as the roof itself.

If a language of art that addressed nature's place can be developed, it is a language that involves our immediate experience. The forms and patterns you have been working with exist across the globe in different bio-regions. I believe Theodore Schwenk addressed this in his book Sensitive Chaos.

It seems that there is a limited 'pattern book' of basic ways things fit together in our universe. These patterns are best understood in terms of fundamental physics and mathematics. Organic life uses this basic range of patterns to create seemingly infinite variations. Like theme and variation in improvised jazz. The themes may be finite but the variations are infinite. ←

John GRANDE's *Art Nature Dialogues* published by SUNY Press (www.sunypress.edu). *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* will be published by Pari in Italy.

Peter RANDALL-PAGE, *Womb Tomb*, 2000. Granite boulder. Cave: 229 x 335 x 270 cm; well: 213 x 270 x 230 cm. Enabled by Sculpture at Goodwood. Private collection, UK. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.