

FORWARD BACK TOGETHER

by

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Transcription of Workshop Proceedings

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PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE, ONE AT A TIME, ENTERING THE EXHIBITION SPACE AND WALKING TO ITS FAR END. THEY GATHER AROUND A SET OF TABLES CLUSTERED IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM. SPOTLIGHTS CAST A POOL OF WHITE LIGHT ONTO THE TABLE-TOP IN AN OTHERWISE DIMLY-LIT ROOM. A SINGLE IMAGE IS PROJECTED, WITHIN A DARKENED RECESSED AREA. AFTER INTIAL INTRODUCTIONS THE PARTICIPANTS TAKE THEIR SEATS AT ONE END OF THE TABLE. AN AUDIO ENGINEER PLACES MICROPHONES IN FRONT OF EACH OF THEM. HE THEN TAKES A SEAT SOME 3 METRES AWAY. AFTER A SHORT TIME, THE GROUP FALLS INTO SILENCE AND THE WORKSHOP COMMENCES.

'As you can see, here's Forward in its current state. Here's a picture of it in its current state - the remains of its hand in an unknown location.'

'Unknown location?'

'Unknown location.'

'Do you really mean that? Where's the photograph come from?'

'Through a letterbox without any information.'

'Good god!'

'We know who took the photograph. And we may be able to give us a little more information about that. But it was put through a letterbox on a Saturday morning as far as I understand.'

'It's very interesting that the arm and hand in death, as it were, have achieved a separate identity from the rest of the sculpture, because that's how it started. When the sculpture was first delivered it didn't have the arm and the hand on it because it came on the back of a great big lorry, and to have the hand sticking up there would have been too high for certain bridges it had to go under somewhere between Paris and Birmingham. So, it came without the arm, and the arm came separately and was attached after it was installed in Birmingham. So, the arm has always had a separate identity to the rest of it. So, at the beginning of its life and now at the end of its life a completely separate identity from the rest of the sculpture.'

'So, in a way it's come home!'

'Yes. Where is that? Maybe that's France.'

'Well, whilst we ponder on those questions we'd like to just use our imagination to start thinking about Forward in its current state, and then we'll go through its life journey from before its birth to your report to where it is now. But we just wanted to spend a few moments thinking about Forward in its current state. I'd just like to ask a few questions and for you just to write the answers down first of all

and then we'll discuss them and I'll bring some of those things that spontaneously have emerged already. But just so we try and think about the myth around Forward as well, of Forward where it is now. Because we'll all interpret it, as we already have done, in different ways. So, I'll just ask you some questions and if you just write down the first things that come to mind really without so much thought, because this is the unknown territory, and then we'll share them. So, the first question: how did Forward get there?'

'You mean how did the hand get there?'

'Yes. How did Forward - the hand - get there? You may want to think about if there are other fragments; but the object we can see is what we know is left of Forward. [PAUSE] And just thinking about Forward there now, who looks after Forward there? Who cares for Forward now? Who cares for the hand? Because it's placed in a position that it could be destroyed quite easily again through natural elements.'

'How do we know it's placed? How do we know it didn't move itself there?'

'We don't. That was my literal interpretation.'

'My assumption is the rest of the sculpture isn't buried underneath rocks.'

'It looks as though that has been cemented to the rocks, doesn't it?'

'Looks like it's been placed very carefully, yes. Before Forward was cemented to the rocks who did Forward belong to? Was it the commissioners? Was it the city?'

'Do you mean when it was in place before it was burnt down?'

'Yes.'

'Who did it belong to?'

'Yes. The artist? The people? The people being - in my interpretation of that - people of the city, people who visit the city, people who walk in it..

[PAUSE]

...If Forward belonged to anybody. And where are those people now? Because Forward is, as you say, in France possibly, cemented into the rocks. So, where are those people now - who it belonged to? So, we're starting to look at how disconnected Forward has become from its original commissioner's objective and its role in the city. And is there something special about this location? So, we don't know where it is, but is there something special? Why right on the edge as well? It may be that this is some mythical place or that there are some stories that Raymond Mason went there. Because I'm assuming - this is an assumption - that this photograph was taken

whilst he was still alive. But it may not. We don't know that; we just know that it was put through the letterbox. But if Raymond Mason died in 2010 then he could have chosen this place; he could have been in connection with the mover of it. Or it could be a stolen object. So, why? Is there something special about this? For me it's so close to the natural elements that it seems incredible. And thinking about the environment of the location that Forward is there now, what can Forward see? What can Forward see around it? So, is it a remote island? Or on that side of Forward are there some houses - where people live? Do people come to look at Forward? Do local residents come to look at Forward? So, what can Forward see? Can Forward see any people? Because the hand is facing inwards, isn't it; it's facing inland. And if we start to think of Forward now as a being, as something that is active now, what does Forward feel at the moment? Is Forward happy to have left Birmingham? And thinking about Birmingham as one of the furthest away from the sea within the UK, to be placed by the sea is a big contradiction to its original location, an industrial history of the city, or what I believe the artist's impression of why it should be the location of the space. I think Percent - who wrote the report? - I read a report that Percent - that you were the author of - and you were talking about the location, the relationship of the public art within the location, which was very interesting. And this now is completely out of the original location.'

'Absolutely, it is. I mean, the original intention of the location was very urban, very much to do with people. I mean, the whole of the Forward sculpture was about the different peoples that made up the Birmingham population. And here the arm is without any of those peoples in a completely apparently wild environment. And whether the sculpture is enjoying that - it may be because it's released from the tensions of the urban environment in which it was first set up with all the businesses. As I was saying to some people here, this is the third occasion that people have tried to burn it. The two previous occasions it had extinguished itself, as it was intended to do; the materials were such that it should have extinguished itself. So, whoever burnt it finally was trying very hard. But there were all those tensions that it had to live with, if you like, in its original location. This location it may feel a huge sense of release from all of that. or it may feel a huge fear at the wilderness.'

'I think it's incredible what you were talking about in terms of it could feel free, but it could maybe be feeling fearful of its world.'

'Maybe it would find the urban environment for which it was created very safe and reassuring. And this wilderness might be very fearful for it. On the other hand it may feel a huge sense of release from the urban tensions.'

'As you were saying, it's been three times that it took to destroy it.'

'And there was all the controversy in the press. There was a lot

in the local paper, particularly the Birmingham Evening Mail about this allegedly Trotskyist creation in the city, this very Russian kind of thing. Incidentally my initial response to that was: have they ever seen any Russian sculpture? Because I had; I'd been to Russia and I'd seen a lot of this, and some of it is very fine stuff. It's like any other sculpture: some of it's good and some of it's bad. There's nothing essentially wrong with it looking like a Russian sculpture if that is the case. But there was all that controversy going on; but at the same time we knew that it was a very popular piece, particularly with children. Children loved it, to the extent that we had a health and safety problem with children trying to climb on it. And there were all sorts of issues about the city's liability if they fell off and hurt themselves. In fact the only person that did fall off was our own conservator who was climbing on it one day and fell down in amongst the figures in the middle of it and hurt his leg. That was the only actual injury we ever recorded. But there was a huge health and safety issue going on with signage, discussions about signage and all the rest of it. So, it was very popular in some respects.'

'Just before we introduce...'

'I'm collections officer from BMAG.'

'Just before we introduce our visitor perhaps we could just go back to Forward now and I think actually start with that, as you've already discussed, it's how it feels now, if we could start with the final question? So, your response was?'

'I wondered, because it looks like it's in the sun, and I was thinking of the transformative nature of or rather the role that heat has played in its life, in its kind of modelling and in its destruction. And I wondered how it would feel about being bathed in this feeling warmth again, which might instil a kind of a fear in it or it might be uneasy about feeling that temperature.'

'Do you think it might be in the south of France do you, or Spain?'

'Well it also might be in the north of Scotland. Rumour has it that the person who took this was living in Scotland.'

'The Scottish kings.'

'So...?'

' I also was interested in the fact that it's responsive to the elements and it's now in the sun. But I suppose my approach was actually more resonating with one of the transcripts that I'd read where it said that actually perhaps Birmingham never was the right place for the sculpture because the fibreglass increased the depth of the colour when it was ignited by light - and Raymond Mason said that. So, it really needs to be in the light to have that depth of colour. So, I was thinking well, okay, maybe it's disconnected from the city where it's been designed for, but perhaps it's now in a place where the

material really comes into its own with the elements. So, it's been moved from a hostile place where it was antagonised by people but also by fire, and it's now been moved into a place where those materialities can really come alive in the way that they were intended almost. So, it's both alienated but it's also at home with its new environment.'

'Well it was the case that we initially wanted to make it in bronze in fact, but the cost was going to be 2.5 million or something. So, that's why we had to then start looking at various fibreglass materials. I don't know what that makes of the point you were just making. But that's where colour came; because if it had been bronze of course it wouldn't have had different colours on it.'

'And it would have looked very different in that environment, wouldn't it?

'Oh yes.'

'I thought Forward probably felt stuck, as you can sometimes feel stuck in life; possibly a little isolated and somewhat lonely. As you say being in the city. It just made me realise that maybe you can be lonely with all those people around you; but this is different. The loneliness is that kind of solitude that it has at the moment. I think that's kind of feeling - those emptinesses.'

'So, how do we think Forward, or Forward-the-hand, got there? We thought it could be Scotland or France. I suppose we don't have to decide on where it is; but how do we think it got there from the burning?'

'Well, somebody's picked it up and run off with it, haven't they? They've nicked it basically. Because you've got another question of who owned it - legally the answer to that is the city council, albeit on behalf of the citizens and visitors to the city. But legally the city council owned it.'

'I thought the question was who it belonged to.'

'Yes.'

'You interpret that as to who owned it.'

'Yes, point taken. I mean, the city council would only own it on behalf of the citizens of Birmingham and the visitors to Birmingham. That's where ownership as opposed to belonging comes in, if you like. So, technically it's been nicked but I don't think anybody's going to really worry too much about that.'

'I suppose who owned it came from the idea of it was paid for with public money rather than perhaps legal ownership. So, my response to that quite strongly was the people of Birmingham that owned it.'

'I'm wrong in fact. It's not the city council who owned it; it's the Convention Centre - which is not quite the same thing, because it was paid for out of the Percent for Art scheme at the Convention Centre. So, it's whatever the - I can't remember what the constitutional entity with the Convention Centre is. It's part of the NEC, isn't it? So, it's the NEC who have had it nicked from them and not the city council.'

'And was that public money?'

'Yes.'

'So, that's interesting. So, the NEC is a commercial enterprise and yet it was paid for by public money but it's owned by?'

'Well, it's a commercial enterprise I think owned by the city council ultimately.'

'How interesting!'

'I think so. Or it may even be not just the city council but Solihull council as well, because it's in Solihull. You'd have to check the exact constitutional circumstances here. But that's where the money came from from the Convention Centre budget.'

'Just going back to that question how did it get there, you said what happened somebody stole it; but is there any more expansion on the physical journey? So, who was that person? Was it a team of people, a sole thief?'

'Before we go forward again I'm still struck by this for me the slippage between ownership and belonging. We're talking about Forward's kind of public life, its work role and how it felt it was owned by the city council and by publics; I think Forward feel it belongs to its beloved.'

'Who's that?'

'I don't know. Possibly the person who stole Forward from Birmingham. So, that brings me to how it got there. Sometimes I think Forward doesn't know itself. I think it sometimes finds itself somewhere and thinks how did I get here. I don't think it necessarily knows.'

'You were going to talk about Forward's hand...'

'Yes, I know a bit about the journey of the hand, but I don't know about the rest of Forward.'

'We're just looking at the hand.'

'So, the hand, as far as I'm aware, was kept in the store of the Ikon Gallery for quite a length of time. And then passed on to a curator/

artist, who kept it for a while. And then he passed it on to another friend, who the hand now lives with or belongs to. He has been doing work in Scotland. Why he would have taken the hand to Scotland with him I don't know. But that in itself is quite an interesting proposition. And the hand now we think is his possession, although he can't find it - which again is quite unusual given the scale and I suppose the history of it. It's just quite strange that you'd have something like this and be...'

'It's not there anymore?'

'Well we don't know. I've tried to contact him and he thinks it's back in Birmingham, but he doesn't know where it is and he can't put his hand on the hand. So, he just popped this image through my letterbox without an explanation of where it was taken. And we were saying perhaps that adds to the mystery or the sense of unknown history of the piece of work.'

'And so it was passed from artist to artist?'

'Or curator to curator. Is he also a curator?'

'He's also an artist, yes.'

'That's interesting. So, it went on holiday perhaps. [LAUGHTER] Now back to work. We're just not sure where.'

'I'm trying to imagine when would someone retrieve that hand - knowing that was affixed separately to the sculpture - did it fall off? Was it an obvious, separate fragment? Or did someone think it's the hand that embodies something about the rest of the - represents something about the totality of the work - and that they therefore needed to rescue the work?'

'I think with Raymond's work the hand is so prevalent throughout his work that it's...'

'The other business about how the sculpture felt about its environment I wanted to come back to, its relationship to the square, Tess Jaray and her response to it.'

'Sorry, who?'

'Tess Jaray, she designed all the paving. If I could say a couple of words about Tess Jaray's involvement because it's relevant to the context for Raymond's piece.'

'We'll just go back to your question first and then we'll come back to its environment. So, the question...'

'Do we know for sure as a fact that the hand was still attached when the sculpture was burnt down?'

'Well, what we don't know is how it was joined and therefore whether there was a weakness in the hand - possibly if it was transported separately - how it would then have been attached, not knowing the mechanics for melding fibreglass together; I'm not really sure how that would have been or whether there would have been a weakness?'

'I can probably help a little bit there. I think that the whole thing had various steel armatures involved. The hand would have been fixed with a steel rod and a socket in the stomach, if you like, for it to go into it. And then there would be fibreglass moulded around the join, as it were. So, in a sense there would be a weak point. And I suppose all the heat of the burning could have loosened that in some way. But certainly the arm was there when it was set fire to.'

'There was a little finger missing and it looks blistered and damaged.'

'That's the heat of the burning, yes.'

'I've been reading Mason's autobiography and he says that there was a point when he was ill in his mid to late 40s when all he could draw was his hand. I think it might be a piece held by the Arts Council, but there's a cast that he made that I think is a bronze that is in the Arts Council collection of his left hand.'

'A bronze, did you say?'

'Yes.'

'It's funny, I've just realised that as a foundation student I only did one sculpture and it was a raised single arm and hand. But in an armature, so it was held together by a framework. But I just looked at that and had an incredible flashback.'

[LAUGHTER]

'We were talking about the environment as well, so how Forward felt in that environment made you think about Forward's original environment and the consideration for the paving as well.'

'Yes. The Centenary Square as a whole was tackled in a completely different way from the Convention Centre. The Convention Centre had a Percent for Art scheme. The £740,000 was 1% of 800,000 less 60,000 which was nicked by a committee chairman to provide a crèche facility; they raided the public art budget if you like to pay for the crèche which they'd forgotten about when planning for the rest of the Convention Centre. So, there was 740,000. Whereas Centenary Square was not a Percent for Art project; it is frequently promoted, especially by the Arts Council, as a Percent for Art project, but the whole point about it is that it's not a Percent for Art project. If it had been we'd have had £35,000 to pay for some blip in the corner somewhere because it cost us

3.5 million for the square as a whole. But what we did was we employed Tess Jaray as part of the design team for the square in all areas that were relevant. Initially that meant just to design the paving; in fact once she got involved in the thing it became clear that she could contribute to lots of other aspects of it such as the lighting and the railings and the seating, the different grilles around the trees - anything metal is also designed by Tess Jaray. So, there's a sort of coherence about the whole design of the square which is quite different to what you would get if you were actually running a Percent for Art scheme. And interestingly it's arguable that the arts cost nothing because all those things had to be provided anyway. And in fact the paving - the materials that she chose - were cheaper than the materials that the architects had initially specified. So, okay, there was her fee to pay for, and I guess the railings and so on were more expensive; but I don't know if anybody actually did the arithmetic. It may well be that what came out of it was actually cheaper than a Percent for Art scheme. Now, because Tess Jaray was everywhere in the square, and then somebody had the idea of putting this enormous sculpture in the middle of it, there was a certain friction. Tess Jaray was worried by this. She was very good about it, but she did have worries at times about how her design would be compromised by the intrusion of something of completely different aesthetic character from what she was doing in the square. So, that was another element if you like of friction, if we're thinking from the sculpture's point of view, that the sculpture would feel unwanted by the environment in which it was set.'

'And was there any dialogue between Raymond Mason and Tess Jaray?'

'I wasn't aware of any battles between Raymond and Tess Jaray, no. I don't think it ever got uncivilised in any way.'

'There was communication between the two of them?'

'I'm not even sure that there was much of that. There must have been some communication between them, but it never reached me that there was any problem between the two of them. All I ever heard was that Tess Jaray had some worries.'

'And the plinth that the Forward statue stood on would that have been designed by Raymond Mason?'

'No, I think it was - I couldn't say for certain who actually did the detailed designs - but Tess would simply have been given dimensions to allow for. Whether she then designed the plinth or whether Raymond designed it I don't know. Her paving design obviously incorporated that space. It wasn't just dropped down in the middle of the design; she designed the paving around it, if you see what I mean, so that it looked coherent.'

'Was Forward always designed specifically for Centenary Square? Was it

site specific in that way?’

‘It was designed specifically for Centenary Square, but there were changes about where it was going to be in Centenary Square because roughly where it finally stood there was a structure, a sort of neo-classical arcade right across what is now the square which was part of the 1930s development which went with Baskerville House and the war memorial building which I think is 1926 actually. All those were part of a much grander scheme of other Baskerville House type buildings all around that square. Initially the arcade was going to stay, and Raymond’s piece would have been to the west of that in between where it actually was and the Convention Centre in the middle of the sort of square there in front of the theatre. But then the political decision was taken that that would compromise the whole design of the square, not just for Raymond, but for everybody. And they moved the arcade to the Peace Garden - I can’t remember what street it’s in now - but it was moved; it still exists. So, that meant that Raymond’s piece could go a bit further away from the Convention Centre and have a bit more space.’

‘So, Forward caused quite a controversy at the beginning of its life in terms of its location to its environment now. I was just trying to look through to find the actual words you used in your report; but it must have been another notepad. Something, a sentence or two that jumped out about the public arts role - it was active language that you used as the public art being like a ‘sentient being’ essentially. I’m trying to find it. But also how it was a public servant in a way. It was a great couple of lines in your report so I’ll try and find it. But in terms of its sentient being from then to now.’

‘I seem to remember there’s one report which I think is an account of councillors - there was a debate among councillors in ‘91 - mid ‘91 where they were claiming - I think it was Labour councillors - were claiming that even controversy - the action, the agency of a controversial sculpture works well for the city. So, it didn’t have to please the citizens; it had to hit headlines and could be part of a ‘city marketing’ campaign to attract people into the city.’

‘And actually on that, Birmingham Post said the same: it doesn’t have to please everyone; it just has to get in the ‘bus loads of Japanese tourists’.’

‘So, that’s I think a great start. I’m just thinking about the questions. What I wanted to do was get us talking about Forward but from a good conversation lots of things we’ll be touching upon, but from using Forward now. And we’ve already started to think about Forward as a sentient being now.’

‘By now, by the sounds of it sounds, is that it’s disappeared. We’ve been talking about how it feels in this environment, where is it, is it in the South of France or is it Scotland or wherever, and it’s a dustbin

somewhere or somebody's cupboard.'

'Absolutely right.'

'It must be pretty depressed wherever it is.'

'So, that's the wrong starting point then because that isn't it, him, or her now.'

'So that's its romanticised escape to some extent; whereas being consigned to the waste bin of history is probably where it lies more permanently.'

'I noticed again, looking at how Raymond Mason describes the process of casting - and he looks at Rodin, he looks at Giacometti I think - that during the process of casting there's a strong chance that when you reassemble fragments of a cast you may mislay some fragments, or you may reassemble things in a different form. And he points to the walking man figure by Henry Moore that used to have a head and arms but lost its head and arms but was still reassembled as this more abstract figure - a less 'figurative' figure. And I wonder about whether the hand always knew that that was going to be its fate, that it would be separated; there was always a strong chance that it wouldn't be assembled as an entire kind of figurative piece. I wonder if it is thinking of its other fragments and thinking that's its fate, that 'we're lucky to be where we are'.'

'Perhaps it actually resented being attached to the rest of the sculpture. If it had a separate entity to begin with perhaps it was really rather pissed off that it was then attached to something else and rather pleased that it could make up separate.'

'It was given special treatment right from the start I guess, that particular fragment, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Its own transport.'

'And now it's creating its own stories and myth around itself and where it is, and it could emerge at any moment.'

'Sorry, it could emerge into what?'

'I don't mean emerge into anything; I mean it could reappear.'

'In public.'

'Yeah. someone could walk in with it right now.'

'It's interesting though than in separating itself from the people of

Birmingham that supported it in order for it to emerge it would still need to be carried.'

'And that raises the question of did the people of Birmingham support it - if the people of Birmingham at the end...'

'The sculptural people of Birmingham.'

'Oh, the sculptural people.'

'And the children, as I said earlier. There were stories about families coming down at weekends because the kids were making their parents bring them down so they could have a look at all the kids in the sculpture and have a climb on it and so on. There was quite an active support element in the public. It was the press that were causing the trouble, and in particular the Birmingham Evening Mail.'

'Can you say a bit more? What was the trouble that the press were causing?'

'They caught on to this thing of it being Russian essentially; that it looked like some Russian thing. This was essentially bad news to a right wing publication like the Evening Mail.'

'Because I knew Taiwanese students that studied here that referred to it as The Communist Party of Birmingham.'

'It was by some interpretations seen to be a march away from the industrial past of Birmingham to the future. So, by some it was read as a disconnection from the heritage and the manufacturing past that had made Birmingham great, and a step in the wrong direction towards celebrating new creative forms and urban regeneration. So, I think for some, in terms of public memory, it was seen as desecrating what was important to the people of Birmingham. However, I think that was always a misreading really.'

'Absolutely. That's not the reading that Raymond would have wanted.'

'Exactly, because Raymond had the tools of the industrial past being held by the figures as they march forward.'

'But is there such a thing as a misreading of a public sculpture?'

'Exactly. Again, it's a separation between perhaps how the different publics brought themselves to the piece and appreciated it, to the press - and the way the press can circulate itself - means that those accounts get well circulated. They still can be revisited in a way that perhaps is lost from other people's public memories because it's not recorded.'

'But the press can be understood as another public.'

'Of course.'

A NEW PARTICIPANT ARRIVES, CARRYING A CARDBOARD BOX APPROXIMATELY 1METRE SQUARE. SHE STANDS, PLACING THE BOX ONTO THE TABLE, BEFORE SITTING.

'So, what I'd like to is move on and try and pinpoint those moments. Because we're talking about lots of events really and lots of different relationships with it. Before we do that I'd like to introduce a character or a presence to our workshop.'

'I'm expecting some kind of marsupial!'

'Like an animal is going to pop out!'

'What are the creatures with the big eyes and long fingers called?'

'I'm not sure but I hope you're right!'

THE NEW PARTICIPANT OPENS THE BOX, ASSISTED BY ANOTHER. A SMALL, PAINTED PLASTER SCULPTURE, CASED WITHIN A CLEAR PERSPEX BOX IS LIFTED FROM THE BOX AND PLACED ON THE TABLE INFRONT OF THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS.

'There you go; I thought that's what it was going to be.'

'Can I say thank you for bringing that?'

'So, this is the maquette, the original maquette.'

'...So, we were interested to see how it actually was composed. And it's not quite how I remember it. Whether the sculpture changed from the maquette to the...'

'I was going to say I think there are some changes. It was never quite as accessible from this side as I'm looking at for example. It looks by the look of it as if you could walk straight into the middle of it there. But I mean the fact is that people did climb onto it and they did climb over it and they did climb into it. As I said earlier, there was a health and safety problem with children possibly injuring themselves. But that still gives you a pretty clear idea of what Raymond was about in making this piece. Except this strange figure in front - I've only just noticed this chap standing there. Oh, that's a member of the public.'

'Yes.'

'A child. For scale.'

'Yes, it's helpful I suppose for scale as much as anything else.'

'It's interesting from my point of view - with what I want to explore with this work, is that this - at sometime in the lifespan of Forward - this is

Forward. We think of Forward as the sculpture that was burnt in Centenary Square; but this actually predated that. This is what existed; this is what people paid attention to.'

'I was going to say earlier that there was a major exhibition of Raymond's work in the Museum and Art Gallery in '89 or thereabouts which was curated by Jane Farrington, who you've been trying to get hold of. Do you know how to get hold of Jane Farrington?'

'I don't know. The best way would be through the arts board and then the Fine Arts curator at the museum.'

'Somebody knows how to because she was at a reception and two funerals I've been to in recent years. Somebody knows how to get hold of her; but we've had no success in getting an address for her. But anyway, Jane Farrington arranged the exhibition in the museum. And this maquette was part of that exhibition. So, by that time, by the time the exhibition happened obviously the commission for Centenary Square was being developed. It was being presumably agreed or at least was far enough advanced for Raymond to produce this, even though it was still a couple of years before the piece was actually made.'

'This was popular apparently.'

'This was very popular, yes.'

'And this piece too.'

'Yes.'

'I remember there being a big plume of smoke coming out of the chimney at the back, which I guess for modelling reasons or visibility reasons isn't included in the maquette, or was perhaps a later edition. I don't know.'

'Also this image here is of course with the plume of smoke that eventually billows...'

'I think the other interesting thing about that is, you say quite rightly, the exhibition was very popular and this piece...'

'Well, as a member of the public primarily it's my direct contact with it. my background is in fine arts; I was trained as a sculptor. I used to work for the Public Art Commissions Agency for about six months as their librarian; so that's the closest I got to the maquette stage side of things. And I was also present when it burnt.'

'You were standing there watching it?'

'I was walking away from it and I saw the reflection of this black smoke in a glass fronted building. So, I was heading towards the central

library where I worked. And that was the first thing I saw. Well, I was confused - because I walked past it with a sandwich earlier and it wasn't on fire, and then I saw this big black plume of smoke being reflected and I thought that's some curious optical illusion then because when I walked past it just seconds previously - so that was how quickly it turned. It wasn't on fire before.'

'That's very interesting because we were talking earlier about what time of day this happened. So, what time was that?'

'Lunchtime I guess, just me having that sandwich; between 12 and one.'

'I'm surprised that it was ignited in the middle of the day and not at night.'

'We've got the fire report...'

'The fire report says the police were first aware it was burning at twenty past two o'clock.'

'Oh really? Okay, it might have been then.'

'That's the first log that they were aware it was burning.'

'We've got a fire incident report and it's about one.'

'I maybe had a late lunch that afternoon.'

'It started a bit earlier; but when they say finding the monument on fire it's 20 past two. So, it is the middle of the day that they managed to actually get it alight; despite the fact that the material was resistant subject to an arson attack.'

'And the arsonists were followed by CCTV camera right through the city apparently, the fire officer said.'

'Really? They knew who they were then?'

'Well, they were caught but they were minors - under 16 - so they couldn't be charged.'

'Were they 14?'

'I don't know. There were three of them and one was slightly older.'

'I remember just days later they were from Bartley Green I think; I remember noticing where they lived. I just wonder whether they'd been named in the paper when they went back or just mentioned them as minors, so that you don't know anything about them.'

'Are the arsonists seen as some kind of folk heroes in Birmingham now?'

'By no means, no. If the subject comes up there's a jokey response to someone saying, "do you remember the sculpture that was here?", and someone might say well, this was a very direct form of criticism to burn the thing. But by no means folk heroes; I've never encountered someone genuinely believing that a great service had been rendered by their actions.'

'That brings me back to the point I was about to make in response to the comment on how popular this was, and the exhibition in the art gallery. Because you've got a different public there from the one that you have in Centenary Square. We can only speculate about how different that is and which bits of the public are reacting differently; and whether they were represented by the newspaper. As I've been saying, as I recall it the problems with the sculpture were with the Birmingham Evening Mail. And whether the rest of the public felt the way the Evening Mail did was another matter. And certainly we know that it was very popular with children who would force their parents to bring them down so they could climb on it.'

'Yes, I think it highlighted a certain lack of civic amenities for children. Another factor - it's a bit of an indelicate subject to bring up - but Broad Street, as you know, is regarded as the entertainment district, so there's a lot of pubs and clubs along that space; but there are no public toilets. So, if you're caught short between pubs well this is a convenient place late at night for certain sections of the community to use.'

'Use it as a toilet!'

'Yes.'

'That's news to me.'

'Well, it's just a secret place; but it's like finding an alleyway.'

'So, you could get in as an adult?'

'Yes.'

'So, it's multi functional!'

'With that thought in mind, and it being popular with children, there's this kind of dual representation of two lacking amenities, quite apart from it being a piece of public art for that environment.'

'Interestingly when I came in earlier you were talking about the light. I don't know how far you'd got in that conversation. But Raymond Mason when he did a radio interview with Ed Doolan he was talking about the piece and how it worked best at night-time. And it's just interesting that you've

just said that actually - in what capacity it works best.'

'In that same transcript it says that we don't tend to have the right light conditions in Birmingham for it to work well in the daytime; but at night time, because it was properly lit, that's when it came alive. And it also came alive simultaneously in another way that it wasn't designed for!'

'But there's a lack of public toilets in the city. I'm not justifying it, but if there was a lack of its public use.'

'Broad Street would stink; it would be really unpleasant. It would stink of either urine or bleach where the landlord of those venues would have to bleach up every morning.'

'Was it Rachel Whiteread who did a video piece of Broad Street?'

'No, it was Gillian Wearing.'

'Just before we get to the next stage about trying to put these into some sort of story format really, you mentioned, that at six o'clock in the morning someone would go round and clean up the public art.'

'Maybe you could talk about that, as somebody in the council?'

'Yes, we had an arrangement with the city engineers department, as it was then called, who had a chap who went around basically checking public facilities. He'd spot broken paving, which was a trip hazard, and he would spot graffiti or whatever. And if there was a problem with one of the sculptures he would report to my chief conservator who would come out and deal with it hopefully. And the classic example of this was another sculpture entirely, which was the Iron Man in Victoria Square. I came into work one morning - because all this happened very early in the morning - and there was George in my office saying, 'It's okay, I've removed the testicles from the Iron Man'. And the Iron Man had acquired testicles overnight apparently. [LAUGHTER] And George had been out at dawn to remove them. So, we had a very efficient process to protect the city of Birmingham from these untoward experiences. And George, as I said earlier, was the only one that actually got injured by the Forward sculpture: climbing over it to inspect it or remove litter on something, he actually fell down amongst the figures and injured his leg.'

'I thought this was interesting when we're thinking about where's its beloved; who cared for it; who cares for it. I guess having someone call in every morning for the whole of your life would have been a significant event for Forward, and a real attachment.'

'It would yes.'

'It also occurs to me seeing this here, when we're talking about Forward,

which Forward are we talking about? Is this the parent of that Forward? How many of these are there? Because I think I've seen a photograph of full-scale models of different parts of it.'

'Yes.'

'Maybe there's a whole family of Forwards.'

'We keep getting drawn back to various things rather than the conversational life of Forward. Because you were talking about Forward having many lives, almost.'

'I think that's important: it's about getting all of the ingredients ready for the next bit really, all the different characters. And now we've got potentially a whole family of Forward.'

'Only one iteration of Forward has died. This one's perfectly okay, in the care of the art gallery; never seen but it's looked after. Somebody is inspecting it, just as the original one was inspected every morning. Every so often - I don't suppose it happens every day does it? But somebody every so often is looking at this and making sure it's okay.'

'It's alive.'

'Yes.'

'On a bureaucratic level it has to be the finished work which is signed off as the brief has been satisfied. So, if Raymond Mason had said well, here it is, where's my whatever the fee was, then I don't think it would have been regarded as being the final line.'

'I think we're exploring the idea that there is no final line, which is perhaps resonant in the title of Forward; that it's an ongoing conversational life or life of meaning that's not constrained by its bureaucratic line.'

'Indeed. I think there are just different levels of reading. If you asked particular people what their particular reading of it is then...'

'And what you've started to bring, you've brought in many different characters that we hadn't touched upon before: you've brought in the children; you've brought in being used as a toilet; but you've also highlighted the role of the art within the city and an area that we hadn't talked about. And we've got George; we've got new characters; we've got the parent of Forward; we've got lots of things emerging. I wonder whether we're now at a stage that we can start structuring what we believe Forward's life is. Are you happy to?'

'Yes, and I think maybe, as you were saying, in conversation we're reassembling Forward. It started its life as a conversation. It would

have started its life as some discussions between the artist and the commissioner. Maybe we can explore that as the first moments of it - and from that point on - we think about what form it took.'

'A passing thought, which perhaps isn't worth pursuing, is since we still have this version with modern technology could we clone it to full size?'

'You could yes.'

'Scale it up and just 3D print it.'

'There is actually here - a description of the Haligon Studios in Paris that were renowned for making enlargements and reductions of sculptural works, including the work of Rodin. So, Louis Haligon had this machine, and Raymond Mason says: 'the machine is simple; suspended by pulleys and free to move it consists of a pivoted steel bar with a point near the pivot which caresses the surface of the model, and a second point inscribing a bigger arc at the further end of the bar, which in the hands of a workman scratches into a block of dead plaster or clay the larger version.' So, he says it's a craftsman's skill is required in order to do this, form this. I thought that was interesting just thinking of how the material feels at that point. It's got another apparatus, another device, that's touching its surface; that's touching it and cloning it in that moment; it's actually taking something of itself and imbuing some other piece of seemingly inert material with its life, if you like. So, that must be an extraordinary feeling to have, to be cloned in a way.'

'This was an obsession of James Watt who coincidentally his statue in relation to this sculpture would have been about there I think, where the cup of water is. He wanted to create a machine that was able to recreate a sculpture; so to have one existing shape via a system of various levers and I don't really know what construction it had, but that it would chisel out from raw granite a version, on different scales of the original. I wonder if you know the sculpture The Wattilisk on Newton Street, I think it is, by Vincent Woropay in Birmingham? And that's a rendition of Watt's obsession with hewing down...'

'We've got an image of that. Isn't it stacked scale objects?'

'That's right. It's two pieces of black granite. It becomes gradually more defined, almost like a totem pole, as it moves up.'

'Mason says the problem with that scaling device is you scale up all the irregularities, so it gets a really rough surface. And then you've got to pay another period of attention, you've got to care about the surface again, bring the detail back into it. So, it really makes me wonder about whether something of the finish of this is a mapping of the roughness - or the sort of vagueness of detail on that.'

'That's a sketch, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I'm just conscious of time that we explore other areas as well. Are you here for the rest of the session?'

'I can stay till about two o'clock or just before two o'clock.'

'Because the relationship with other art is really interesting. We want to, whilst you're here, to use that...'

THERE IS A BREAK IN THE PROCEEDINGS.

SOME OF THE GROUP ARE SEATED AT THE TABLE. SOME ARE STANDING AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS IN THE ROOM, TALKING TO EACH OTHER.

THE AUDIO RECORDING IS RESUMED AND PARTICIPANTS ARE ASKED TO GATHER AT THE TABLE. TAKING THEIR SEATS, THEY SIT AND CONTINUE THEIR DIALOGUE.

'So we thought we'd just come back and not start formally, but just try and capture some of these stories that are happening off the side - off the mic - because they're really interesting.'

'That strikes me as a repeated pattern of any kind of formal gathering concept, it's when it breaks, as you say the interesting...'

'No, I was just curious because this is something that I keep coming back to about retention of conversation, about how suddenly we're aware that something, a different style of conversation has emerged away from the microphones and away from the table and the summit, if summit is the correct word. The serious point is that you were almost saying we'd like to bring the conversation back to capture some of that excess conversation more informally; it would be more interesting. But I wonder if as soon as we observe that type of conversation and try and capture it, whether it's not already lost, if you know what I mean.'

'I think you're absolutely right, and I should have probably not have said 'now let's come back and try and capture those off the record conversations'.'

'But that Open Space land-rights negotiation format which developed, it's used pretty widely, does that, it has that explicit round table start, break out as a break where people break into pairs or threes or whatever, and bring those conversations back to the small groups which is then brought back to a plenary and tries to, you know, it admits to all those different modes. And it's quite often just configurations, just numbers, it comes down to numbers doesn't it? The types of conversations you can have among a certain size of groups...'

'And so just to get back to Forward and try and capture that: You were talking about that being 'Photoshopped' - and we've created this romantic story that it's often the South of France or it's on the Highlands of Scotland, yet actually...'

'Yes, actually I was talking about it in the first instance and he was actually on his hands and knees trying to follow the shadows...'

'I was.'

'To see whether - and it was interesting that we haven't looked at it in that way throughout this morning, we've assumed that it's real and that it's there.'

'I think I had the same initial reaction when I first came in and said I thought it looked Photoshopped but I didn't think it would be entering into the spirit of today to say so because the starting point was, will this work, we've got this photograph that's been posted through the door, where do we think it is? So within the life of a fictional retelling of the work I felt the starting point was to accept the narrative that this is somewhere, either in the land of the kings, the Scottish kings or wherever it is in France. However, I like that you had an immediate honest response to it which was concept, this looks a bit surreal doesn't it and the colours look a little bit fake to my eye as well. So I think it's worth recording.'

'It's a double process though isn't it? It's a photograph re-photographed on your phone? Or was it scanned?'

'Ah, actually that's a really good point. I've got a photograph of it on my phone which is much clearer.'

'Okay.'

'I felt there might be a reference to the final scene of Planet of the Apes where they encounter the head of The Statue of Liberty sticking out of the sand and an entire reframing of that story, that film, that happens at that point and it also has a kind of Salvador Dali feel about it where he would set all sorts of mad gigantic unexpected things on the local beach for whatever reason as a background for his fantasies. So seeing something like that before I even weighed up what it could be I was thinking this is a hoax.'

'But also what you're doing is you're developing Forward as a very complex character without one single narrative as well.'

'Yes, I think if you're accepting that it's far beyond the bureaucratic lifetime, so if the first instance was the moment where it's been commissioned and a dialogue about what form it might be and what the theme might be and the actuality of the sculpture only being made real once it's unveiled as the full scale statute. And maybe even when the cheque is banked, that's when it's finally made authentic. But I think we're agreed that it's far beyond the perception of it, the reality for it for most people it's beyond that bureaucratic experience. So I think we should explore the mythology, so if we suspect this is a hoax then we

should explore that as a valid a direction as any of the paper trails or direct interactions with the sculpture.'

'Are there any other conversations that you had over the break that you feel could lead...'

'We were trying to remember the name of the drawing toy where you had one pencil in your hand, a stylus that you would trace and it would copy the drawing. And then we were sort of thinking about changing the technologies of copying as a way of creating families because you were talking about children's narratives. But I'm curious about the almost the supposed singularity of public art and the signature piece - the public's possible perception that that thing in front of them is the one thing and that it's almost a little bit like a social archaeology or uncovering of the family ties and connections of that one thing. I think Liam Gillick sometimes, he's recently referred to kind of art that tries to uncover or reveal some of its own genealogy, so this work has a traceable, copy-able, family and genealogy.'

'I think the original photograph is a lot clearer and I don't think 'hoax' anymore, I think there's some very fine details with the weathering of the fibreglass and the kind of unexpected way that it's slightly less apparent in the slide.'

'We were saying earlier that scan or the projection looks more like a sunset - a postcard - whereas actually the image...'

'It's slightly painterly.'

'Yes.'

'Well what we'd like to do now is to start to create Forward's life journey and the material you've got in front of you is just stimuli to start choosing the moments in Forward's life. And we've taken it beyond , about it being a - it could be the moment of the idea, the conversation of its conception, that could be when it began its life journey. So if we just take a second to look through what we've got here, we've got some images so we've obviously got the image, the iconic, what has become the iconic image that only we know [LAUGHTER] and then we have the images of Forward from various angles, but also with various people around it as well. And the maquette as well. And we have the picture of Forward on fire, we've also got things being built, it seems like it looks like things being built behind it as well, so the Centenary Square in its wider context as well. And then we a report here, so it reports the development, well a strategy for the public art in Birmingham, but maybe you want to say a little bit about this in terms of contextualising the time it was written?'

'Well, I don't think I want to add to it really, I mean if people want to read it and see what the backdrop was to, not just to this piece but to

many other pieces that were commissioned for Birmingham round about that time. I think part of it was about the principle of Percent for Art, how it came to be 1% which this came out of a Percent for Art scheme and I had profound misgivings about the whole principle of Percent for Art which was much promoted by the Arts Council at that time. So this touches on that, although it does actually refer to a separate paper on that. So it's only a very brief mention in this policy paper in fact.'

'What it does in 2.6 is it contextualises Birmingham within the wider nation, it says here that Birmingham has a higher level of public art activity than any other city in the UK which I think is quite interesting.'

'At the time it did, yes, but I think it goes on to say that that's not to say that it's a particularly high rate in international terms. Many foreign cities, Seattle for example, was producing far more public art at that time than Birmingham was and a number of other cities as well in Europe for example.'

'Financially, how was Birmingham at this time?'

'How was Birmingham? Or as the Birmingham public art programme?'

'As a city and a council in terms of finances. And also I guess sort of the economy of Birmingham.'

'Well, the thing is, it wasn't just about Birmingham and the economy, it was about public funding and I have a career long enough to be able to remember when people started cutting local government. I started in local government in 1965 and our problem each year until 1975 was how we were going to spend the extra money we had in our budget in the following year. That was our debate, at the end of each financial year, how are we going to cope with all this extra money we've got, what are we going to do with it? And in 1975 they suddenly started cutting it and I can remember a 7.5% cut in 1975. And from then to the present day local government has been cut every year.'

'Since 1975?'

'Since 1975. I was the chief officer for 19 years with two different authorities and I cut my budget in 18 of those 19 years. In the other year I had an increase of 1%, sorry half of 1% in my budget which I spent on an extra education officer in Birmingham. So for the rest of that 19 years we were cutting the budget every year. And one of the reasons I took early retirement was because we'd started cutting things I didn't think we should be cutting, like conservation officers for example.'

'Can I just come back to something we were saying over lunch, you were talking about a shift from a sense of all the different, I mean for example with this piece, Forward, the design was integrated into the team, so there's an idea of a holistic design?'

'Yes, I mean that, if I carry on answering your question in terms of public art, that's why I could not say I can allocate a part of my budget to pay for public art, I had to find the money from somewhere else. So for the Raymond Mason piece it was part of the 1% programme for the convention centre where there was a new lump of money that had been identified for the convention centre and we were able to persuade the politicians to spend 1% of that on art, 1% less, 60,000 for the toddlers group. In Centenary Square we did it that other way I described earlier, where we integrated it with the design team and as far as we could tell we haven't actually cost any extra to the city anyway, but we'd still spent quite a bit of money on art if you see what I mean. And we had to use devices like that to pay for the public art programme and a lot of them were done along the Centenary Square model, I can remember a library in the east side of Birmingham which, what was it called, anyway there were some new railings going up and they commissioned an artist to design the railings but the money, you know, it was always within the budget they'd originally allocated for the railings. That sort of thing was going on all the time. There was another one, do you know the giant's head near the Birmingham City football ground?'

'Yes.'

'That was paid for out of the budget of a new housing programme, East Birmingham Housing Programme allocated some money for that as a kind of marker to that, and there are all sorts of other stories about that, about how it was adopted by the Birmingham City supporters and given a blue nose and there's a whole other story about that. But we never had enough money simply to say I can make some savings within the museums department and pay for all this public art out of that, we would never do that, we had to find it from somewhere else.'

'You also very briefly touched upon a feeling that you have that in the past you were getting civil engineers coming to your partners and saying we're looking for an art involvement in this project for an underpass for example. But you were suggesting to me that over time that wider interest or involvement in art has become detached and fewer and fewer people...'

'Yes, what did happen at the time was that a number of departments got together if you like, there were several of us who all espoused the same idea of making art available in the city to ordinary people. I've described earlier to you two about taking art out of the museum. Part of my motivation for all of this was taking art outside the museum in such a way that people fell over it, it wasn't just somewhere where people went if they were particularly inclined towards art, we put it where the people were instead of expecting them to come to us. That was a big motivation from my point of view, but others had their own motivations but the city planning officer, the city architect, the city engineer all got involved in this. The city libraries did, they involved artists painting mobile libraries, there were a couple of mobile libraries where the libraries employed an artist to do the livery if you like on the

mobile libraries. And I mentioned another one, the railings down in, I can't remember the name of the place now, but there were a couple. And once all those people had moved on they were replaced by people perhaps who didn't have that interest. So it all stopped happening basically or largely stopped happening. The last person still around who was part of that crew, if I can put it that way, was Nigel Edmondson who's still in the planning department, although I'm told about to retire, so he's the only one still there that we all worked with.'

'So that's what I've been told is that there's no budget for public art commissions actually it's Nigel Edmondson ends up looking after the public art in the city because he has the town planning role. However, he's about to retire, so there's a question mark about who's going to look after public art from now in the city. And I think it's being somewhat picked up, it might have been a tense issue anyhow because of the lack of budget given over to public art in the city.'

'I think that's a great question to hold in the back of our head as we go back to Forward. So some of the other material here, we've got the maquettes and this is taken from the publicity brochure of ICC, it doesn't say when it was taken, so in terms of the chronology to this material I'm not sure, but I put it there because it was the birth after conversation of the conception of the idea it's the maquette, the creation of the maquettes and obviously the connection with the ICC we've heard a lot about. And then we have The Birmingham Post but not The Birmingham Mail I don't think.'

'No, perhaps I've got it wrong, perhaps it was the Post.'

'I thought it was The Post.'

'I think it was The Post.'

'And there is a mention of The Mail in one of the - it's somewhere I think.'

'Because it's Vincent Kelly who he writes to isn't it?'

'The Evening Mail did a poll it says in the next...'

'But it's The Post and Mail isn't it?'

'It's the same company.'

'It was the same building so the same printing press, but I think the two different newspapers.'

'And the poll was 76% - is that right? - of the public wanted the sculpture removed?'

'Yes.'

'But I never trust these polls, I don't know who they poll, I've never been asked to be part of a poll.'

'You were saying earlier that there's been a traditionally sceptical and slightly hostile perspective in the press towards art.'

'Mm-mm.'

'There seemed to be a kind of in-house policy in the early '90s of mistrusting modern public art, even to the point of when Princess Diana came to open the Victoria Square which I guess was 1992 the local paper, I think it was The Mail, suggested that a veil or some kind of structure be erected around Gormley's Iron Man so that her fragile eyes wouldn't be insulted by it.'

'Princess Diana, not Queen Victoria?'

'Yes exactly, and I think it might even go back to the, did it even ever happen, but when Queen Victoria and her train would go through Birmingham she'd request for the curtains to be drawn so she didn't have to see its industrial bleakness. I don't know whether that was true or not but it seemed to be directly harking back to something that had happened a hundred years previously and the reality was that that sculpture became very quickly embedded, the public loved it, it's never not been...'

'But the irony is that Gormley, the anecdote is that he's not particularly fond of Birmingham, he wanted it just to appear as if it was just kind of dropped there. Just here's my sculpture.'

'I don't know about that, I don't know whether he was but apparently he was on the board of Ikon's artist's panel in 1997.'

'That would be quite a contemptuous thing to do, I think he did spend a lot of time working out exactly where the sculpture would sit and how it would be perceived from different angles and it's looking at the Queen Victoria, it's sort of at an angle to her isn't it? So I think it was quite a careful, so I don't know what the reason for it being at an angle is, maybe it's suggesting that Birmingham doesn't have the same viewpoint as other cities, I don't know, but I don't think it was just that he'd kind of faxed in this solution to public art and...'

'I wasn't aware of Gormley making any comments about Birmingham at the time, that was a commission of the Public Art Commission's Agency for the old TSB Bank, which occupied the building but that stands outside. That's rather interesting, that was commissioned by them, by the bank whose, oh gosh, what was his name, the guy who was national head of the TSB was a great cultural - he developed a big collection for the TSB Bank, he himself was a scholar on Matthew Boulton and spent a lot of time - what

on earth was his name? Anyway, he commissioned that and the bank paid for it and PACA put it there and then almost immediately the city council decided to do up Victoria Square. There were rumours that there was some friction between the commissioned artists over the placing of their work. Never put two artists too close together!’

[LAUGHTER]

‘But this is a public place, it’s part of the brief, if the brief is to create it for a public place it’s not that you’ve got your own gallery that you’re allowed to arrange to your taste, so you have to kind of accept what’s gone before.’

‘Yes, but interestingly with relation to Forward there’s a suggestion that the Gormley statue will move now that Lloyds TSB has moved, so this notion of temporary location...’

‘I think it’s also where the tram is heading as well, so I think it’s...’

‘It’s only going to move a few feet though isn’t it? That’s what I heard.’

‘To dodge the tram.’

‘Just to dodge the tram, yes. And Gormley’s become such a mega figure since that was installed that the city should be pretty proud that it’s got a Gormley in the city centre.’

‘And it’s more forward looking than some cities so Leeds never actually got its act together to commission Gormley there which Gormley was very annoyed about, so they were going to create a brick Gormley in Leeds, however in the end the public decided they didn’t want it and Leeds Council went with that and the public feeling, I don’t know if there was some sort of poll done as well. And so they never built the one in Leeds so at least at that time Birmingham was more forward looking.’

‘Was that that huge proposal?’

‘It was going to be quite giant, yeah, using bricks, and it didn’t get built so at one point at least Birmingham was more visionary when it came to art and I think that’s been lost in the narrative of Birmingham somewhat because of the reactionary culture maybe in the last ten to 15 years in the city.’

‘But going back to reactionary culture: if we look at the press and the subsequent press, public, political debate that this sculpture provoked in terms of we’ve got the article in 1995 from The Post which would have been directly, well I suppose immediately after, the sculpture’s positioning on Centenary Square and this is where it talks at the end about waiting for the ‘coach loads of Japanese tourists’ to arrive. Then we have, so this was on June 7th and then if we’re thinking about chronology, Raymond Mason

wrote this and sent the fax on June 7th, so in my mind I'm thinking he read that and responded immediately. So if we're thinking about events in Forward's life in terms of Forward provoking reactions in connections in relationships with other people, it's also his relationship with Raymond Mason, so is Raymond Mason his carer, his protector, and what is Raymond Mason's role, the artist's role. You've talked about you don't put two artists next to each other, but if we look at the sculpture as a sentient being again then what's...'

'Well, this idea of not putting two artists too close together in a public space, as in all public spaces, a place of conflict and encounter and even the word - I'm just struck by Raymond's use of the word, onslaught, by the proposed. So it seems like this sort of battle, and I'm reminded that Forward is also a kind of a military charge and you've got this crowd surging forward. And this thread or feeling of revolution and conflict or a clash potentially with this work that I can see how a strong socialist iconography can also be slightly antagonistic to some perspectives.'

'And when does the artist leave the art as well though, so if we're looking at Forward now, so who's creating that, is it something else, is this just the - what's the role of Forward in all of this? Because this is between Mason and the press. You mentioned particularly the press as a character, so we'll just hold on to those things in terms of...'

'I was going to say to mention as well he says in that letter back to the press that it's accusations that it's all red and yellow and humourless and Walt Disney, he does make a big point of it being in the tradition of British narrative art elsewhere and he points to Ford Maddox Brown's painting in the city art gallery, The Last of England, and he's obviously seeing that as a kind of ally for Forward. So this isn't placed on its own at this point in Centenary Square - it has friends around it.'

'This is also what the space looked like even as recently as 1930, that's what Centenary Square looked like, it was this industrial background, so it's directly referencing what was here before and what use the land was for and what people might have looked like at the time.'

'And apparently there's a figure of an actress throwing a bouquet which is facing the Rep, so it acknowledges there are these others, but it's in a particular place at that point, it hasn't been rooted...'

'And we've seen her have we?'

'She was towards the back wasn't she?'

'It would be on this side.'

'She's in the photo yes, I've seen her in the photo.'

'Is it The Lady Of The Arts, is that what's she's called? She's facing backwards, that way. But interestingly though, kind of an aside, but she seems really disproportionate to the other characters, you know how they increase in scale, she's actually quite sizeable looking back, so she's quite significant in the work. It's interesting that she's facing backwards isn't it? She's scaled.'

'It may be because the character right at the front - and her - feature on the coat of arms.'

'The emblem, yeah.'

'The next document is 'the councillors slug it out over artwork', so I'm not sure where this is taken from - and who Brian Baker was- but what's interesting - and also when exactly, but this is very...'

'It's in Arts Management Weekly.'

'Oh, sorry.'

'It looks like it might be from Arts Management Weekly.'

'Okay, and it's in '91 by the date of those letters I think.'

'Oh yeah, I have written 1991 there, sorry. So just things which jump out to me, Labour administration vigorously defending the controversial money statue against sustained Tory assault. So really using it as a political weapon and then Labour leadership, some of whom privately agree with the detractors is hoping controversy will add to the attraction of the square blah, blah, blah. So it's really fuelling, it's being seized to be used for this political agenda - as a real political weapon there. And then we have the broadcast, the interview with Raymond Mason by Ed Doolan. And so this was August, and I must admit I haven't read this because I couldn't open the audio, so is there someone who has read it in terms of commenting on it or...?'

'Well, I think it's important to acknowledge, it's local radio and they acknowledge that he's from Birmingham and that they say he went to Birmingham Art School, and then to The Royal College- and I think he was there for a year. This was during World War II and he was actually up at Ambleside drawing hills for a year, and then left The Royal College and went to The Slade, and then went to Oxford - actually the Slade was at the Ruskin during the war years - and then immediately left for Paris - and I think this really establishes Mason's sort of claim to be initially a sort of protégé of - but then heir to - the School of Paris - and working in that tradition of Rodin, and ultimately Giacometti.'

'There's something on page three though, I've just picked up where he says: 'What I'm saying is that Birmingham has a present, will have certainly a future, but mostly decidedly a past. For one moment in world

history we were unique. At the beginning of the 19th century we were the first industrial city in the world and it's absolutely essential that Birmingham people should not forget it. They shouldn't forget this red brick town which in my eyes when I was a boy was so present.' So he's raising the question of a specific moment in time being placed in the present that is out of context and yet connecting with its future as well. So the role of...'

'He later says on page five, he's talking about the material so I think it's being challenged why stone or bronze wasn't used. And he's saying, well this is a modern square, you know, these are modern buildings surrounding it, largely, and that seems to be a reason that he's chosen the fibreglass. And he even says, I can't quite understand this, but he says, 'It would have taken five times longer if it had been made out of bronze or stone and that it would have been more open to damage.' But he's saying that by making it, I can't understand this claim, but in his mind, the artist's mind, it's more resilient by being a cheaper material, that it might have been a target perhaps if it had been made out of bronze.'

'Can I draw your attention to this, these are extracts from - I took some extracts from The Shape of a Pocket by John Burger who describes Raymond Mason's motivations, I suppose, for working in the style that he does. So I think maybe Mason is - I get the feeling from that interview - Mason is saying what's expected of him actually, that it's about expediency or something or it's about saving money for the city.'

'Yes.'

'...You know, we're going to get you something in place as quickly as we can, it's going to be robust'. But actually I think Berger gives some really good insights into the form that Mason uses - he says it establishes a kind of 'anti-aesthetic' on behalf of the proletariat and it's actually not about how things look, it's about the relationships that have developed among people and it's about living with things over time. And it says that over a long duration - over the artist's working life - he was trying to tackle this problem: in what form do you make sculpture that's fitting or suitably proletarian? And he really sees this as political - as a kind of radical aesthetic if you like. And he says here, it says, 'he began painting his monuments in the derisory colours of proletarian life,' so the materials and the finish and the way that it's painted are really meant to fit with the city and with who he expects to be the public for this.'

'But it's in such tension, Berger's writing, with Raymond Mason's own letter - whereas I don't think he does himself any favours here - where he says he's justifying its worth as a sculpture because 'prior to crossing the Channel it was shown to educated eyes among Parisian elites, professors of the Collège de France and museum directors plunge immediately into the subtleties I've mentioned.' So here actually it's

an aesthetic that's understood by this French viewing public but not by a Birmingham proletariat at all. So I mean [LAUGHS] who is the intended public?'

PARTICIPANT EXITS

'I think that also comes across quite strongly in the Ed Doolan as well, that he talks about these kind of 'lusty boys' climbing across it and how there's an assumption with his language that there's different types of audience and the work is engaged with by a different type of audience.'

'He says that himself?'

'The artist?'

'Yes.'

'He's come back from Paris to do this?'

'No, he's living in Paris...'

'He lived in Paris but he's commissioned and he creates the work as I understand it in France and then transports it across. So I think as a whole...'

'But it's interesting you were just saying that he's conditioned by this idea of the public that surrounds him there in Paris, that they understand his work, why don't a Birmingham public understand his work? He forgets his sort of current grounding, so he's moved on, he's gone forward, but there's that sort of disconnect...'

'Or he's gone backwards, if he's thinking like that.'

'What, you think that the idea of this aesthetic is a backwards...?'

'No sorry, you're talking about in Paris they understand him but in Birmingham they don't. To make that distinction maybe in my opinion is maybe a slightly distant observation about the present he's creating art in. Anyway, that's an opinion and I'm here to facilitate. So just to...'

'Yes, but interestingly it wasn't the proletariat who were objecting to this sculpture, it was the press and the Tories on the city council, these are, on the face of it, educated people but not aesthetically educated people. The ordinary proletariat and particularly the kids and so on were loving it.'

'And the people on Broad Street having a wee.'

'Well, not so much the people having a wee, but I'm just thinking of play as an aesthetic education.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'They have a relationship, an aesthetic relationship with it. But you were talking about the Conservatives on the council, am I right in understanding that the Birmingham City councillors traditionally are predominantly Labour?'

'Yeah. Well, not predominantly, the administration has predominantly been Labour for a very long time, but the balance between Labour and Conservative is not that big a difference, and in fact there have been Conservative administrations. There was one for example straight after the Falklands when Maggie Thatcher got really popular, suddenly the Tories were amazed to discover they were in power in Birmingham. The Falklands effect was to bring the Tories in, only for a couple of years, but there's enough strength there to make that possible.'

'The next document here brings in another character to that argument though, or whoever Charles Barwell is. He may very well be connected to the Tory council or the press, but claiming to be a citizen. But he ends this with, 'If the city council is not brave enough to admit its mistake and take it down the citizens of Birmingham must demand it. Forward must and can be brought down by public acclamation.' So we've got another dimension in terms of, this is The Body to Veto Public Art, it doesn't specifically say Forward, but was this Body to Veto Public Art set up because of Forward or did it exist before? It's just another dimension, another character in that argument.'

'It's interesting because again it goes back to this question of representation and if we can trust the press to be representative of the wider public. The only evidence I've really seen in these documents that the public supposedly weren't appreciative of Forward is this spurious poll where they haven't explained the methodology, who they've spoken to, how many people they've spoken to, all they've given us are statistics, 6% wanted the sculpture removed and we know that there's this body set up, but again we don't know who's part of that body and how representative it is of the city. So it's very difficult to extrapolate from this actually what the public did think, the wider public that is.'

'Yes, we don't know in the end.'

'So the press is a myth of the public voice, in fact it's often the expression of an owner's or a proprietor's respective political agenda.'

'It often can be.'

'Yes, and we have to remember when you're talking about setting up bodies to do 'this, that and the other', the city council is elected, and they have been put there by people who agree with their particular point of view. And Labour councillors supporting something like this know that if they get it wrong they stand to lose their seat next time round. So we've

got to be very careful when looking at letters like Charles Barwell's, you know, who is he talking on behalf of?'

'And I think the next letter as well on the next page, it's by A. D. Miles, Managing Director, High Power Tools, so obviously a business leader, obviously invested, but the headline is, 'plastic monstrosity drags down the city'. So in terms of the media selecting... But the point I wanted to make with that was this in February 1993, so this is nearly two years this is going on from what we've got here, so that's a long time to be talking about...'

'Yes, but I mean there are always going to be people who...'

'We're still talking about it. This is still part of the conversation in the life of the art world.'

'Absolutely.'

'How many times, I wonder - people walking through that square now today - I wonder how many people are talking about the sculpture that used to be there.'

'Yes.'

'Does it still have a presence in its absence?'

'I was going to say, what I think is, so we're talking about particular people and particular utterances, and what we've lost is an idea of the general public that's invoked by the press and by some of these letters, and it seems like that, I suppose that's quite temporal isn't it, you sort of claim your peers or you've claimed these people for your cause without knowing them, without knowing anyone, without conversing with them and I suppose that seems to have quite a significant shift - that now we're saying this is the person who wrote this letter, this is the person who spoke, and we're no longer claiming a general, an unknown, imagined public.'

'You asked the question, who is he talking on behalf of, which is a very Bakhtinian question that in dialogue there's always the absent voice or there's always some voice being spoken through. And it seems to be - and I've been repeating anecdotes but I can't remember who told me the anecdotes - and I'm conscious that a lot of stuff I have no idea of its grounding or validity or what ties it down. So I'm just repeating the story, the fiction and there's some people in the conversation, they have a much more tangible and concrete relationship to the life of this work.'

'Yes. I think it's something about the transformation - that they've been transformed - and some of us around the table have transformed the material of this work, have made decisions, made decisions that have affected the state, and that's maybe the difference, it's not just a

thing that's just a concept, it's actually something that's performed and, if you like, to transform something else.'

'You're tying that idea to the public - the transformed public rather than a passive abstract public we'd lay claim to - in that sense we're getting towards the different publics that have been transformed by Forward.'

'Yes, or where it's a mutual transformation, so actually through care or through whatever role they've had, whatever action they've performed on it, they've transformed its state.'

'Can I bring it back to Forward?'

'Yes.'

'Because I'm conscious of time as well and I know we've got a journey to get you to Forward's 'inner soul' by the end of it. All this material and the conversation we've had, if we could try and decide if there were ten key moments in Forward's life. So that's for us to decide whether the life of Forward began with a conversation at its moment of conception. As you've rightly said, that may not be where Forward is now. We may decide that Forward is in a garage with whatever his name is, without mentioning names or whoever. So that might be... but all these key moments from the exhibition in the gallery... so if there were ten key moments what would they be? So a starting point, if we're thinking chronologically and if we think about it as a 'washing line' as well, so if we think about we've got a washing line and we've got to fill it with ten outfits, so one of the events could be a big suit or ball gown because we don't know what gender Forward is, so when it's unveiled to the public that's a big, big moment. But that moment of conversation - or one of these conversations - it sparks a conversation within the council - so it's not as big in terms of its wider public and who's connected with it. But if there were ten events that a part of all these things we've talked about, what could they be? So they don't have to be huge events, they can be smaller but very important events in its journey.'

'I would say the first one for me would be a conversation.'

'And who would be...?'

'A conversation between the artist - No, I don't know actually...'

'It could be a commissioner?'

'Well, yeah that's what I was thinking, the artist and the commissioner, but in a way it's almost that it existed before that in Raymond's own head, but I don't know how that would... as a thought process.'

'In his own head, yes. That thought, that spark?'

'The thought.'

'I think it existed before, I don't think necessarily the artist had this idea of a work of art and was waiting for the commissioner to come, I think it exists in the commissioners' conversation.'

'It does, but the concept behind, or the premise behind this work, is already in Mason's history isn't it? Like the red brick, and the nostalgia that he relates in this piece of work - as a kind of fragment in his head.'

'But that's still all coming together in response to the commissioners.'

'Yes, through the commissioners it comes together, but it's kind of this big disparate set of ideas and memories.'

'So if we think about it as an event - to try and make it concrete - so if we say if we go with that, that could be the idea in his mind.'

'I think the earliest important moment is possibly in Jane Farrington's head when she decided that it would be a good idea to do an exhibition for Raymond Mason's work as a Birmingham sculptor, that that would be the first moment at which Raymond would find his relationship with his native city beginning to be fulfilled in some way. That would be point number one and the second one would be, I'm not quite sure where it would be chronologically but it's where that exhibition melds with the public art programme that's happening in the city at the time and somebody, presumably Jane Farrington, gets the idea that a Raymond piece in Centenary Square would be a good idea.'

'And somebody, presumably Jane Farrington, gets the idea that a Raymond piece in Centenary Square would be a good idea and something worth pursuing. And it's at that point that you start to open early thoughts for this. Bear in mind, as well, that he'd already done several sculptures on this scale before: one in Montreal, and there's one in Paris in the Tuileries, and I'm not sure if there isn't one in Washington? There's a spiel here somewhere about the Americans...'

'Yeah, this is 1969, The Crowd.'

'That's the Paris one, isn't it?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Yes. I've got a suspicion there's one in Washington, which would confound the comments in here from somebody saying how the Americans get it right and we get it wrong! They certainly did one in Montreal.'

'And confound it in what way? That we also get it right, or the Americans also get it wrong?'

'No, that the Americans recognise that Raymond's okay, actually!'

'So are you saying by that that it could be that Forward existed from when he was 40 and had the illness then - when he could only draw his own hand?'

'I think those are important moments, and then obviously the next moment is when the commission for Centenary Square is confirmed - and then there will be other moments, thinking, as we were earlier, from the sculpture's point of view. About its birth as a maquette and then its... What about the journey from Paris on the back of a lorry?'

'I think that's really significant, and we haven't talked too much about it but it's something that I really love, looking through this material, it's not just the mobility of sculpture, but the mobility of different audiences and publics, and actually how the sculpture is justified through different geographies. So looking at how his travel, his ideas may have travelled from Paris, how it's the Parisian elites that understand the artwork.'

'There is a concrete...'

'Yeah, and just in terms of what we've got.'

'Oh sorry, we've got a framework, haven't we?'

'No, just because he mentions that in context with Forward after it's situated on Centenary Square, doesn't he? So just if we can contextualise that into an event rather than a concept.'

'But we certainly have to have, I think, the journey from Paris, don't we? With the hand separate from the rest of Forward.'

'So, so far, just to recap, I've put possibly the illness in his forties where he's thinking of this - it's the hand - and it's started to influence his idea. We've got the exhibition with Jane Farrington, when she decided to exhibit Birmingham artists; and the idea to commission Raymond Mason for the public square; then I've got the actual commissioning for Centenary Square confirmed; the 'birth' as a maquette; and the journey, from Paris, of the hand. And you were then talking about the conflict between Parisian and Birmingham sensibilities of the public, but if we can make that an event, because it's part of a dialogue that we've discussed. So within 1991, when that's raised as a response to Forward.'

'Perhaps it's just the letter, actually, that he writes, because the letter's quite fantastic in lots of ways, isn't it? So his justification for sculpture. Where is it...? So that's his 1991 letter to Vincent Kelly at the Birmingham Post. That's very nice because it brings in that whole discourse that's happening between the press and between the sculptor

Raymond Mason.'

'So we're in 1991 now.'

PARTICIPANT EXITS

'The scaling of the maquette as well, in a studio,... the scaling of the maquette by Haligon Studios.'

'The scaling of the maquette, yeah.'

'And did we mention the manufacturer as well?'

'No.'

'You showed the picture of him in a studio presumably working on this?'

'Now then...'

'And you described it as 'There's a proper artist'.'

'A proper artist'. Yeah, sarcastically! It's on the front of that book. It's him with the plaster.'

'So by the manufacturer, do you mean?'

'Well I guess after it's been scaled and the cast has been made, then it's going to be manufactured - or fabricated - in fibreglass.'

'Can I just ask, are you like a security guard?'

[LAUGHTER]

'I'm not a security guard, but I'm a courier for the artwork. In terms of the value of the piece, in monetary terms, it's not very viable - we can hand-carry it to here, so it's not going to have to have art-transport - but in terms of the city and the fact that public sculpture was destroyed, it's valuable to the people of Birmingham - the object's history, the connection that Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has to the public, to the people that own the artwork - and so I'm here to ensure that nothing happens to it really.'

'So that's a big event, the transportation of the maquette to this workshop.'

'I think so, because that also has that possibility that it could be rescaled again, which generated quite a lot of discussion, so there's potential within this maquette that we could recreate the sculpture in the future.'

'That echoes another important moment that was discussed earlier where it entered into a relationship with a gentleman called George who started to care for it for many years and visited every day.'

'It was mentioned that George was the only person who had an accident, had an injury climbing. That's the event, isn't it?'

'Maybe that's the event - the accident with the carer falling.'

'So how many do we have now?'

'We've got nine, but there's missing history here.'

'What about its burning? I don't think we've mentioned its burning!'

[LAUGHTER]

'There were three burnings, though, weren't there?'

'Yes.'

'So three attempts.'

'And somebody mentioned the decapitation.'

'There was rumour of this, yes.'

'What's the difference between a rumour and an event?'

'Let me see. It's an off-the-record comment by a council employee. So there's the possibility that there was an unreported incident and it didn't actually get logged, it was just taken care of, so we can't verify it. It's just hearsay.'

'I'm just thinking about how little of what I've said was verifiable.'

'No, no, no - but there is a possibility that it's a myth that this happened to it, so we can imagine that someone did attack it and did decapitate one of the figures.'

'So for the purpose of this, we can create it as a key event if we wanted to?'

'Mm.'

'Have we talked about its installation? Because you talked about the travel bit, but some kind of 'feel' of that moment of being set and settled, a bit like the having the keys to your first house, when everybody, after its arrival, goes. Has it ever had a moment where it's been by itself?'

'Yes.'

'Apart from with the photographer?'

'Well, maybe that's what we'll think about: what constitutes a public for it? It's if someone's paying attention all of a sudden, rather than just passing by, or living in proximity to it but not caring about it. Its that potential for transformation...'

'I think that has to be it. It's the idea of 'if a tree falls and it doesn't make a sound if no one's there to hear it', but I do genuinely believe that if there's no one there to see the work - to engage with it - then it doesn't have a public at that point.'

'No, but there are biases in terms of the obvious entry of language, of seeing and engagement and a rational conscious activation. And I think there are other forms of being engaged and transformed.'

'Because through this kind of discussion it's got a public - even if it is in the closet somewhere and no one's viewing it.'

'I was just going to reiterate and restate that. I think that someone could be emotionally transformed by it at a distance. It's not about proximity and not about seeing; it's about something else, about being transformed.'

'But it is about engagement in one way or another. So it's about consciousness of it...'

'Maybe that is a measure of engagement: it's the quality of the relationship; It's the intensity of something.'

'That's similar to Arts Council language...! Because they're doing a review. It's different, but they're looking at how we evaluate the arts according to intensity, and it has to be 30% for you to be seen as a creative individual, but anyway...!'

[LAUGHTER]

'Sorry, you've handed us some questions. Have you handed these to everyone?'

'Not yet, no. What I'm going to do, because we've become a smaller group, I'm going to reduce the number of events that we're going to look at to five, and I'm going to choose them, but you tell me if they're wrong, if you want. Because we've focused a lot on the earlier things, I want to try and flesh out some of the things that we don't know about: part of Forward's life that we haven't talked about much. So I'm going to choose five of the events. So the letter which you said - the letter Raymond writes - and then the manufacture of Forward, the transportation of the hand. So that's three; And George's accident is four; and the burning is

five. And with those, if you could have a conversation, and answer these questions for each of these events. So the questions I've given you...'

'So, for example, when Raymond writes in his letter, where was he writing his letter? Was he writing it from his studio in Paris?'

'Yeah.'

'Or was he writing it from a café in Paris?'

'Try and be as specific as you possibly can in answering these questions.'

'I understand that you've read a lot of his documentation, and do you know where his studio was?'

'No, and if I'm really honest, I've read a lot of the document on the train here, so I'm not a real scholar on it.'

'I'm familiar with what its location might be, I couldn't tell you which street, but I think I know its attitude or its... position in relation to other buildings.'

'You've talked about his sort of relations and connectedness with other artists in Paris, and I have the impression it was that kind of studio district and quarter or artists' district, and he strikes me as the kind of person that would want to be right in the middle of that.'

'But also, I don't know if there are right or wrong answers, because again it's about interpreting what we believe Forward to be feeling, unless you want it specific in terms of knowledge.'

'No, I just wondered.'

'But it's not so much that I'm seeking a write-up; I'm seeking...'

'Clarity?'

'...help for the imagination.'

'So maybe you just spend a few moments just answering these questions about those five events.'

'So we've got the transport, the hand, the burning, George falling, and also burning...'

'And just to try and get out of a formal conversation that you have...'

'And I'm missing one of the five.'

'Me too.'

'So I've got the letter Raymond writes, the manufacturer, the transportation and the hand, George's accident and the burning. They sound like nice sort of scenes of a drama. We've talked a bit about where we thought, but do you think Raymond might write his letter somewhere else?'

'I think he spent a lot of time in his studio - and I think he had a garret - he had a small apartment overlooking a courtyard where his wife ran a gallery, and which also I think would be studios, so he was very aware of people making work around him.'

PARTICIPANTS EXIT WITH MAQUETTE

'Say goodbye!'

'Bye maquette!'

'Forward is going back.'

'So do you want us to think about what Forward was feeling at the time it was being written about?'

'At the time of the event.'

'At the time Raymond was writing the letter, what do you think Forward was feeling? Did Forward know it was being written about?'

'I think Forward was suffering an identity crisis and Forward was feeling torn between Paris and Birmingham and didn't know whether it was part of the proletariat or the elite.'

'I wonder sometimes, like with artists or people who find themselves at the centre of a public storm, whether it feels kind of vulnerable, a bit like somebody who makes a Twitter statement and doesn't imagine how it's going to be taken up or responded to - I'm not entirely sure Forward knew that it was going to cause such reactions. Or be used, because I wonder if Forward was feeling used by people for their own agendas?'

'Mm, and transported around, so subject to other forces around it, and at the centre of maelstrom, but not necessarily speaking the language of the people around it.'

'No, and I wonder about Raymond Mason in that sense, letting it loose, leaving it alone.'

'And then he goes back to France without it.'

'I just think because this is a little bit contrived now with three of us, maybe we should just answer the questions together, it's about the energy and the moment now rather than... and the exercise needs to adapt to

its environment!’

‘Yes, I agree.’

‘I think so!’

‘And also to take us forward. So what were the economic circumstances for Forward at that time? So this is the time of writing the letter, so it should be at the beginning of Forward’s life, essentially. Sorry, its existence on the square - its move -its living on the Square.’

‘I imagine it would feel quite proud of itself, actually, because it’s had quarter of a million pounds spent on it, and in financial terms it’s been given - valorized, or validated -, I suspect, and validated. And so yes, I can imagine thinking that it’s flush, [LAUGHTER] that its owner is now living the high life in Paris off its proceeds. It’s new, I guess, it’s physically, or in itself, it’s probably feeling robust and whole. I guess it knows that it’s been in a state of disassembly and fragmentation, and it knows it’s being assembled and bonded together, and so it probably feels coherent and...’

‘Self-possessed!’

‘It’s ‘that pristine house’, it’s moved into ‘hat pristine house that has been designed as well.’

‘Yeah, and that Square is quite somewhere to be finding yourself occupying.’

‘But Forward is in the middle of controversy, so who are those people? So we’ve got the letter.’

‘So you’ve moved on to question four: who was Forward in conflict with?’

‘Yes...’

‘Is it Forward in conflict, or is it Forward is the one person who is unvoiced in all of this, it’s everybody else in conflict about Forward? It reminds me a little bit of family court cases where you’ll have lawyers and barristers and parents and social workers all arguing, and sometimes I wonder about what voice we give, or what voice the children have, in sort of arguing about their future and their place in the world, what’s important for them? And in all of this documentation there’s a real feeling of a bureaucratic dispute about a child, that somehow the whole of the public world feels it knows best and what’s best for Forward.’

‘It depends if we think of it as a narrow object or an animate object that acts on the world around it and has some sort of agency in those relationships. And I suppose there’s a whole body of thinking about

how you follow the thing, and how the way that an object isn't simply something that's traded between people, but an object that somehow impacts upon not only its surroundings but the people that engage with it in particular ways. So yeah, it doesn't take it away from...'

'But are you saying that the object is the in-between; the object is symbolic of the relationship between people?'

'Not just symbolic, but actually the object has its own materialities and agencies and that impact and change over time, so the object isn't simply in between, the object is something that has volition in and of itself.'

'And that leads us to the next question. So what does Forward think about this behaviour at this time?'

'Can you explain volition? What does it mean by Forward has volition?'

'That instead of it being something that's fixed - like a monument - and not even a monument - it's difficult - but instead of it thinking it's something frozen in time, that actually that object changes in relationship to the place and the people that climb on it, that move in between it.'

'That's true of all things all things of the world, isn't it? It's an idea going back to classical times, that the world is in constant flux, and that Forward - and this is the tension in conversation - that there is no concrete, it's only plastic. There is no concrete Forward, it's constantly being in the process of flux and change.'

'But for the purpose of this question, what does Forward think about the behaviour of this letter? What does Forward think about the behaviour of these people? What does he think about Raymond writing that letter?'

'I wonder if it's being aware of any falling-out or conflict, because it's not omniscient - it can't see the media, it can't read the newspaper at this point. I wonder if, if it became aware of this letter, what it would be made suddenly aware of? It might be quite a silent, quite a restful time, that its had until that moment - or its been celebrated even; or apparently is a catalyst - and its that idea of the object as a catalyst - it's producing all these engagements around it and it's kind of getting people's attention, but then suddenly it's having its own attention drawn to the fact that there's some other mediated, distant conflict that's happening around it, so maybe it's imperceptible to Forward until that point.'

'Until that point?'

'Mm.'

'Or perhaps it feels discombobulated, as though its being pulled

indifferent directions.'

'And that's the answer to the next question then. What choices did Forward have at that time?'

'To get up and leave?'

'What state has it known itself to have been in at that point, before that point? It's known that it could fall apart, it knows that it could be scaled, it knows that it could move; it knows that its form is dependent on conversations with other people, it knows that it's dependent on money.'

'And time of day and light conditions.'

'I think we're getting somewhere...'

'Can we just answer these questions quite quickly and just try and think spontaneously? Because I think we've done a lot of thinking and a lot of the questions have been really unearthed. And if we can think about this, Forward is gaining the energy within its life to be able to answer these questions, so gaining its own voice now. So we've got to the letter, so the manufacture, so just in five words, and it could be one each or two each, just the location of the manufacture.'

'I'm speaking from Forward here - as Forward - that I'm in a room with other maquettes and other sculptural forms that are in fragments or at scales different than mine, and we're in an enclosed space - top-lit - I think - and with the artists paying a lot of attention to us, always being around and always manipulating form.'

'So I think that's a clear understanding of where it is, but what does Forward feel about that, what does Forward feel at that time?'

'I think energised.'

'Okay, we'll leave it at that. So what were what the economic circumstances for Forward at that time?'

'He's got new money!'

[LAUGHTER]

'What's the word? Prospective, ambitious, we're full of ambition.'

'Yeah, we have to speak for him, so, 'I am ambitious''.

'Prosperous.'

'Yes, I am prosperous.'

'So, Forward, are you in conflict with anybody at this time?'

'I think sometimes Forward might feel other things are in its space, some of the other maquettes that might be distracting the artist's attention, breaking his attention from it, because it feels that now is its time and that it should be having more of the attention from Raymond than others in the studio with it.'

'So you're fighting for your space?'

'No, I think you're there, there is no more space or less space, you occupy the space that you need to be, at the moment, because you're aware that this is what you have to do, you have to occupy this space in order to be what you have to be at that particular moment in time.'

'But you want more attention, though, don't you?'

'Yes, and I guess it's relational space, is it? You'd like a few of the others to back off and let a bit more of the intimacy between you and Raymond.'

'So it's being demanding, perhaps needy.'

'In the sense that we all have a need for otherness.'

'And we've sort of answered this fifth question in that. So what choice do you have at this time?'

'To fall apart. Or to capitulate.'

'Are you saying that despite this kind of moment of 'This is my time, I'm feeling prosperous,' there is still the possibility of just before actually going forward, you could just stop and not become and not go out there and not happen, just go, 'Actually, I've just changed my mind, I'm going to dismantle.''

'Because it's fibreglass, so it's fragile as well.'

'So now you're being transported, but only a hand is being transported -so only a part of you is being transported from Paris - so can you describe your mode of transportation? Are you inside something? If so...'

'Wrapped in blankets in the back of a Ford transit. Next to some drum kit!'

'No, I think I am in a specialist art mover's van, with blankets, with at least two people caring about me and my fate for this journey; and I'm going to drive to a ferry, I've been told I'm going to drive to a docks somewhere in the north of France.'

'And it's really mollycoddled, because it just won't be blankets if it's fibreglass, it will have bubble wrap around it, it will be bound up, and then you'll have blankets across it, and it might even be in a crate. So mollycoddled, and it may be suffocated as well.'

'So you feel mollycoddled and suffocated?'

'In a crate, for sure, yeah.'

'And what are your economic circumstances like at this moment?'

'Have you had the cheque? It feels like you've done the work, then you feel like you're prosperous, but you're not sure that you've banked the cheque yet.'

'I mean are we being given VIP treatment? I mean we're being chauffeured to our destination.'

'It's not the same as being paid, though, is it? It could create the feeling that we're prosperous but...'

'So you're unsure of your financial future?'

'Mm.'

'Yeah.'

'Are you happy with everybody? Have you got good relationships with everybody at the moment, or is there somebody you're angry with?'

'I wonder what I feel about the rest of me? [LAUGHTER] Because I'm going to Birmingham, it's just decided that actually I'm the important bit and the rest can stay in Paris. As far as I'm aware, I think it's just me that's going to be going forward.'

'Yes, and I imagine some tragic event befalling the other fragments.'

'Possibly hoping!'

[LAUGHTER]

'"Only I will be in this!"'

'Yeah, if the ferry should sink while the rest of me is following on behind, what a tragedy!'

'The competitiveness coming through!'

'Sharp-elbowedness of the arm, yeah.'

'It's, like, schizophrenic!'

'And do you think this is suitable behaviour?'

'For a public sculpture?'

'For you at this moment?'

'No, because I think the artist wants me to be part of a group. He makes works about crowds and things assembling and I want to be separate from that crowd, so I know I'd feel ashamed, I think, and I wouldn't want to let the artist know that this is what I'm thinking.'

'So what choice do you have?'

'Keep quiet.'

'Fall away at the earliest possibility. Go to Scotland!'

[LAUGHTER]

'Make myself available for reclamation!'

'Advertise yourself!'

'It is six o'clock in the morning, George has arrived; he always arrives at six o'clock in the morning. Can you describe your location? And think about your environment, so six o'clock in the morning; is it busy?'

'Relief, I think.'

'So just describe your environment rather than your feelings at the moment?'

'You know Centenary Square...'

'Yeah, I was just feeling slightly uplifted because I'm on a few inches, they've stuck a few inches of concrete on that plinth. It's a bit cold, because I find that after a night of rain, the water just sits on the surface and soaks into the stone, and everything has that kind of damp coldness about me.'

'So it's grey, but there's first light, so there's a promise of a new day.'

'So what do you feel when George arrives?'

'Again, relief.'

'I think it feels familiar, but I think I feel like, I'm used to people

paying me this attention and I'm used to one person coming to see the state that I'm in every day. I remember Raymond Mason doing this.'

'I wonder if George is connected to Raymond, if he's a relative, or whether Raymond asked him to pop in on me, just to check that I'm okay?'

'So what do you think your financial situation is like at the moment?'

'Somebody else seems to be looking after my finances at the moment. Now that I'm here, I don't feel I have to worry about my finances.'

'Mm, got an accountant!'

'It's almost like now I'm in the house, the house is bought - as far as I'm aware - I kind of feel as if I'm 'sorted'.'

'So are you happy with everybody at the moment, or are you in conflict with anybody at the moment?'

'It's those people that stop by and have a wee on me on a Friday and Saturday night. I do wish they would stop that.'

'And the person that drilled me. At least I think it was a drill!'

'God, I do hate dentists!'

'The kids that climb on me, sometimes I feel disrespected, sometimes I feel loved; it depends on my mood!'

'Is that because you're not very comfortable with kids? Sometimes when kids climb on me I think, 'I'm not a climbing frame.''

'What does George think about you being this unsociable?'

'I think George is quite used to me by now!'

'George doesn't think I should be sociable anyway!'

'Well, he climbed on me.'

'Oh, did he?'

'Yes, and fell. I'm worried; I understand why he's worried for other people.'

'So George is lying in the middle of you at the moment. What can you do?'

'No. I can't do anything at that point, I guess.'

'I feel helpless.'

'I feel inanimate actually, even though I'm depicting animated figures, I'm really aware that there are things that move differently than me.'

'You're starting to burn. Can you describe your location? Or your environment, I should say, for that question.'

'I'm completely unaware of my environment, I'm just kind of aware of my surface. I suppose my environment is this black cloud that's completely surrounding me.'

'Are there people around you?'

'I can hear voices, but I can't see anybody through this thick black smoke.'

'And how do you feel?'

'And there's a fire crew.'

'I can hear people gathering, I can hear people's voices raised, and a commotion, an excitement around, but I can't see them.'

'So an excitement. Do you feel excited?'

[PAUSE]

'No, I'm trying to think. I don't think I've ever felt an intense heat like that, so it's an uncomfortable, unfamiliar feeling. I can probably feel my form changing at that moment as well.'

'I think I feel frightened.'

'Yeah.'

'You feel frightened, but the sense of acceleration as well, going from that feeling of being aware of different people's abilities in comparison to your own abilities, to suddenly an acceleration of your own abilities, so that metamorphosis would be both unnerving but exciting at the same time.'

'Yes.'

'So you're aware of new capabilities as you start to burn and mix with the elements around you and produce toxic gases.'

'He seems to have become Forward as your...'

[LAUGHTER]

'I have to say you're so forward!'

'What do you feel this does to your economic circumstances?'

'The scrooge!'

'Yeah, I'm not sure I'll even be an insurance claim!'

'Suddenly I'm aware - is the word precarious? - I'm suddenly aware that I'm not as secure as I thought I might be.'

'And who are you in conflict with now?'

'Directly with the fire-fighters in the city centre and the city council, who now view me as an imposition to be cleared away, rather than a wonderful piece of sculpture.'

'Is that conflict, or is it a sort of anger?'

'That's why I wonder if - and I'll speak from Forward - but I'm wondering, I feel like I'm in conflict with the fire crew because they're stopping me from transforming, they're arresting this amazing transformation through burning, which I have come to recognise. It feels familiar because I'm aware of how I've been transformed in my past life, so it's this dynamically shifting form that's being arrested, stopped. Stopped from changing.'

'So are you in conflict because it's almost like they're trying to hold on to you, to a you that's already gone, and actually you just want to be allowed to be let go of?'

'So you have this latent potential that's being realised, mm.'

'Have you got any choices at the moment?'

'Hang on or let go.'

'Any chances of survival?'

'I think I'm conscious of losing my body, but I'm also conscious that I feel as if I live in the lives of others, so I become embodied in others.'

'Yeah, and so I have a choice of, 'Do I become a relic of the past, or do I take on a new form in the stories of people in the city?' And actually, is it better to be now firmly imprinted in people's memories as an exciting narrative - even if I'm now ephemeral - than it was to be a sculpture that wasn't so loved by everyone?'

'I also wonder if I'm aware that I've started to produce new documents, other objects, so fire reports, insurance reports, and that actually that the artist has come back to visit me, the artist has come back, having

been burnt, has come back, he says to check on my condition, basically to see whether I can be resuscitated or not. So I'm aware of this, I'm aware of the changing state of things around me and I'm producing these new objects that record me, and maybe I've dissipated into these other objects, an array of things.'

'So become a talking point again for new reasons, so that new lease of life is exciting, even if it is unnerving.'

'I think knowing that I still have got the potential to be the catalyst is reassuring in some way.'

'Mm.'

'I'm the catalyst of?'

'Or producing new things.'

'Yeah, being reborn and reformed.'

'Yes, producing new things.'

'So you've had quite a life.'

'Mm.'

'But I didn't know - didn't anticipate - that it might be coming to an end, in one sense, now, that this stage of my life would be coming to an end now.'

'So you're in a new role now, and I'm going to just move, for the last ten minutes, to the final exercise, because the third one we had a lot with Ben, and we've touched upon that; I think you've got some good material through then. So now you've become a commissioner of art - with all your experience of being a piece of art - from creation to your relationship with the public, and now you have been promoted, some may say, or given the responsible task of being the commissioner, and we're in 2013 in Birmingham, big changes within the city centre, the new library of Birmingham being opened, in your old home, and new pieces of work are about to be commissioned for 2015. So, as your new role as the commissioner, you have to ask these questions, which the public are being asked as well. So what defines Birmingham?'

'And we're talking as Forward again?'

'Yes.'

'What defines Birmingham for me, then?'

'For Forward.'

'It's been my home, really, my community. I notice that - going back to some of your questions about my finance have been - financially my prospects have been quite intimately tied in with how Birmingham's been doing economically, but I guess my neighbours have also felt about me in different ways, depending on how they've been doing in the world.'

'Yes, and I guess some of my neighbours - other public artworks - have had to move because of regeneration projects in the city, so some of them have been withdrawn from their public - from the 'general public' - and put into storage and taken away...'

'And perhaps I think that Birmingham misunderstood my importance, because now public art commissions aren't going into a piece of monument, they're going into ephemeral, one-off events, so perhaps my importance, even though I didn't appreciate it at the time, was being re-catalysed through fire, and perhaps that's really the contribution I made to Birmingham, and perhaps I was the precursor in the turn towards 'event culture'.'

[LAUGHTER]

'Isn't the allusion to permanence of bronze works by the Henry Moore, the sculptor, also ironic that that sculpture can be stolen and melted down, just as I was set fire to. So there's a myth that myself or any of my neighbours are permanent monuments.'

'Can I just ask the question again? What defines Birmingham?'

[LAUGHTER]

'Um.'

'That may be your answer!'

'I think it's the changing landscape with certain points that remain static. So something that's shifting and quite temporal and ephemeral, with moments that punctuate that changing landscape.'

'As Forward, I'm curious about your question about why you think I understand things through defining them. Because I've been reflecting on myself all this afternoon in very abstract kind of ways, and sometimes even emotional and poetic ways, and yet sometimes I feel that I'm being drawn back to, "Right, I need to underline some of the things that I feel about this abstract, messy, complicated world by summarising with a few nice definitions."''

'I'm asking you to define Birmingham because you've been given the task to commission a piece of public art for Birmingham, so somebody who has been given the task, I would hope that there would be some understanding of the city.'

'I suppose diversity and fractiousness would come through my understanding of Birmingham.'

'But I would immediately reply by saying, if you're asking me to relate to Birmingham, it's multifarious and complex, and I think we need to be a little bit more specific.'

'I'm only giving the money to you. I mean that's your job to define it. I'm just the budget holder here, but as the budget holder here, I have to be able to justify...'

'I don't think you can define a city: you can pick a part of it, or fix on a perspective or a road or an interstice through it, but I don't think you can define Birmingham.'

'I refer back to the report from 1989, about public art in Birmingham, that states that Birmingham has more public art than any other city, and that's something, as the budget holder, I'm very proud of, so I just want to ensure for the future that this responsibility of the commissioner is understood.'

'I don't understand what you mean by the responsibility of the commissioner?'

'The commissioner to fulfil the task of, first of all, sustaining this wonderful track record, but being able to create pieces of work.'

'Maybe it's not the responsibility to sustain what is, maybe it's the responsibility to come to terms with how things move forward.'

'I'd go as far as saying that I'd commission work that produced Birmingham, so it became the catalyst that built a set of relationships that would be Birmingham through that, or with that object commissioned. So I wouldn't walk into the commission as Forward, thinking that I knew what a general populous of Birmingham was or what they might want. I think I showed - as Forward - that you can produce this intense social group around an object -whether you're a supporter or a detractor or whether they gave life to you, or whether they burned you. So that would define my strategy.'

'So what images, to try and define it further then -or define concrete - what images do 'made in Birmingham' conjure up?'

'For us in view of Forward again?'

'Yeah, I mean Forward's just given us a great example of an active, and also a philosophical approach, essentially, but also active in terms of relationship building, but no concrete idea about an image.'

'I think, as Forward, I drew heavily on the coat of arms of the city,

and I think I would always have that motif in mind, that wedding of entrepreneurship or invention and technical, manufacturing skill and art practices or craft practices.'

'Do you see that as art-isan practices?'

'I think we can find examples of a whole range of - and I don't want to use the words 'creative practice', but there are the arts. I guess we're looking at a city that has a kind of arts/science/education model - kind of arts and crafts model - that I think I would look carefully at to see how I could read that now.'

'It has that in its history, but you think it's lost an awful lot of that and that this is another chance for remembering, or going backwards?'

'What do you think? As an image. What would be your image then?'

'My image of...?'

'Of 'made in Birmingham', because you have drawn on historical aspects of it that have conjured up images, but is there another image?'

'For me. it would be yes, manufacturing, but also about interdisciplinarity, particularly across art forms, so that's why it's hard for me to respond to what an image would be, because...'

'I'm just thinking in terms of manufacturing, what's left in Birmingham?'

'Jaguar and Rover are left in Birmingham, and then we have some steel works in this area. What else do we have in Birmingham? Oh, we have Cadbury's still, and they're a large employer here.'

'Owned by Americans.'

'Maybe you're alluding to the fact that we've got a jewellery quarter, so as Forward, I might be aware that there's an artisanal scale of...'

'No, but I'm worried about becoming - I'm worried about - and I don't know quite how to put this - I'm worried about becoming an image of my own past and being fixed. I understand my need for nostalgia and for feeling at home in myself, but what I sit amongst in the world around me might have moved on and left me a little bit behind.'

'So I'm going to ask one final question then, actually, because we've touched on the others. What does Forward think of this project as a form of public art commission?'

'The project that you lot have been talking about me today?'

'The thing we've been doing today as well.'

'It's funny, because I haven't been conscious of it, this public art, I've taken part as Forward. I feel that occasionally it's been slightly bureaucratic, but at times, when I've been able to forget that, I've suddenly found my voice again, and so being drawn into the conversation and relationships and... I think I've found myself arriving at a new self-understanding through this work, which I think has been a thread that I've not quite heard but have only managed to weave again and again to get to this point. So I think it's about my self-understanding.'

'I think it's about the fact that I was never about fibreglass! [laughs] So my parts were never just the fibreglass, and through this public art commission, I'm realising that part of my identity was the fire, part of my identity is the narrative around my life's journey, and part of my identity is mythology. So, actually, I never was just a piece of monumental public art, I've always been...'

'In your description then, were the words 'public life' in that order, because this idea of the life of a public - and a life in public, is always a kind of a moving on.'

'I think certainly part of the public memory of the city, so part of who I am, as Forward, is part of the fabric of the city, the psycho-geography of the city.'

'Yeah, and part of other people's lives.'

'Mm, you become part of the fabric of other people's lives.'

'It makes me, as Forward... I think I've realised that my public was not the public that my commissioners imagined - and that publics can be catalysed, they can be at various scales, and that this can be ... that we formed a public through this work. So I think I recognise this as public artwork, even though it's not in public, as it's commonly understood.'

'I've created my own public.'

'Yes.'

'And that word again, agency! [laughs] It wasn't the public that was intended for it, but I created a new public and that way felt I had my own volition.'

'But my only concern about my participation today is that it comes back to maybe, and it might have been something that you were saying about me earlier, about speaking for others. And as the group's got smaller, at times we've had people that come in and that have introduced different voices and perspectives, but I think it's been an important part of my conversation for myself today, for example, the woman from the museum, who looks after part of me and my self-understanding, and then who saw me burning. I'm sorry that none of the kids that played on me could be here.'

I'm curious about the fact that I keep getting drawn or invited back to these art institutional settings to be discussed - to have my public life discussed. It seems funny that I always have to retreat back into a private room - owned, administered somewhere - to have a conversation about public art, and I sort of wonder about that.'

'But speaking as Forward, my life always was in those closed rooms: it was with the commissioner, it was in the studio, it was in the Haligon studios being rescaled. It was not just when I was Centenary Square. So this doesn't feel unfamiliar.'

'But then I had another movement, back out into a different kind of public, and so I guess you're reminding me that I'm anticipating, and I'm curious about what my next public might be.'

'Yes.'

'A photographic exhibition maybe or something as well!'

'Can I just quickly say before we go? The kind of conversation we've done, so I couldn't share it with you, but are you aware of Shelley's poem Ozymandias? Because I looked up the lyrics earlier and it just encapsulates this and it's all to do with a fragment of past civilisations and how you might imagine those pasts. And it's so befitting. And it even talks about the hand, the shard left over. It's by Shelley.'

'O-Z-Y-M-A-N-D-I-A-S.'

'And it's all about telling the stories, travellers telling the stories of this past civilisation, told through a fragment of sculpture, and it refers to a sculpture, it refers to the hand that mocked them, and I thought, if this is Photoshopped, then this is the inspiration for it!

[LAUGHTER]

'If it is Photoshopped - but I agree, that actually when you saw the image a bit more clearly, it didn't look as fake as it does here. But this is wonderful; have a look at it and see if it's something that you might want to bring in somehow, because it just fits so well.'

'Yes I will do.'

'Brilliant.'

END

FORWARD BACK TOGETHER

Simon Pope, 2013

Commissioned by Vivid Projects.

Curator: Kaye Winwood.

Workshop Leader: Caroline Jester.

Participants: Michael Diamond, John Hammersley, Helen Oliver, Simon Pope, Ben Waddington and Dr.Saskia Warren.

Audio recording: Ross Adams.

With special thanks to: Nigel Edmonson, Simon Redgrave, Lorna Hards, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and The Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art, University of Oxford.

Forward Back Together explores the material transformations of Raymond Mason's sculpture *Forward* (1991), commissioned by the city council, given as a gift to the people of Birmingham and later destroyed by that very same 'public'. Using a participatory methodology, this dialogic work took the form of a series of meetings with key participants and a script-development workshop held at Vivid Projects on 11th June 2013. The work explores how various publics, produced at each points of the statue's transformation, might improvise a fictional account of *Forward's* life as a public artwork - from the point-of-view of the statue itself - from artists proposal and commissioning process, manufacture and installation, burning and removal.

A limited edition of this transcript was made available at an 'in conversation' event with Simon Pope & Dr. Saskia Warren on 6th July 2013 at Vivid Projects, 16 Minerva Works, 158 Fazeley Street, Digbeth, Birmingham, B5 5RS.

