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TOWARD A LIVABLE PLANET

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Conversation with a master conservator

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INTERVIEW

Things Fall Apart

Art conservator Robert Lodge discusses his work on public sculptures

BY JOSEPH HART

What happens to public artworks after the ribbon-cutting ceremony is over, the press flashbulbs have dimmed, and the artists and their contractors have moved on to the next project? Of course, everyone hopes the piece becomes a beloved icon of the public it serves. Loved or loathed, however, public artworks suffer the same fate as every other element in the built environment: They begin to fall apart.

Few professionals know this better than Robert Lodge. In 1997, Lodge and his colleagues at McKay Lodge Conservation Lab received their first contract with the General Services Administration to fix problems with the nation's collection of public artworks—a collection that includes thousands of works in hundreds of locations, including courthouses and other federal properties all across the country. It's work that's kept his firm busy ever since.

Lodge specializes in sculpture, and the GSA sculptures include a range of works—some of them as old as this country, some commissioned during the Great Depression, and others dating since the federal percent-for-art program, which began in the early 1970s. We wanted to hear about some of the issues that crop up after a public artwork has been on the ground for a decade or more. We reached Lodge at his office.

Public Art Review: Are there any kind of general problems that you face, or is it really a case-by-case situation?

Robert Lodge: The most common problem we see is in the process: It's a basic lack of understanding that maintenance is required with a commission. That's usually how we end up involved in these restoration contracts—it's maintenance catch-up, or problems that come from a lack of maintenance.

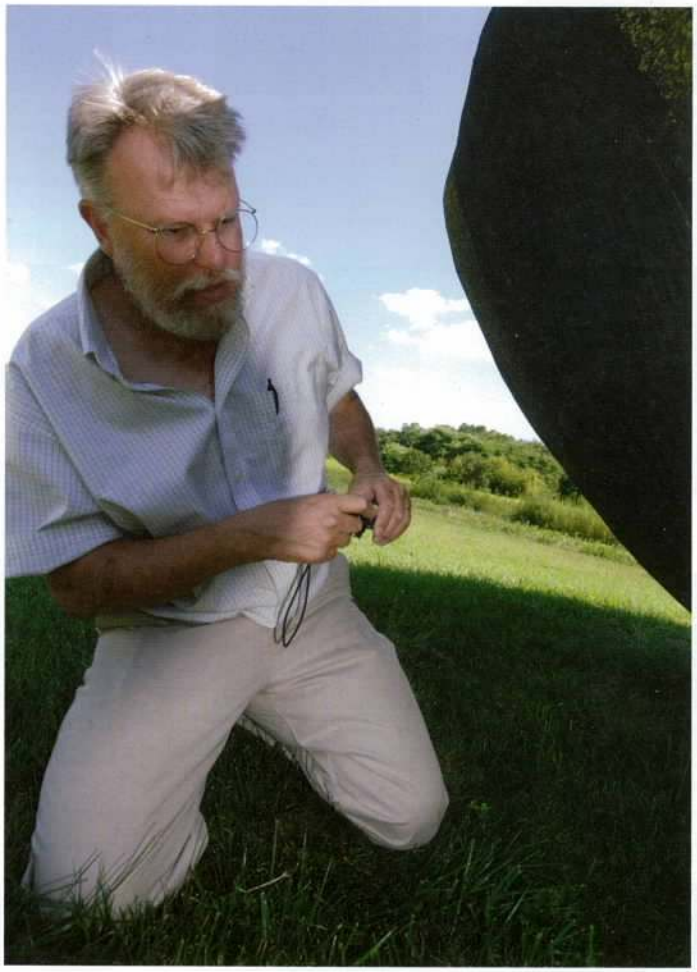
PAR: So you're saying there should be a maintenance plan from the outset?

RL: Yes, maintenance needs to be part of the funding of a commission. Not long ago, the federal government established a peer review process when commissioning an artwork, and there are various stages of review, including a technical review. About five years ago, they started placing conservators on those panels to address safety and maintenance issues. We've been able to influence the materials and construction. That's going to correct a lot of the problems we face from the past.

PAR: What are some of those problems?

RL: It's as diverse as the materials used. It could be deteriorating glaze on tile, or corrosion on stainless steel, or fountains. Anything involving water takes sometimes weekly maintenance or they fail. Take the monumental abstract art of the 1970s and '80s. These were often painted steel sculptures, and they are costly items to maintain because of the necessity to do repainting. Also because steel can't take constant wet. We just removed a steel piece to the lab that was corroded through, with holes right through the metal. That artist didn't recognize that steel can't take standing water.

Coatings are another major problem. There were many fabricators who did superb shopwork but fell short in the coatings. One commission, there was no review of process—they accepted the artist's design and the sculpture was made from milled steel with paint on it. Well that's simply not going to last long. Proper surface preparation involves abrasive blasting. In an aggressive urban environment, it'll get scratched.



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PAR: How does an artist get educated on those types of materials?

RL: Artists are working with fabricators, and the number and range of sophistication of fabricators is incredible. A lot of potential problems are stopped in the work between the artist and the fabricator because of the sophistication of these firms.

PAR: Would it make sense to consult a conservator?

RL: We've been engaged a number of times as a third party to review the artists' materials. But conservators are diverse in their materials. Let's say someone is fabricating something from stainless steel and other non-metal items. There are just too many specialists they would have to turn to. Fiber-reinforced polymers have their own set of problems. It's a lot for a fabricator or artist using diverse materials to keep in touch with.

If you think of an artwork as a product—well, product manufacturers have mastered the technology that goes into their product. They can afford to do that because of the scale. But the artwork is a one-off for the artist. There will always be unforeseen problems. There's no way around it, because they are one-offs.

PAR: So how do you keep up with it?

RL: We keep up with trade publications in corrosion, concrete repair. We read blogs, listservs on adhesives and metals. We really try to keep up with all the materials industries that we're aware of. I don't read art philosophy; I read about preventing corrosion in sewer pipes, for example, and translate that into situations I might encounter in a public artwork.

It's also very important for us to work with industry. For example, the colorful fiberglass sculptures of Luis Jiménez are all over the U.S. They're essentially fiberglass and resins built into molds, painted with automobile paint, and clear coated. And they're fading. We're now working with PPG Industries because they found out we were trying to deal with this old color and ethically redo those surfaces. They got extremely interested and this month they are sending technical teams to train us, as though we were an auto shop, in using high-end coatings. They're even installing a paint-mixing machine.

IN MEMORIAM

Walter De Maria (1935–2013)

The American sculptor Walter De Maria, who was at the vanguard of four major movements in twentieth-century art—minimalism, conceptual art, land art, and installation art—recently died at age 77. De Maria literally left his mark on the globe with permanent installations such as *The Lightning Field* (1977), a grid in western New Mexico of 400 stainless steel poles averaging 20½ feet in height, and *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977), a solid brass rod one kilometer long that was driven into the earth in Kassel, Germany, so that only its top is visible.

The Dia Art Foundation, which finances and maintains those two works, also underwrites the display of two permanent indoor installations: *The New York Earth Room* (1977), a Soho loft filled with 22 inches of earth; and *The Broken Kilometer* (1979), also in Soho, which consists of 500 two-meter brass rods arranged in perfect rows.

Repeated geometric shapes were a recurring motif in De Maria's career, which spanned more than half a century and often explored principles of measuring and numbering.

Born in Albany, California, in 1935, De Maria studied history and painting at the University of California–Berkeley, and participated in so-called "happenings" in San Francisco's avant-garde scene. Moving to New York City in 1960, De Maria continued to participate in happenings and also exhibited minimalist wood sculptures. His first solo exhibition was at the Paula Johnson Gallery, whose owner later became better known as the art dealer Paula Cooper. Early in his career, De Maria also gained the admiration of another prominent art dealer, Heiner Friedrich, who became a major patron when he founded the Dia Art Foundation in New York.

De Maria was also a percussionist who joined the musicians' union at age 16 and later performed with a band called the Primitives, which would evolve into the Velvet Underground.

Photo courtesy McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory, Inc.

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