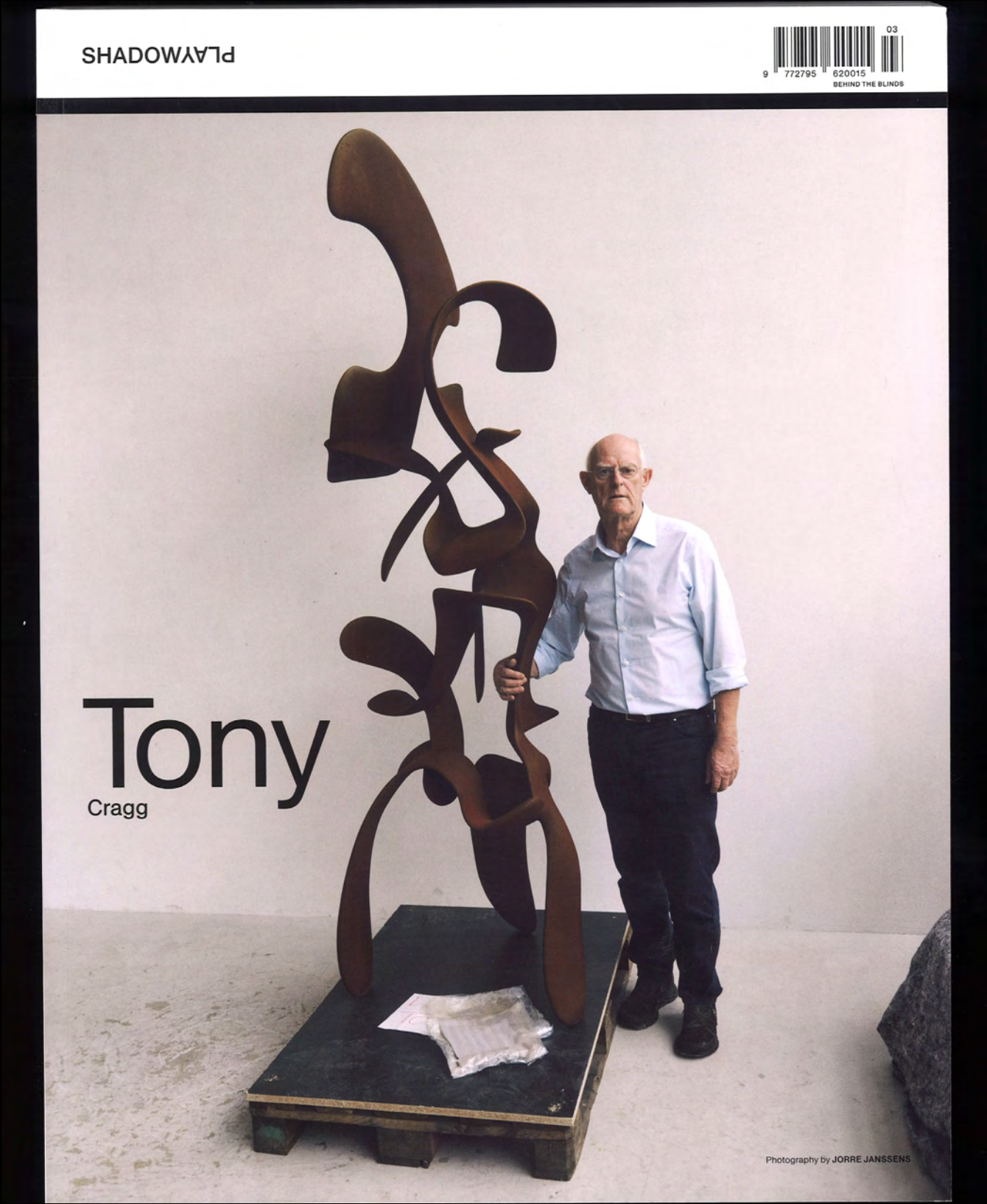
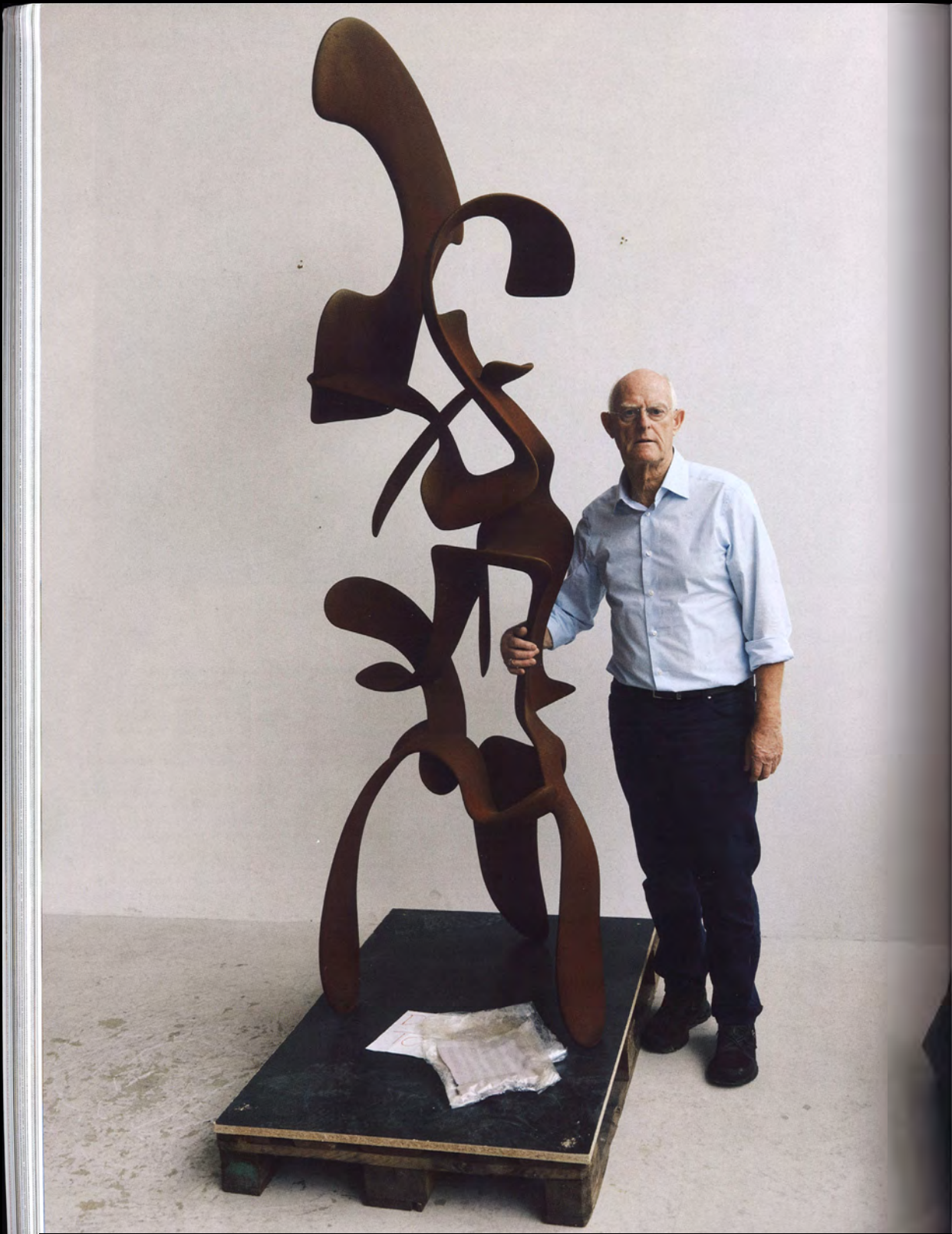






Tony Cragg

Radical Materialism



Interview by ELOISE HENDY Photography by JORRE JANSSENS

For over four decades, Turner Prize-winning sculptor Tony Cragg has investigated humanity's relationship to the material world. His works push at the limits of sculptural media, twisting materials into sublime, undulating forms. Despite their often monumental scale, Cragg's sculptures bristle with energy. Stacked towers teeter like landslips and shifting tectonic plates; metal forms seem to melt, distort and blur. One luminous steel curlicue looks like a creature about to slither or pounce forward, and is aptly titled *I'm Alive*. A self-described 'radical materialist', Cragg explores materials' expressive possibilities, and emotional meanings. In this pursuit, everything is up for grabs. His *Early Forms*, 1987–, were derived from vessels used since prehistoric times, and a more recent series, *Hedges*, 2008–, was inspired by shrubbery. Cragg is also renowned for his use of industrial materials and found objects; *Terris Novalis*, a vast public sculpture in County Durham and one of his best-known works, is composed of two steel engineering instruments standing atop surreal animal feet. Cragg's art seems both natural and unnatural — neither representation nor abstraction but something in between and in motion. For *SHADOWPLAY*, Cragg talks about his sculptural practice, and how "the whole material world is up for investigation."

In the past, you've said that "materials are a bit like instruments in an orchestra." How does this approach inform your practice?
I think the main thing is that sculpture is a study of all materials. And it's a study of what materials mean to us – not just intellectually, but how we emotionally respond to materials. So, obviously, that's a changing thing. Different circumstances, different materials and different shapes have different meanings. And so, I think we are unaware of how deeply not just our body shapes, but also the contents of our minds are formed by our experience of materials.

You've often used 'unconventional' materials, such as fiberglass and Kevlar, alongside more 'traditional' ones like wood, stone, and steel, and once said that using plastic fragments in the late 70s and 80s "was almost a kind of punk gesture at the time." How have you seen the art world's material culture changing since then?
We know that up to the end of the 19th century, all sculpture was made in wood, stone or bronze, or something. It was a craftsman's job. And then people realized the way that material – everything – affects us. The clothes you have on, the furniture around you, the landscape you're looking at, the shape of the face that's looking at you.
So, what has happened over a period of over a hundred years – more or less since the end of the 19th century – is that sculptors have realized that all materials are relevant. All materials are significant. So there are really no 'unconventional materials' anymore. The whole material world is up for investigation. I mean, the artist makes sculptures with chocolate, water, DNA – whatever you want, you know?

I think really, it's not a question of 'conventional materials'. I think there's an enormous job to be done, and I think artists are doing that job.

Your sculptures seem to hover between the geological, biological and industrial, blurring the line between the 'natural' and 'man made'. What attracts you to this kind of abstract sculpture?
So, along with what I've just said about sculpture being a study of all materials – not in the way a scientist studies them, to know the reality of their chemicals, but to know what they actually mean to us, how they affect us – along with that, as a sculptor, I've never been interested in making a human figure out of some other material. Or a horse, or a person out of marble. I mean, for me, that's a vain occupation, because nature is just more sublime and more interesting, and we can just see how well we can make things.

But, that's not really the point about making sculpture today. So, because you are using materials and looking at all sorts of things – trying to find out what things work, in terms of emotion – then you don't think about just ordinary and traditional ways of making sculpture. It's not about craftsmanship anymore. It's about meaning. Emotional meaning.

You know, when you look at somebody, face on face, they only have to move a tiny little bit of their face and you get a different idea about them. And you have a different emotion when you're looking at them. So, changes in form equate to changes in emotional reaction and ideas. You know, somebody sticks their tongue out at you, you think, "Oh wow, that's a change!" I mean, it's only a tiny little bit of material, but it's changed so much in your mind. And it's not just the face, which is a very important thing for us to read, but the whole stance of the figure, and then it's not just the figure, it's the room they're standing in and the stuff they have around them, and everything else. So, sculpture's not about just making things in other materials. It's not representative. It's about these strategies and ways of using material that let us know what they mean to us. I keep saying it, don't I?

I love the idea of thinking of someone sticking their tongue out almost as a sculpture in itself.
You have a painting which is 500 years old and there's an illustration of somebody smiling at you. Why would that be important? You know, it's just illustrated with a tiny little bit of material. And yet it means so much. Even after 500 years.

Does your thinking change depending on whether a sculpture will be presented indoors or outdoors, in an art space or a public place?
Really my main focus is based on my work in the studio, what I learn in the studio. I don't think very much about what anybody else might expect. That's the main thing. But, there are certain things, especially when it comes to putting work outdoors. Because I've talked about this huge range of materials you can use and which should be looked at as being interesting, but once you start putting things outside, the range of materials becomes very reduced, very rapidly, because of the environment, and maybe because of the people around, and matters of structural stability.

They don't play a role if the work is in your own home. But once you get it out in a public situation, it does change that slightly. I have to think about things surviving outside, and not hurting people.

And the idea of public art, is that something that's important to you in terms of how people access work, and sculpture being part of a cityscape as opposed to in the gallery?
Well, it's a difficult theme, in a way. Especially, maybe, in Britain. I grew up at a time where, as a little boy, it was a regular feature to have Henry Moore, who's an amazing sculptor, and there was always a little joke or a little cartoon about a woman with a hole through her head. And every sculpture that was put outside was a controversial issue.

Well, it's amazing, because some of the cities are so ugly and so repetitive! You walk through most cities in most countries, and there's no art. Just some rather mediocre architecture. And, you know, everything is very boring. Utilitarian. Boring forms, repetitive forms. It's all very gray. And then you put a sculpture there and you'd think the alien had landed in the back garden! Everybody gets very upset. But, the strange thing about that is that, if people don't like a sculpture, and after a year it's taken away, it's "Oh, no, no, no. It's our sculpture." So, when things are new and they've never been seen before, and nobody can put them in a category, and they don't know how to respond emotionally – which is really the work of an artwork, that's how they function – it seems to be disquieting for some people. But, after a while, things get established.

But, I mean, the thing is this. Seriously looked at, there is very little art out there anyway. Hardly, hardly any. What is anybody getting upset about? There's nothing out there. There's really nothing to worry about. But I think there should be!

Drawing is essential to your practice - why? What is the relationship between drawing and sculpture, for you?
For me, drawing is an amazing discipline with very, very simple materials. I mean, just with cellulose and graphite you can start to make a universe of your own, and it's easy, so why wouldn't we do that? It's much more variable, it's much richer in its expression than things you can knock out on a computer. Drawing is very important. It's something I've been interested in for the whole of my working life.

And there are different kinds of drawings. There are drawings that I do just to clear my own ideas. On some levels, it is much easier to do a drawing than it is to make a sculpture. And therefore it's interesting to maybe do some preparatory work in drawing. Then I work with assistants, and I have to tell them what I'm trying to get at, and there are limits to words, so I'll use drawing for that. And then sometimes it's just things that interest me. So, it's an observational activity, just looking at stuff, learning about how it's really put together. Drawing is a good method for that. And, you know, sometimes one does drawings and doesn't know, or quite notice that one's done them. So I'll come down into the studio in the morning and think "Oh my god, that's interesting, who did that?"

But, it's all part of the same thing really. It's all thinking about materialism.

Finally, I wondered about the future. Is there anything you would love to achieve that you haven't yet? Or, to put it a different way, what direction would you like to take now, or what are you interested in investigating at the moment?
What I've found out in my life is I'm not a designer, so I start something and I see where it leads me, and I've been amazed where I've landed up. Continually surprised that I've made that. Even if I've had sort of maybe 'ideas' or whatever, thank god, that didn't come to fruition. Really just making stuff is a path in itself. It leads one. It's a journey without a specific destination. So, it's very difficult for me to look into the future. But I've been quite active in the last 50 years, so I think that, the more work I make, all I really realize is what enormous potential there is to make things. I mean, things that don't exist in the natural world, and that don't exist in our industrial world. While I'm making a work, I just become aware of so many other things and other possibilities of form. I'm just happy to try and work through that. So time would be good, you know? I mean, all I'm really interested in is having more time.

But not just time, but also the quality of it, of course.

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