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THREE CASE STUDIES OF OUTDOOR SCULPTURE WITH PROBLEMATIC INTENT ISSUES

Michael Belman

1. Introduction

In the three case studies discussed in this paper, problematic intent issues will refer to confusing aspects of an outdoor work's design, intended use and intended role that result in recurrent or accumulated damage. This term will also relate to the overall susceptibility of an object to abuse or harm, such as having weak construction or a vulnerable location.

The first example, *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial* by Robert Eccleston, is a monument that is shared by numerous groups, each often commemorating different time periods. The integral base under the statue invites the public to continually place memorial items in direct contact with the bronze surface. The second case, *Trio* by George Sugarman, involves a sculpture that was specifically designed, painted and sited by the artist to invite physical interaction. In return it receives a constant battering from vandalism, skateboarding and BMX riding that surpasses what could have been anticipated. The third instance, *Formula Compound #1* by Dennis Oppenheim, was an imposing, multi-part installation that was acquired by a small state college for a one-time fireworks performance. No future role after the performance was ever determined, and the sculpture was essentially forgotten and allowed to degrade in a field for two decades.

Case Study 1. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial*

The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial is an 11 foot tall, bronze sculpture of two firefighters rescuing their injured comrade. It was cast at the Tallix foundry in Beacon, New York, and unveiled in October of 1998 at the Empire State Plaza in Albany, New York (Fig. 1). Behind the sculpture is a gray granite wall that has been sandblasted with the names of the men and women of the New York State Fire Service who have died in the line of duty (New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial Committee, Inc 2001). Individual firehouses, fraternity organizations and auxiliary groups share the memorial. It serves as a backdrop for special ceremonies and becomes the symbol for those that died and an object of comfort.



Figure 1. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial*. Robert Eccleston, 1998, bronze. (11' 4" x 6' 5" x 7' 3") Empire State Plaza Art Collection.

In the process of maintaining the memorial, objects conservators from the Williamstown Art Conservation Center observed that the public often places flowers both against the wall of names and on the wide, flat base surrounding the sculpture. It is unclear if it was ever intended for flowers to be put on the base, or if they should only be placed against the wall.

During a week of hot summer days in July of 2001, the sculpture was given what would be considered a fairly standard cleaning and hot wax treatment. Existing patches of flaky green corrosion product were removed using a 2% solution of Orvus in tap water, and a 0.5 solution of diammonium citrate on stiff brushes and cotton cloths. The treatment produced a shiny, saturated black surface with no visible traces of corrosion.

The public really seems to like the memorial. It is the only representational work in an immense plaza that contains numerous abstract expressionist sculptures. People would constantly come up and inquire about the sculpture during the treatment. The abstract art in the plaza is often vandalized. The Firefighters Memorial is left alone. After the World Trade Center collapse, the

objects lab in Williamstown received a phone call from the offices of the Empire State Plaza Art Collection. In the outpouring of grief after the disaster, flowers, wreathes, figurines, clothing, candles, letters and bells were being heaped on the base of the firefighter sculpture causing new bright green corrosion (Figs. 2 and 3). The conservators inquired as to whose responsibility it was to remove the items, assuming that they were probably important to some specific groups, and they would want it done respectfully. It turned out that there was no set plan for collection.



Figure 2. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial.*
The base of the sculpture shows heaped memorial items following September 11th. Photo taken September 15th, 2001

A few weeks later, the New York State offices informed Williamstown staff that a rededication ceremony was scheduled at the memorial on October 9 during Fire Prevention week. The ceremony was to be attended by George Pataki and Rudolph Giuliani to honor the firefighters who had died in 2000. The objects conservators were asked to make the sculpture presentable for the ceremony.

The 911 memorial items were set aside and the corrosion was removed again (using the same technique as before), though this time there was some visible damage to the patina. The conservators felt it important to not interfere with the outpouring of emotion, and after the treatment, everything was carefully replaced.



Figure 3. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial.*
Bright green corrosion from the post-September 11th memorial
items. October 5th, 2001 cleaning for the Rededication Ceremony.

A Williamstown representative attended the ceremony only a few days later, and observed that someone had cleared off the 911 memorial objects and a new group of more formal, funeral type flowers were accumulating (see Fig. 4). It was reasoned that those who were lost in the World Trade Center in 2001 should not eclipse the memory of the firefighters who died in 2000. There were many speeches given by chaplains, rabbis, the governor and other politicians. Fig. 5 shows the dramatic highpoint, when wreathes were laid on base of the sculpture accompanied by a bagpipe. Objects conservators visited the plaza during the week after the ceremony and noticed that the 911 memorial objects were back on the sculpture again.



Figure 4. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial*. Robert Eccleston. Overall view with flowers commemorating the firefighters that died during the year 2000. Photo taken October 6th, 2001.

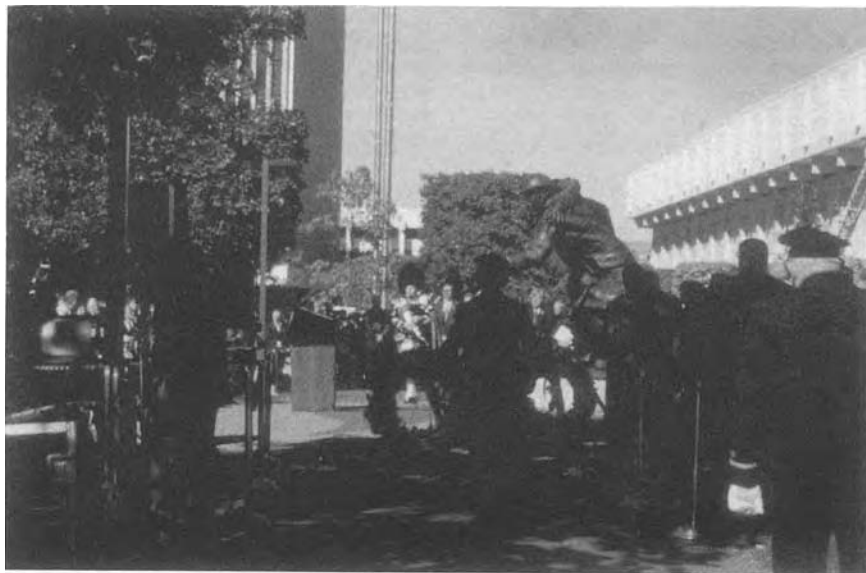


Figure 5. *The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial*. The dramatic highpoint of the Rededication Ceremony, when wreaths were laid on the base of the sculpture, accompanied by a bagpiper. Governor George Pataki can be seen in the background. Photo taken October 9th, 2001.

It is unfortunate that the design of the base can invite recurrent damage. At the same time, however, it seems completely appropriate that the accumulated wear comes from those who are in the process of remembering. While the wall contains the names of the fallen, the sculpture provides a more tangible visual focal point. In the act of placing flowers on the base, mourners intuitively get a different sense of their loved ones heroic sacrifice. The accumulating wear can be viewed as evidence of this interaction.

Williamstown Art Conservation Center recommended that New York State develop a set procedure for sharing the monument, one that would involve sensitively collecting the memorial items in order to minimize the prolonged contact that causes such damage. A protective mat could be laid out on the base during ceremonies or other periods of remembrance. Another solution, although one that would significantly change the current use pattern, is to set a small sign into the base respectfully asking to please put flowers against the wall.

Case Study 2. *Trio*

The next case study, *Trio*, by George Sugarman, is one of the artist's earliest outdoor pieces. The 10 foot tall by 32 foot long by 13 foot wide, aluminum work was installed at the Empire State Plaza in 1976 (Fig. 6). Sugarman himself suggested the sighting of *Trio* in its location along a busy pedestrian walkway. The catalogue of the Empire State Plaza Art Collection describes Sugarman's sculpture as "inviting public participation", and states that, "Sugarman believes that a one-to-one physical experience is the basis for...the intellectual aspects of art" (Easton et al. 1987, 190).

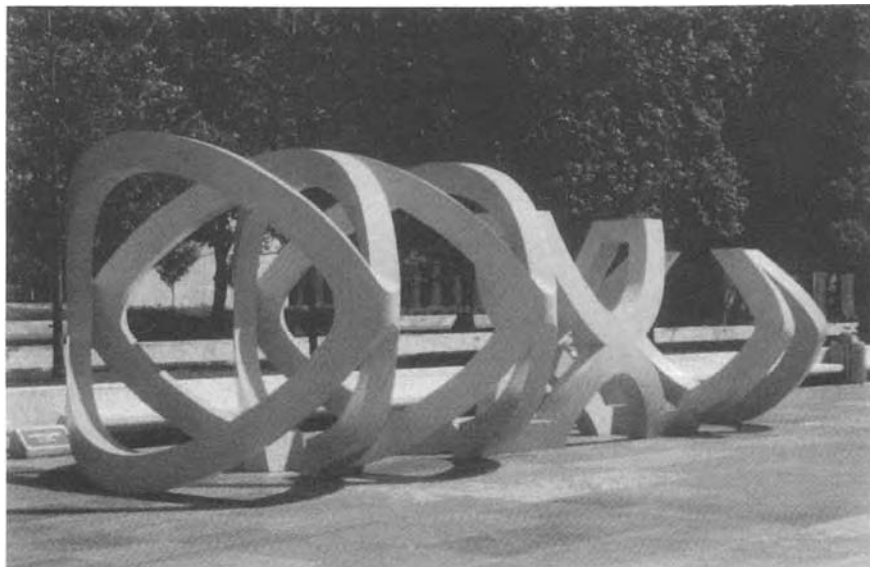


Figure 6. *Trio*. George Sugarman, 1968-71, painted aluminum. (10' x 32' x 13') Empire State Plaza Art Collection.

When the sculpture arrived from the fabricator, structural cracks had developed in the relatively small contact points where the arching shapes come together. As early as 1979, a condition report from the Albany Institute for History and Art pointed out that since its installation, the weight of people climbing on the un-reinforced sculpture had worsened the original damage. Fabricated from a weak aluminum alloy, the report recommended that structural repairs be made by re-welding the cracked areas and that the work should be bolted down in an area that is not as heavily traveled by pedestrians. The report also stated that some attempt should be made to educate the public that *Trio* is a sculpture and not a Jungle Jim, and that periodic cleaning should be undertaken to remove hand prints, grease and accumulated grime (Albany Institute for History and Art 1979).

Fifteen years and numerous maintenance campaigns later, on March 25th 1993, between 4 and 5:30 am, *Trio* was rolled 25 feet into an empty reflecting pool nearby on the plaza. There was speculation that Grateful Dead fans may have damaged the sculpture, as the band was playing at the nearby Knickerbocker Arena, now called the Pepsi Arena, earlier that night. A spokesperson for the New York State Offices was quoted as saying “There were 60,000 Grateful Dead fans in the area, and we can’t rule out that possibility” (Quinn 1993, 11).



Figure 7. *Trio*, split in half following the catastrophic March 25th 1993 act of vandalism.

The Williamstown Art Conservation Center condition report after the incident described the sculpture as having broken in half with extensive paint loss overall (Fig. 7). The report mentions

that the work had never been bolted down because of the complexity of the plaza substructure. Conservation treatment ensued. The two halves were welded together and the entire sculpture was anchored into the plaza with four threaded stainless steel bolts. Dents and paint losses were filled and spot primed, and the object was completely repainted with three coats of a polyurethane enamel that was recommended by the artist (Williamstown Art Conservation Center 1993).

Only seven years later, in the summer of 2000, *Trio* needed another major restoration campaign to repair cracks and paint loss not only from climbing, but also from skateboarding and BMX riding. Immediately following the final paint application in this treatment, the sculpture was overrun with black footprints from vandals (Fig. 8). This occurred very quickly, within ½ hour of application, despite stanchions and wet paint signs. Paint was reapplied locally to cover the footprints (Holbrow 2002).

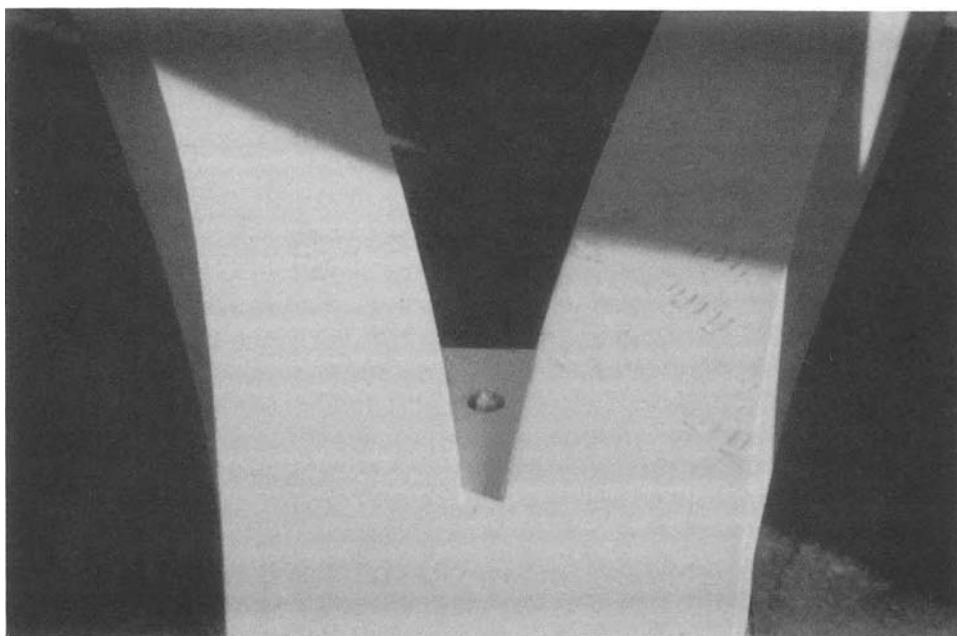


Figure 8. *Trio*. Footprints of a vandal in freshly applied polyurethane paint, following the Summer 2000 treatment.

Now that *Trio* is bolted down, the structural damage accumulates slowly relative to the paint damage. Although Empire State Plaza sits in the shadow of the New York State Capitol Building, surprisingly, there is no regular security presence. As a result, the sculpture is subject to daily raids by vandals. There are sure to be new gouges and scratches to repair for the 2002 outdoor sculpture season.

It is difficult to solve this object's problems entirely. Re-sighting it to a less traveled area is not a great option, considering the artist personally chose its current location. It seems inappropriate to block it off with barriers that would limit public interaction and obstruct its view. It is difficult to determine if Sugarman intended the sculpture for just sitting and a little climbing, or if it was meant for more intense contact.

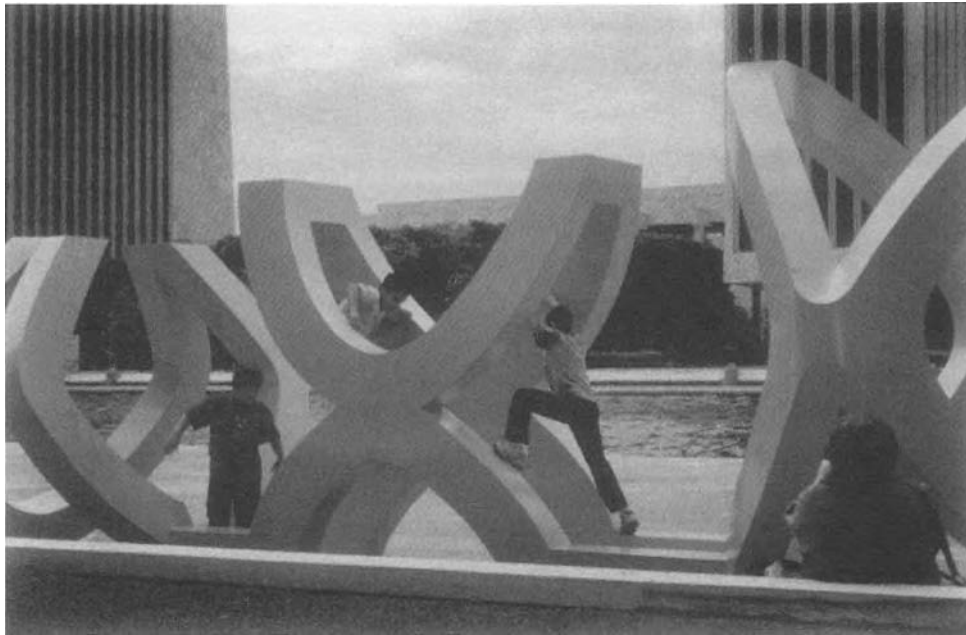


Figure 9. *Trio*. A typical example of the intended public interaction with the sculpture.

On any given day there will be children playing on *Trio* (Fig. 9). Tourists inspect it closely when they walk by. It serves as a bleacher for a nearby performance space on the Plaza and gives off a lot of stimulus with its playful form and color. Much of the wear that *Trio* accumulates is evidence of this interaction. However, skateboarding and BMX riding may be beyond what the artist envisioned. It may be possible to install an unobtrusive barrier such as staggered rows of low concrete bumps that will still allow physical contact with the sculpture and keep out skateboarders and BMX riders.

Case Study 3. *Formula Compound #1*

The last case study is *Formula Compound #1* by Dennis Oppenheim. Acquired in 1983 by the Brainerd Gallery at SUNY Pottsdam College in northern New York State, the multi-part

installation provided the base from which a fireworks performance was set off. The tracks served to channel the fountains of sparks, redirecting them and bouncing them off banks of panels. Fig. 10 shows the appearance of the work just after its construction. Some of the parts, such as the towering pinwheels visible in the image, were propelled during the performance. It occupied a large field near the college and covered an area of approximately 70 feet by 70 feet; the tallest structure was approximately 25 feet high. It consisted of 20 different elements of low alloy steel, fabricated from welded perforated sheets, ribbed tracks, angle iron, pipe and cable painted grey, green, red and black (Williamstown Art Conservation Center 2001).



Figure 10. *Formula Compound #1*. Dennis Oppenheim, 1983, painted steel and aluminum. (70' x 70' x 25') Collection of the Roland Gibson Gallery, SUNY Potsdam College. Overall view of the sculpture just after its installation at Potsdam College in 1983.

The first *Formula Compound #1* fireworks performance was held in Battery Park in lower Manhattan in 1982 with mixed success. During that showing, some of the rockets accidentally shot into the audience (Crary 1983). Oppenheim felt that the piece should only be fired once and that it was unnecessary to light it again. He found a home for the sculpture at Potsdam College, who, inspired by the previous performance, made grand plans to re-ignite it on their own as part of an annual fall fireworks celebration (Price 2002).

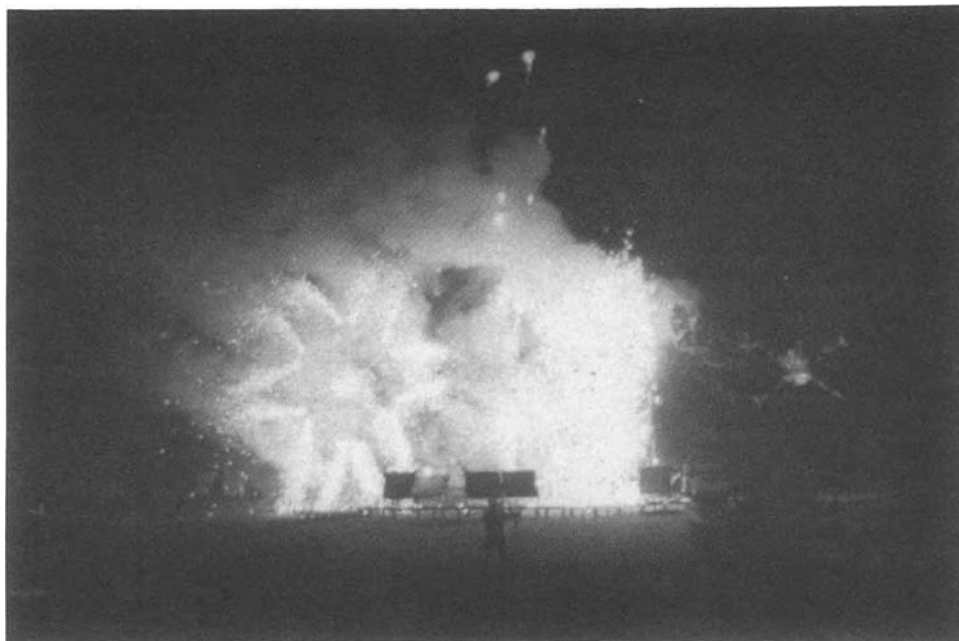


Figure 11. *Formula Compound #1*. The Fall 1983 fireworks performance at Potsdam College.

Six thousand people attended the display, which was for the most part successful. Apparently, Oppenheim's assistant, who attended the performance on the artist's behalf, said that the fireworks did not capture the true essence of the piece. Afterwards, the college was left with the lingering material from *Formula Compound #1* as well as installation bills, and they turned their attention away from the spent sculpture to other emergencies. The staff changed within the art department and in time the sculpture was largely forgotten, eclipsed by budget droughts that are common at small state colleges. Even at the time of the fireworks display there was a difference of opinion as to whether or not the piece was meant to be permanent. After the performance the artist was unreachable and the future role of *Formula Compound #1* and its intended life span were never clarified (Price 2002). Eighteen years went by, and the sculpture was brought back to the attention of the art department by Potsdam college groundskeepers, who claimed that it had become a safety hazard.

The Brainerd Gallery, now called the Roland Gibson Gallery, asked the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in August of 2001 to examine *Formula Compound #1* and draft a treatment proposal. The sculpture had fallen into a state of severe deterioration due to lack of maintenance. Numerous parts had tipped over, broken apart and were scattered about the field, lost and half buried in the grass (see Fig. 12). The mesh screens had badly rusted, as were many of the welded

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joints of the ribbed tracks and ramps. Particularly unnerving was the large dangling cylinder, which was suspended on a single rusted cable from the supporting tower (see Fig. 13).

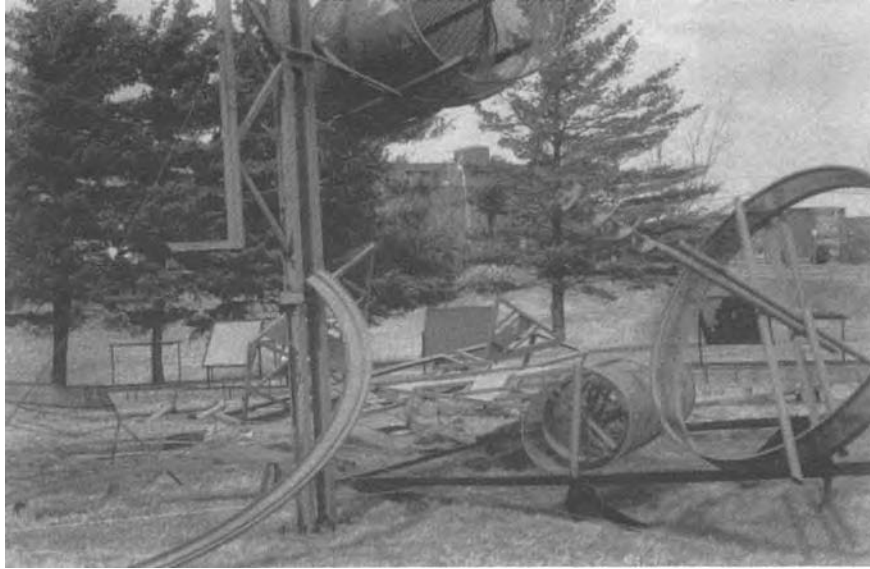


Figure 12. *Formula Compound #1*. Detail of steel elements that have collapsed after 18 years without maintenance.



Figure 13. *Formula Compound #1*. Detail of elements of the sculpture as they appeared in March 2002.

Whole sections of the reflector panels had been relocated and other elements visible in the original image, such as the towering pinwheels, now appeared to be missing entirely. Due to corrosion and weathering, much of the original paint was badly flaking or lost from the metal surfaces (see Fig. 14). Because no blueprints or other ground plans were available, the full extent of the damage was unclear. The size and weight of the steel elements, in particular the towers and dangling parts, made the sculpture a danger and a liability. The presence of empty beer bottles confirmed that the site had become a night time hangout spot for the Potsdam college students.



Figure 14. *Formula Compound #1*. The banks of panels showing corrosion, paint loss and missing pieces. March 2002

The college administration, the physical plant and many town residents voted to have the installation taken down. Oppenheim was finally reached and he assured Potsdam College that it was meant to be a permanent work, even though he had no idea of its condition or the vast monetary costs required for conservation treatment. Williamstown Art Conservation Center recommended that the Roland Gibson Gallery thoroughly document the current form and arrangement of the elements and then put them in storage until outside funding could be obtained to restore it on a new site (Fig. 15). The sculpture was dismantled in March 2002. The Gallery contacted several sculpture parks, but none of them wanted to take the installation. The work is unfortunately destined for the scrap yard (Price 2002).

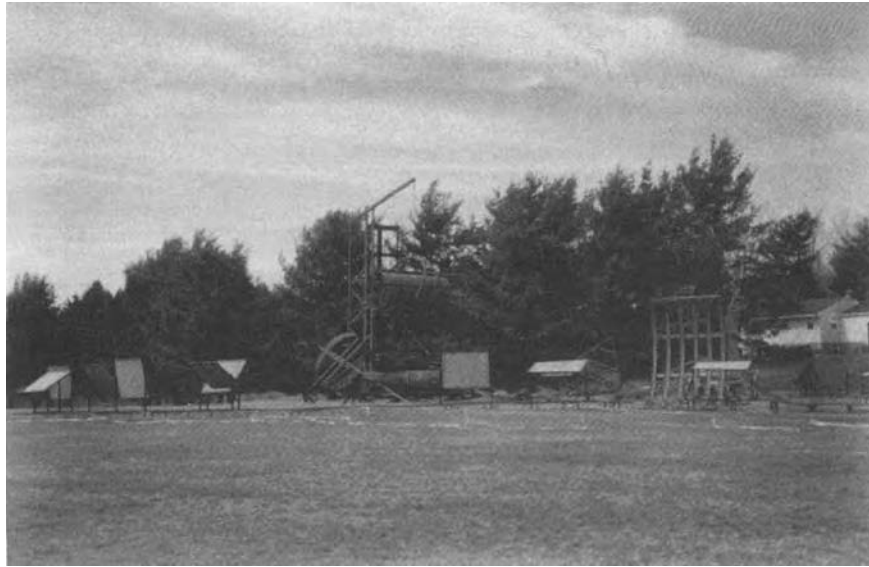


Figure 15. *Formula Compound #1*. Overall view as it appeared in March 2002 before demolition.

It is interesting to imagine, even with a fully restored version, what future role the installation could serve in a field such as this. With its imposing look and sharp edges, is this piece an appropriate rallying point for students on a college campus, like an amphitheater? From afar, the sculpture does resemble some kind of obstacle course or playground. When viewed up close, it is evident that the construction is only adequate enough to allow the piece to remain standing. Judging from this medium weight manufacture, it is likely that the artist only ever intended *Formula Compound #1* to be viewed from a distance, and walked around in a well-behaved manner. Considering that the sculpture's original role was part of a one-time performance, it is possible that documentary film footage of the fireworks would have been the most appropriate preservation.

Conclusion

The ideal situation for preventing the problems in these case studies would be to identify the potentially problematic aspects of the work before it is installed, during the artist's design and fabrication process. The sculpture's intended role, life span, specific design and material choices can be thoroughly weighed against the long-term effects of the ideal and non-ideal viewer and the outdoor environment.

The far more common situation is finding oneself with the inherited problem. In the case of *Formula Compound #1*, Dennis Oppenheim had accepted the terms of Potsdam College's

collections management policy. They were within their rights to dismantle the sculpture because in their eyes, it had become an expensive safety hazard and was no longer relevant or useful for exhibition or educational reference (Price 2002).

In the cases of the *Firefighter's Memorial* and *Trio*, coordinated usage procedures, maintenance plans and unobtrusive barriers certainly may assist in reducing their recurrent damage. It is also helpful when an artist is more accepting of changes or involved conservation treatments. But most importantly with outdoor sculpture intended for a specific use, it may be necessary for conservators to adjust their thinking to accept the heavier wear and maintenance as positive.

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