

**Interview by Liz Linden and Jesse Hamerman from the Public Art Fund New York with Christian de Vietri
Transcript of Audio recording from December 2009 in the studio of Christian de Vietri, New York.**

Liz Linden: One thing that was really salient about your project was that it came together so smoothly and quickly. There didn't seem to be any surprises in it for you, or maybe there were and I just didn't see them...

Christian de Vietri: In terms of process, there were not a lot of surprises because I had made a smaller similar work before, and also because the idea for the sculpture came from the process itself – burn casting. So the actual making of the work wasn't really the thing to figure out – it was more like a given in this situation.

Jesse Hamerman: Can you talk about the process that came from the choice of site, and how the work was affected by having it sited at Metrotech, if at all?

Christian de Vietri: Working at Metrotech was an opportunity to scale up the idea, a shift that not only made the work more present and confronting but also shifted its ontology. It became a bonfire rather than a campfire. It was important to me that the work would have enough physical space around it to accommodate the potential of these new associations. With a bonfire, there comes festival, ritual, worship, sacrifice...not only warmth and survival. That was a really interesting part of the process for me, to see how the shift in scale affected what associations one would project onto the object.

Jesse Hamerman: I found that the piece works outdoors in a grassy area more dynamically than it does in a white cube. The piece is scaled up, but it is also taken and put into its (almost) natural context.

Christian de Vietri: Yes, absolutely. And you have nighttime as well, which is a shift in terms of imagining what might happen around the object. I think that the possibilities of how it defines social space and how it affects the surrounding environment are much broader when it's outside, because the gallery is such a coded space already. And the gallery is a protected environment. Outside, the bonfire suggests its own protective sphere, albeit an illusory one.

Jesse Hamerman: Is that changing the way you thought about the original one that's outdoors? And how does the experience of having it in public affect your thinking about it?

Christian de Vietri: I think that outdoors the material integrity of the piece is tested in a way that heightens the experience of the actual material. Bonfires disappear, producing fleeting, ephemeral moments in time, but as a public work this has an unsettling permanence to it. It made me think more about the contradictions present in the work.

Liz Linden: I think that's something that Johannes' piece also point to very explicitly; when the work is shown in the white cub it is static, it is like you're entering a photograph because it never changes in there. It's like this frame always remains around the work, whereas when it's outside, the photographic element or the...

Jesse Hamerman: ...the fixed image quality...

Liz Linden: ...yeah, the fixity of it is completely lost and it becomes an active thing, like a living, breathing thing. Especially because your piece is out in the world as this living thing and yet is also a fossil and a marker of this moment that's long gone and frozen in the sculpture, there is this interesting tension in it between the past and the present, change and fixity, and so forth.

Christian de Vietri: Yes definitely.

Jesse Hamerman: What do you think about people physically interacting with your work? That's something that we deal with as project managers and try to account for, and because you put things out in public, you are giving up control.

Christian de Vietri: This may be wishful thinking but somehow when I made it, I was looking at it in the foundry and I was like, "I don't think people are really gonna play with it." I mean maybe they do, maybe they are climbing on it right now, but I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to. It doesn't invite that kind of an interaction.

Liz Linden: It definitely had a sort of Crucible connotation for me, when we installed it and it had the really beautiful autumn leaves behind it. There was something extremely evocative for me in that. But what was interesting to me as well is that on one hand it had this kind of sinister other-worldliness, but then at the same time there was something very sweet and precious about it too. In the right light it felt extremely cared for...

Christian de Vietri: The way I made this one was much more considered than the way I made the first smaller piece for example. They demanded different treatments, and I took on different roles in making them. For the small one, I was making a quick fire perhaps for warmth or food, so the placement was random but practical. For The Gathering I was not only creating warmth and light but also a kind of show, there was a crowd in mind, There were sticks placed on top of each other but also larger sticks angled upwards, to create a larger fire that you would need to cook an animal or something.

Jesse Hamerman: There are all these religious and ritualistic things surrounding the bonfire too. When I was in Spain there was the Day of the Witch where people make a huge bonfire and then everyone jumps over the smoldering wood to cleanse themselves of all their sins of the past year...I also got another reading as opposed to sweet; I thought it also can look very sad and lonely.

Christian de Vietri: The witchcraft association is definitely there, but it is amongst many other rituals involving fire, ranging from celebration to sacrifice. Religious or animist notions connected to fire have to be assumed to date way back, pre- Homo Sapiens. Interesting you mention The Crucible too Liz. I actually thought of using that as a title for the work, because it is what you call the pot for melting the metal at the foundry, but I didn't want to reduce the work to being about the Salem witch trials. It needed to be more ambiguous than that, or more polyvalent if you know what I mean. And yes, the fact that it is about human size, or slightly smaller, I think creates an unconscious sense of empathy towards the object. It's also a very frustrating object because the material denies what the form suggests. You know, aluminum can't even produce a spark if you hit it. Perhaps there is a longing for an active moment, a moment that has already past? Maybe that's what it is?

Liz Linden: Well, it's a fossil.

Jesse Hamerman: A ghost.

Liz Linden: For me that was always really wonderful. The thing that got me first about the project was just how watertight the concept was. I thought it was so beautiful that the making of the sculpture was the registering of its own form, and that the act of burning is making this bonfire sculpture that we have installed right now. It's just such a lovely, nicely tied-up concept. And then at the same time, it does translate to this very visually pleasing, evocative and complex kind of form, so you have this hermetic nugget that you start out with but you get the pleasure at the same time.

Christian de Vietri: Its weird because I think that artworks operating as tautologies, or self referential systems tend to exist on their own and die on their own. But in this case there is such a wealth of history and associations to the object that it constantly feeds your experience of the work and its site, and in a very universal kind of way. Everyone human being identifies with the object, and in different ways, so I think this multiplicity of meanings can produce uncertainty - you know the object but you are not quite sure what it stands for - and this can be a very generative state of mind.