

Transcript of B-roll interview between ABC's John Martin and Kryptos sculptor Jim Sanborn, 1991. Transcript created January 10 2004 by Elonka Dunin and Andy Zimolzak.

Jim, how did you get the commission?

I was selected as part of a group. There were actually originally 5 sculptors commissioned by GSA and there was a panel that met, and it was a combination of CIA employees and also arts professionals. And then I was selected based on my previous work.

You knew this was a sculpture for the CIA, it wasn't just an anonymous GSA commission?

That's right, yeah.

What criteria did the CIA impose on this?

Well, you know to tell you the truth, I didn't see this criteria until after I'd finished it. But actually they did. There were some, there were quite a few actually that were given to the panelists, when they were choosing which artist was to do it. I'm trying to recall what it was exactly...

So what were they looking for? Did you have a sense of that?

They were looking for something that more or less depicted the spirit of the Agency in a large generalized way.

(noise in background, "Hold a sec")

Let's start over. How did you get the commission to start with?

It was a limited competition. Which means that my name was selected out of a group from a slide file at the General Services Administration Art and Architecture Program. And so, I was selected as one of five artists who were in a small group.

You were asked to submit proposals, designs?

Yes. We were a--- Well, no. We were really selected on the basis of our previous work. The things that we had done before. The type of work that I do generally.

And then how were you finally chosen?

I was chosen on that. And then once I was selected as the artist to do that, then I submitted a maquette to the group of panelists. Who were, some of them CIA, some of them arts professionals. Once that was, that panel met, in the Agency, I made a maquette, of the piece.

A maquette being a?

A large model, a very precise model of the whole project, what I was going to do for the project. And then I was selected based on that model really.

Is that the model that's in the other room?

Yes it is.

I see. So that was really as much a landscape view of how it would look as an actual, um...

Yeah, I've always done pieces that were -- the term is site-specific -- which means I build a piece for a specific site, and it will really only work on that site. And so in some ways I have assumed a role as landscape architect here, and that was part of the commissioned amount that part of that was set aside to build my piece into the landscape of the Agency.

Did the Agency impose criteria on what they wanted?

Well, they did present a list, which I only really saw after I had been commissioned. But which, they really wanted a piece which offered the spirit of the Agency up, and was something which would inspire the people there, and was of a contemporary nature, and it wasn't really totally historical, or **another** statue of William Casey, something like that, which they have a lot of.

What's the title of this piece, and what does it mean?

The title is Kryptos, and it's significant in a couple of ways. It's the Greek term for "hidden". And I've always worked with invisible forces, or making forces visible that are invisible, or visa-versa, and make visible things invisible. And so I chose that word as my keyword for the code also. I did it in large text that's cut through a copperplate out at the Agency. And that -- the keyword for **some** of that text is Kryptos.

Does that for you symbolize the CIA?

Well, to tell you the truth, when I was first commissioned, my ideas of what the Agency did and what the Agency was were quite different, then what I... After I had done a lot of reading about the Agency, things that had been written, papers which had been written in the last 15 years primarily. I realized that it's different from what I originally thought it was.

What did you think it was?

Um, it was spies and spying.

And it's something different?

It's really information gathering. It gathers information, processes it, and then transfers that information, and people use the information. That's it's primary, that's what I understand now, is its primary mission. Obviously there are other layers, but those are the ones that I worked with, and those are the ones that I understand now. That information is what I -- see all the information comes in, encoded generally in some form, and then it's processed and then sent out, encoded, in secret.

Well did you say to yourself, "Hmm, let me see if I can fool them with this?"

Sure. Yes. I mean, I ... The levels of complexity developed while I was building the piece. But I always thought that I wanted to fool them. Y'know that was always the plan from the very beginning. I don't know -- fool them or make everybody out there think a

little harder about maybe it isn't just things military which can be secret, or things like that. I mean it's a more general statement about secrecy that I make.

How did you decide what message to encode?

Well that changed during the course of the project as well. And that developed largely from the reading that I did about the Agency. And also while I was cutting out, physically cutting out the copperplates, things in my own mind changed. I wanted to put something on there which would -- Let's just say, that once the plate is deciphered, I'm not convinced the true meaning will be clear even then. I've made a statement which is straightforward, but that leads to something else. There's another deeper mystery. As you peel off a layer of an onion, the myst-- you get closer to the heart of what it is. And so y'know I just wanted to make it even after it was deciphered, you had to go deeper and decipher something else. It's in English, it's in plain English, it's in text, and you can read it, but that isn't necessarily the whole story.

Well, without revealing it, can you tell me its content? I mean, is it from literature, is it from drama, is it from history?

Well, the sources that I used came from a variety of places. I think if I try to pick out certain things by the process of elimination, and having done many interviews on the subject, it could be pieced together, and so I am reluctant to say a lot about its content.

How about a little? How about a little? Without, without... Just a context, I mean, so that somebody sitting at home would say, "Well, what are they talking about?" Is there.... Is this a famous quotation, for example?

I can't say whether it's a quotation. It is either a quotation or it's something I've written, or it's something somebody else has written. But let's just say, that it has a lot to do with secrecy. It has a lot to do with finding something, or opening something, or discovering something that's secret.

How did you come to share this with Director Webster?

Well very indirectly. I had originally not wanted to share it with anybody. I was told early on that I had to tell someone. And I said "okay well we'll just wait and see." And so, as the project developed, that changed, and it became clear I had to tell somebody. The Agency has to be more or less in control of what's in their front yard or back yard or whatever. And so I gave the code, I gave the text of the message originally, to the -- at the Agency, to the -- There's a museum at the Agency, of memorabilia, on intelligence activity. There are things they're dealing with. Various aspects of covert operations. And so I gave it to the office of Historical Intelligence. I didn't want to tell them outright, and I didn't want to write this down. Ed suggested that I, Ed Scheidt the cryptographer, suggested that I try not to do things on paper, generally. And so, I presented it to the people in historical intelligence as just a verbal thing. But it became clear very quickly in just two weeks that they didn't, they couldn't handle the responsibility of the information.

All the world's secrets flowing into the CIA, they could not handle the responsibility of the secret of your sculpture?

That's right. Because what for example would happen if I had put something in that text, right in the center of the Agency, that was pornographic or something which was a complete embarrassment to the Agency, and that these people had read, and understood it, and had let it happen. And so, why would they believe me, anyway. What I'm telling them is the true meaning of it might not have been the true meaning of it. And so their jobs would have been on the line. And so what it came down to was the only person who could truly pass on it would be William Webster, or the President. And so the transfer took place that way.

Did he read it in your presence?

No, he was given a sealed envelope. And I -- there was a good bit of trepidation on whether I wanted to give that -- divulge that information. I said to myself, "Well, if I'm going to do this, I'd really like something in return." So, with the transfer I was allowed access to the pulped classified documents, which I am now using to create a new body of work that I'll be using for years.

Now this is material, these are secret documents that have been made into pulp, and are... Generally, are they thrown away?

Well, since the Iran/Iraq War, and before.. .No, not Iran/Iraq... yeah, since the Iran/Iraq war, the Agency has pulped their documents not shredded them, because during that period a few years ago, someone came up with a machine that could reassemble shredded information, and so now they grind it up into a paper pulp situation. And they mix the classified documents with other material from the Agency so it's a big jumble. It doesn't grind up everything though. When I pull my truck up to the back of the Agency and I fill it up with paper pulp which is basically a wet soggy material. It's called SoMat for Soggy Material, and so I pull up there, bring it back to my studio, pack it into mold forms, and then press letters of text into the surface, and let them dry for about a week. And then I come up with a prod—a wall panel that resembles something that's come from a temple of ancient origin. Something very old.

Are these all coded as well?

These are all coded as well.

There are messages too?

They are texts, yup, they are texts which have then been encoded, using some of the systems I used at the Agency, but other systems which are special and specific to these pieces.

Now, let me ask you about the coding. How did you go about coding the sculpture for the CIA?

Well, I thought long and hard about who I would use to encipher these things. And well, should I go... Okay, so I'll go to the Russian Embassy and I'll find something out over there. Some... I'll find some Russian cryptographer who will just **love** to do this, right? And I thought a little better about that. I thought about that for a long time. I didn't think it would make my job of building a sculpture at the Agency any easier. And so I didn't do that. And I started asking around. I asked people at the Agency who they might

recommend, although I had reservations about doing that. I mean, who is this person I'm going to be getting, is all my information going to be transferred to the Agency through this person?

Can you trust them?

Can I trust them? And so...

Do you?

At this point, implicitly, yes, I do. After meeting with Ed, and working with him, there's no question. And he enjoyed the project a lot because he really would like to stump those folks out there. And I think he's done a very good job of it.

What have you heard from people out there about this?

Of course, it's indirect information, I don't necessarily have an inside person. I hear it by the grapevine or friends of friends. It's my understanding that the simpler parts of the encoded texts have been deciphered, as they had planned to be. Part of it was designed to be deciphered within a couple of weeks. Part of it was designed to be deciphered within a couple of months. And part of it within years, or never.

So you're on schedule?

I think I'm on schedule, mm hmm.

Is there a sense of frustration out there, from what you hear indirectly?

No. Quite, I, con-- on the contrary, I think the feedback that I've gotten recently, and actually just days after I installed the main part of the encoded piece, was people voluntarily came up to me and said, "Listen, don't ever tell anybody what this thing says." Because once -- My main fear of somebody finding out at the Agency what about what it says or anybody finding out what it says, is that, the mystery is gone. Once you've figured it out, it's gone. But my idea was that, I designed something that sure, somebody will figure it out eventually, and then personalities will change, y'know. 10 years will go by, 15 years will go by and they'll forget what it says again. And it'll always retain this enigmatic quality, and that's what I'm really trying to maintain out there, is something of an enigma.

CIA is being very secretive about it. They won't let us videotape out there, they won't let us come out and look at it.

Well I think that's more or less because it's the location. I mean, you know, the Agency is a very secretive place, and I think...

Can you see a lot of secrets from where it is?

When I was working out there?

Installing it? There out in the open. You can't see any secrets inside the buildings.

No, but you just really know they're there. You feel it. You feel it every day. You feel it.

Was it hard to work there for you? As an artist?

In the early days it was difficult, because there were a lot of negative comments made about what I was doing, while I was working in front of the building. I mean, I was working right at the main entrance to the building. Literally thousands of people would walk right past and through my construction sites.

What would they say?

A lot of the comments were things about the fact that the government was spending a quarter of a million dollars on what? Y'know, what is this, is this art? I mean, this is a pile of rocks. There was a lot of that, wasting governmental money and things like this. And it tends to wear you down after awhile. The negativity in the beginning prompted me to write a letter, an open letter to the employees at the Agency, and then simultaneously there were a couple articles that came out about the piece. And the combination of both things created a more positive environment. Because the people were more able to understand what I was doing.

What did you tell them in the letter?

I more or less explained exactly what I was doing. And the symbolism that was involved in the piece. Because there are other things aside from the code which are very esoteric. Or the material that I use might have some associative value which means that it's a powerful rock or something like that. There's a rock that's a symbol or something like this. And so I told them exactly the meaning of everything out there and ultimately what I hoped would happen. And I guess that helped to allay both their fears about what it might be and also help to explain about what it was so that it wasn't as intimidating. I think a lot of contemporary art can be very intimidating. Because it's not easily explained. Now, I don't want mine explained, because that just automatically – necessarily -- I think that automatically makes it less interesting.

Has anybody from the Agency or other Agencies tried to find out directly what this means?

Um, a lot of strange things happened while I was doing the piece. There were people caught on ladders trying to look in my window and photograph the piece through my windows, and they were run off by the police. There were some very strange individuals who tried to get into the building on a couple of occasions, early on in the project, while I was cutting up the plates and while I was doing the text.

You say strange individuals. Were they identified, do you know who they were?

Well, by their dress, they were. They were, let's say they fit the profile of a clandestine individual. I'd say that. I won't say they wore trenchcoats, but I mean, they looked like they were....

Well it sounds from all the references they resembled Peter Sellers more than Bill Colby?

I think in some ways. But I'll tell you there are vestigial, there are a lot of vestigial Peter Sellers running around, associated with the Agency, or hoping to be part of that whole

thing. And so, I don't know, these could have been just people off the street who had heard about this and really wanted to see what was going on. But it got to the point where I had to close all the windows and cover up the plates while I was working on them, because I worked on them for months here. And I didn't want to divulge. I had to hide all my documents. Didn't talk about it while I was on the phone. Ed Scheidt and I generally went to secure places to talk about the encoding systems.

<http://www.elonka.com/kryptos>