DENNIS OPPENHEIM AND THE MATERIAL POWER OF ART

I chair the Panel on Outdoor Art at Stanford – we acquire pieces for the sculpture collection and consider offers of donation. Stanford's collection is one of the best on the west coast.

Like Colin Renfrew [Link] I think there is a strong convergence of interest in materialities and time that brings together contemporary art and archaeology. Though this is not the only reason I love the job. Contemporary art, especially, is so fascinating because it raises questions about things that matter, and the best art offers not simple answers but ways of thinking about the big questions (and yes, this is what archaeology should do too – who else but artists, philosophers and archaeologists can ask – Where do we come from and what has brought us to where we are now?).

This year we have been working with Dennis Oppenheim to get a piece of his at Stanford.

It is part of Dennis's exploration of the interface between architecture and sculpture. It is called "Device to root out evil". It looks like an inverted New England church.

We thought it would be a wonderful way to provoke some discussion – at the minimum! It is what art does so well. We thought that a university like Stanford should be the place where such discussion can happen – creatively, freely. And to start the ball rolling we invited Stanford's Dean of Religious Life, Scotty McLennan, to comment. He said he liked it as art, but that the world views of art and religion don't mix, and "Device" would cause a lot of anxiety to different religious groups on campus because of what it seems to be saying.

We took the project to Stanford's President John Hennessy and he decided to cancel on the grounds that the cost of the project outweighed its benefits.

Dennis issued a press release last week giving his reactions. And today it reached the front page of the Stanford Daily.

He joked that the title of the cancelled Stanford sculpture, Device to Root Out Evil, which caused him

trouble with the University, has grown ironically appropriate.

“It really did root out evil in a strange, circuitous way,” Oppenheim mused. “The President and others have conservative views and are afraid of a work of art, and now we know about it. It really worked.”

Contemporary art is no stranger to controversy [Link]. What I think we are witnessing here too is how artifacts – artistic, architectural, archaeological – elicit reaction because of the way their materiality makes all sorts of connections, reaching into all sorts of issues through the way things engage people.

The aura of the Parthenon marbles, there in the gallery in London – far more than any statement or image could ever convey – far more provocative.

And particularly when things are monumental (which is not the same as big). Archaeologists have always been interested in the way monuments work on people.

And it’s not that an image or artifact is worth a thousand words – their matter works quite differently, cutting across words – not at all a substitute – [Link on the archaeological witness].

Active materiality.