



stand together



yet not too near together

Stand together yet not too near together

Journal

Why so tall?

When he saw the first sculpture assembled, Michel commented, "You've made a six metre high sculpture but people look downwards to the ground!". He's right. Six big river stones are held by long vertical wires, but they hover fifteen centimetres from the ground, and that's where your eyes and your ears go to observe their movements and sounds. At this stage you could see the great height as redundant. Declan, who was helping me, was thinking about the height too "Why not three metres?" He paused, "Four metres, or even five... but six!" We laughed about it, but it wasn't easy to mount the three structures and after the first day we had to abandon my proposed method for assembling them. We had a good scaffolding, the right height and I had made a temporary wooden structure which would support the steel uprights while we attached the top. Consisting entirely of triangles of steel tubes the whole structure would then be stable. But we couldn't do it. We needed to fit the six metal prongs of the top into the ends of the long tubes at the same time, but it was impossible to reach out far enough from the scaffolding to manipulate them.

The idea for six metres was something spiritual. Not in a religious or mystical sense, but in the sense of creating a different home for the being, for the spirit, that goes beyond everyday life, that references a different time scale and invites you in. Something that bypasses or slows down the numerous practical thoughts and feelings circulating inside you. So the six metres means that the stones move at half the speed that they would if it were three metres. Their collisions are inevitable but gentle and their movements continue for longer than you expect, as though controlled by an invisible force, like the flow of water. But I'm not really sure that spiritual is the right word. Maybe transcendent, or something simpler, like intense.

On day two we tried another approach. We laid the uprights on the ground and attached the top and bottom with bolts. Then from the high scaffolding we attached a rope to the top of the sculpture which was still lying on the ground, and pulled it up with a block and tackle. Meanwhile we placed small trolleys under the base so that it could easily roll towards the scaffolding as the sculpture took up its vertical position. Plan B worked. By the end of day two we had attached the six stones and the first of the three sculptures was complete.

I have often used these three elemental materials in my work - mineral stone, vegetable wood and industrial steel. But the provenance is particular. First, the stones, dark grey with white stripes going through them, are from a river bed in Haute-Savoie near where my son lives. The stripes are irregular and sometimes cross over each other making it difficult to imagine what geological processes have formed them so long ago. The wood for the second sculpture comes from dead elm trees that we cut down in front of our house in Burgundy. They bear signs of the disease that killed them, worm tracks that trace paths between the bark and the wood, destroying the layer that enables the sap to rise, but leaving the wood itself intact. The third material, steel, makes the sounds of the final sculpture and also the supporting chassis of all three. I have no idea where it comes from but it tells a different story. For the sounds, uniform steel bars that I haven't reworked in any way except for drilling a hole in each to insert a wire to suspend it. For the support structures, square section tube. Much steel is recycled now and mine may have already been used in unknown ways. I often think of my father when I use steel because he worked for half of his life as a scientist in the steel industry. Sometimes he would arrive home with surplus products that he had been researching - light weight steel girders that he repurposed to make a fence for the paddock for my sister's horse, or, another time, stainless steel tubes that had been destined for the control rods of a nuclear power station, but for some reason had been deemed unsuitable. They turned out to be totally suitable to make a rack for my mother's shoes.



Stone, steel and wood is heavy stuff. After taking the second van load of all this to the barn where we were working Declan ventured to suggest that I turn my hand to water-colours. I smiled and told him that I had a wood-working machine that I wanted to pass on because it was too heavy at 200kg to get up the stairs to my first-floor workshop but I would be very happy to help him transport it to his workshop.

Although all three sculptures have identical frames and consist of matter suspended on wires, allowing the separate elements to swing into each other to make sounds. Within that structure the distribution of matter is very different. The mass of the stones is concentrated very near to the ground in a circle even though everything in the structure is a triangle. Above them the sculpture seems empty. The sound of their collisions is matt and abrupt without a clear frequency, but their irregular forms mean that sometimes they rub against each other making more of a rolling rhythm rather than a collision. This sort of motion can also be coaxed out of them by hand.

The steel bars by contrast, whose total mass is similar to the stones, are spread out over the full height of the sculpture. Their form lends itself to much longer vibrations than the stones, but their fundamental frequency is well below the threshold of human hearing. What we do hear is a very rich mix of overtones reminiscent of the cymbals of a jazz drum kit. Approaching, so that the ear is very near, we are able to separate some of the lower frequencies and to perceive different harmonics emerging from different parts of the bar, from above and below. Like the stones, although their movements have the regularity of a pendulum, their collisions are aleatoric. Watching them it is difficult to predict whether they will hit each other or just miss, and each time that they do collide it adds another aleatoric element to the pendular motion. The twelve bars are grouped in pairs, standing together with six centimetres between and then a space of thirty centimetres to the next pair.

The three branches of elm wood are the only element that spreads out beyond the frame of the sculptures because they are held horizontally rather than vertically. The two-wire-suspension of each makes their movements more complex yet they can never touch each other directly to make a sound. They are sounded by the actions of the three shorter and thicker sections of trunk that are hanging vertically, each of which is arranged so that it can tap against any or all of the three horizontal branches. Sometimes clear tones emerge, sometimes the sound is nearer to the mattness of the stone. Their matter is much less dense than the stones and the steel, they resemble the keys of a xylophone, but like the steel the elm branches are so long that the ear can't hear their fundamental frequency. Three different matters, arranged in three different forms. Together they create a rich mixture of sounds and movements.

Add to this the closeness of a human body. A body that is less than a third of the height of the sculptures and a little less than the weight of the six stones. Now I am imagining the presence of Anna, the dancer who I am planning to work with on this project. What happens when this body stands close to the sculptures but not too close? When body and sculptures are motionless? When the body moves its limbs or when the whole body enters inside the sculpture? Or when the body responds to the sounds that the sculptures are making? More specifically, the body of a dancer. Do the movements of sculptures and dancer echo each other? Can the sculpture respond to the dancer? What is the relationship between four moving beings, three inanimate and one living? And what happens when nothing happens? When we allow ourselves to simply feel the presence of these four beings? My body and the gestures it has already made with the sculptures help me imagine, but I take it no further because Anna will have her own imagination which I will learn more about later.



These were the questions in my mind when I started conceiving the project. That's why I left space inside and in between. That's why I tried to make the sculptures move and sound sensitively, knowing that I could rely on the reciprocal sensitivity of the body to whom I entrusted them. That's why I borrowed a line from Kahlil Gibran's poem "On Marriage" for the title of the project.

Day three went smoothly, we had established the system and the second and third tall sculptures were up and functioning by the end of the day. Declan gathered the twelve steel bars of the second sculpture in his arms, pulling them close together, then released them so they swung outwards and back in again, reminding me of a jellyfish. He was changing his tune now, "I think you should think of twelve metres, the six metres is what makes them special, but twelve would be even better." I was pleased to have his approval and we slid into a jokey discussion about how much money they could sell for if I found the suitable client, whether public, corporate or private.

But it was the third piece, the one made with the long branches of dead elm trees, that was the most different from my previous pieces and that I was most pleased to see coming into existence for the first time. The branches cantilever almost two metres outside the frame of the sculpture but in the centre the form is dense and the three shorter trunks swing vertically to percuss against the others.

Declan liked the piece. "My daughters could dance with this one, Will. They are both good dancers. Or if you like, I could do some dad-dancing with it."

Michel was coming round too. Over one of his own artisanal beers I told him that I thought some churches would be suitable for installing these pieces because of their height, but there are often too many seats that fill the space. "You can easily move the chairs these days", he said, "because no-one goes there anyway, so no-one would mind. They only go there for baptisms, marriages and funerals and the local priest has 42 other churches that he is responsible for". I said he had been right to point out the enigma of making a six metre high piece so that people could look down at the ground. "Yes, but I see now that it's an ensemble and they work together."

That's what I started investigating on day four. I wanted to take photos and make videos to start showing the project to other people, which I did, but I also wanted to start to get to know the three beings that I had created and to find out how they could live together. Until now they had existed only in my head and as their separate elements in my workshop, where I don't have the space to put them together. Now, at last they are alive.



There was light rain outside, which you can hear as a quiet hiss in the videos I made. Mainly I concentrated on one sculpture at a time. I had to remind myself that they are not musical instruments and I mustn't try to express myself as a musician playing them. My role at this point was to explore different ways to set them in motion and then to stand back and give them space to make their own music. I've learnt this many times from previous sound sculptures I've made but still I sometimes find myself not listening enough. I make an action and then, rather than intensely listening to the result of my action I start thinking immediately of the next action I will take. It's the thought process of a musician. Even though these three beings need my help to move and to make sounds, I want them to be independent, and I want them to transcend what I had imagined while creating them.

I explore the spaces created inside them and around them. Is there enough room for Anna? I push the stones with my hand while crouching next to them. Then I walk through the stone circle and see how the stones feel against my calf and shin. I gather the steel bars in one bunch as Declan did on day two. I release them and observe how they revert to being pairs that touch just each other and rarely touch the others of the group. Other actions will produce different relations but I don't try this yet. With the elm branch sculpture I stay outside it but move each piece in turn, watching and listening to how it interacts with the whole. But I am preoccupied with how my video will look and sound. To meet my sculptures at a deeper level I need to spend time with them when I'm not also trying to take photos and videos. It's much the same as spending time with people really. If you are taking selfies you may not have such a close relationship.

Michel tells me he spent some time the previous evening playing with the sculptures on his own. He likes them and he proposes that I leave them in place for a few weeks so I can invite interested professionals to come and discover them. He points out a technical problem with the wood pieces sometimes hitting the metal frame that makes an unwanted sound. Later on he proposes to integrate them into a social event that he and Cécilia organise at the chateau every November, *Faites de la soupe*. I like this idea. It will be the first opportunity for my new family to meet a wider public.

I return to my thoughts on spirituality. It's something to do with finding beauty in the every day and in the ordinary. What could be more ordinary than a few stones bashing into each other? What could be more ordinary than three guys having a joke about the folly of loading hundreds of kilos of rocks and metal into a van and driving them to a barn twenty kilometres away? Yet it gives me a beautiful feeling, and it does somehow transform into something that I call spiritual, into something that I want to share with other people who recognise something of themselves in it too.

On day five I take some friends to see it. We talk about the height again. I explain that I wanted to make the three sculptures as tall as I could manage while still making them demountable and portable, that part of that equation was the standard six metre length that industrial steel is sold in, and also the maximum that I could manage to transport in my own vehicle without hiring a lorry and a driver. Very practical limits. I explain too about spirituality and contemplation that I believe will be engendered by the slow movements. We talk about suitable spaces. We look upwards and agree that the structures are lost against the beautiful carpentry of the barn's roof structure, how they need a minimalist white space or the vertical space of certain less elaborate churches.



One of the stones is beginning to detach itself from the double wire loop that is holding it so I try to do some quick maintenance. But I make it worse rather than better. Nick wonders if I could have drilled through the middle of the stone and held it with a single wire and I recount a conversation I had had with Declan on the same subject. I wanted to keep the integrity of the stone. I had already taken it away from its natural environment and I felt it would be disrespectful and violent to attack it with a percussion drill. I wanted to cradle it not drill it. I say it in French because it sounded sweet : *je voulais le bercer plutôt que le percer*. The similarity of the two verbs makes it seem like a natural thing to contrast cradling with drilling. Maybe I can find a route to spirituality in this sensitive approach to matter; accepting that a river-shaped stone already has a strong personality that I risk destroying if I treat it just as inert material. My wife, Jane, points out that I have already drilled the elm wood of the third sculpture and the steel bars of the second. She's right, but the stones somehow feel different. I'm not sure why, but they seem to be the ones that most need cradling.

There is another friend present, a second Jane, and she is watching the movements of the metal bars of the second sculpture. Ten minutes after being touched, they are still moving, each pair in a slow elliptical dance where they sometimes touch. There is also a weak magnetism between them which modifies their movements. Jane is almost mesmerised.

A month ago I had a conversation with another friend, Jan, around an installation called *Follow the golden thread*, which I had installed as part of a temporary exhibition in his garden. He told me how it had been appreciated by children as much as by adults. I then started talking about the two different sides of many of my works. On the one hand the playful, sensory exploration of material, the fun of interacting with them physically; on the other hand the contemplative, spiritual side which I have often considered deeper. Yet I have sometimes felt uneasy in judging contemplative as being deeper than playful. What does deeper actually mean when we use it like that? Better? Superior? I need to be careful.

"But those are the same" said Jan, "Children's play is one of the most spiritual things there is. They are so in the moment, they create their own world and think of nothing else." I realise immediately that I agree with him. They aren't exactly the same of course, and there are some aspects of spirituality that aren't playful, but the point is that I had no need to separate the two sides. In this moment they had become one. In trying to explain my work, I had invented a dichotomy that doesn't exist. The installation itself was unified in a way that my analysis wasn't. It's a reminder that although verbal language can help appreciate art it can't completely explain it and we must always make sure that it is given the chance to speak for itself. If we do, we are more likely to approach the essential.

On day six I continue exploring. I start by re-attaching the stone, whose cradling wires had worked loose. Then I play. For two hours I immerse myself in the sounds and movements of the sculptures. Yes, I look down, but I look up too, at the top of the sculpture and beyond. I contemplate.

There's another, simpler answer to my question, "Why so tall?". It's just that I love the feeling that tall things give me. It's similar to how I feel when I climb a mountain and reach a point that is higher than everything I can see around me, it's another form of transcendence, going beyond, not defying gravity but pushing it to its limit. Like the feeling that develops when I've walked in the mountains for a week and haven't seen or heard a car or any other motor vehicle for all that time. Not even an aeroplane in the distance. Or when I watch a family of red kites (the avian ones) circling and rising on thermals, this time actually defying gravity, seemingly effortlessly. Or swifts, flying so much higher than other birds, screaming in ecstasy.

Will Menter, Novembre 2025

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The title of the project, Stand together yet not too near together, is from Kahlil Gibran's poem, *On Marriage*.



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internet video links

installation at Lusigny-sur-Ouche



<https://vimeo.com/1130643568>

photos and sounds



<https://vimeo.com/1132799008>

music created with sounds of the installation



<https://vimeo.com/1137414416>