

ANTONY GORMLEY

ANGEL OF THE NORTH, 1998

Is it possible to make a work with purpose in a time that demands doubt? I wanted to make an object that would be a focus of hope at a painful time of transition for the people of the North East, abandoned in the gap between the industrial and the information ages.

The work is made of Corten steel, weighs 200 tonnes and has 500 tonnes of concrete foundations. The mound near the A1 motorway which was the designated site of the sculpture was made after the closure of the Lower Tyne Colliery, out of the destroyed remains of the pithead baths. It is a tumulus marking the end of the era of coal mining in Britain.

The ANGEL resists our post-industrial amnesia and bears witness to the hundreds and thousands of colliery workers who had spent the last three hundred years mining coal beneath the surface. The scale of the sculpture was essential given its site in a valley that is a mile and a half a mile wide, and with an audience that was travelling past on the motorway at an average speed of 60 miles an hour.

The exo-skeleton seemed the best solution for transforming a self-supporting fibreglass and lead structure into an object 10 times life-size, or 20 metres high. It uses the Tyneside engineering vernacular of ships and the Tyne Bridge, to produce a strong structure that could withstand the prevailing south-easterly winds. This has the added advantage of giving the form a strong surface articulation that deals equally well with volume and light.

We made a series of models to work out how this was going to work: the challenge was to transfer a rib structure that radiates from a central axis in the bodyform onto the wings, and the solution was to have an increasing distance between the ribs, suggesting a broadcasting of energy. The work stands, without a spotlight or a plinth, day and night, in wind, rain and shine and has many friends. It is a huge inspiration to me that the Angel is rarely alone in daylight hours, and as with much of my work, it is given a great deal through the presence of those that visit it.
