

# EARTHLY HOMAGE

The rugged terrain of Cappadocia, Turkey, is the site for the Australian artist Andrew Rogers's most ambitious series of earthworks.

BY DAVID EBONY

JUST TWO ROADS LEAD TO Andrew Rogers's vast earthwork compound, "Time and Space," in Cappadocia, in central Turkey. Spread across an approximately 2-mile-square tract of arid, windswept mountainous terrain nearly devoid of people and trees, the complex (2007-09) of eight sprawling rock installations, or geoglyphs, constitutes a government-sanctioned sculpture park. Lurching along pothole-riddled, guardrail-free precipices with frequent 45-degree inclines, the trip there in one of the local jeeplike taxis can be a harrowing and spine-pounding ordeal. A less treacherous and slightly better paved gravel road connects the site to the ancient villages of Göreme, Avanos and Ürgüp, located in a valley about 10 miles away. This route, however, passes directly through the towns' principal landfill, a dump inhabited by packs of large, wild Anatolian dogs that chase vehicles with a howling ferocity for quite some distance before they finally tucker out and pull away, panting. Fears of a flat tire grip passengers for much of the ride.

As you approach the eponymous *Time and Space*, the complex's key component, which the Australian artist and a team of laborers completed last May, mere physical concerns evaporate. Above you is an arrangement of a dozen 18-foot-tall, rough-hewn basalt slabs, each weighing more than 15

tons, erected on a cliff in an attenuated oval configuration like a Turkish Stonehenge. Hauled to the site by truck from a quarry hundreds of miles away, the towering monoliths, positioned at intervals based on the Fibonacci sequence, are spaced closest together along the steep rocky ledge. Set farthest from the edge, the most isolated element suggests a Mayan stele, as it bears on both sides bas-reliefs that Rogers carved into the stone. These shallow, rectangular compositions of sinuous biomorphic and geometric shapes echo the designs of other monumental works in "Time and Space." Capped by 23-carat gold leaf, the monolith serves as a daytime beacon, reflecting the sun's rays for many miles around.

Across the valley, *Predicting the Past*, a post-and-lintel construction made of three more giant basalt slabs, punctuates a comparably dramatic outcropping. Despite its enormity, the primal structure is welcoming as a simple gateway, a portal to the other six installations, which stretch across the distant hills as far as the eye can see. Adopting a Land art idiom that recalls seminal works like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Michael Heizer's *Complex I* (1972-74), both located in America's western deserts, Rogers aims to create a place for a similarly awestruck and transcendental meditation on the

Left, Andrew Rogers: *Time and Space*, 2009, 12 18-foot-tall basalt slabs, one (on right) carved with reliefs and topped with gold leaf. All earthworks in Cappadocia, Turkey.

Opposite top, *Grind*, 2009, rock walls, approx. 4 by 330 by 330 feet.

Opposite bottom, *Rhythms of Life*, 2009, rock walls, approx. 4 by 330 by 295 feet.



environment. Indeed, it is difficult to resist being swept up in a sense of wonder inspired by the majestic natural surroundings. There are breathtaking views of the rugged landscape all around, encompassing the history- and mythology-steeped valleys of Cappadocia, home to some of the world's earliest civilizations. One is struck, too, by a sense of the fleetingness of time and human existence conveyed by the artist's hybrid ancient-modern architectonic forms.

Rogers has produced 11 other earthworks around the world in the past decade, in China, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Israel, Slovakia, Iceland, Chile, Bolivia, the U.S. and Australia. Akin to earlier rock sculptures and earthworks by artists such as Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, these pieces are destined to be reclaimed by the land over time. Before they are, he documents them extensively with photographs and videotapes of the works in progress, most of them shot by the veteran Australian documentary filmmaker Michael Dillon.<sup>1</sup>

Except for the basalt monoliths of *Predicting the Past and Time and Space*, which are secured in the ground with mortar, Rogers exclusively uses materials found on the site. Allowing only minimal environmental impact, the artist and his team carefully pile small- and medium-sized rocks into walls averaging about waist-high. Like the earlier earth artists, Rogers expects his installations to succumb to the elements. He was surprised recently, though, when revisiting the geoglyphs in Bolivia that he executed in 2005. The local residents had been maintaining the pieces since then, restoring the rock walls that had fallen and keeping the overall forms intact, with the hope of attracting tourists to the site.

## THE SITE'S IMPORTANCE IN ANTIQUITY, AND THE RESIDUE OF HISTORY EMBODIED IN THE STONES THEMSELVES ARE FACTORED INTO ROGERS'S GEOGLYPHS.

A LARGELY SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST based in Melbourne, Rogers abandoned a successful career as a financier over 15 years ago to devote himself to artistic pursuits. He started out as a painter, but soon turned to making bronze sculpture and eventually installations on an increasingly grand scale. Working outside the art-world mainstream, he nevertheless garnered some recognition early on for monumental abstract bronzes, and received several commissions for public works. One of these, *Rhythms of Life* (1996), an approximately 8-foot-tall sculpture, features a sphere fixed to a pointed and curving totem, hinting at male and female symbols, which are encircled by a tall, irregular metal band of varying width that is shaped into a fluid line suggestive of sensuous movement.

Installed in front of Melbourne's Victorian Arts Centre, the bronze was well received and led to a number of subsequent casts of the same work commissioned for public spaces in Jerusalem, Dallas and Istanbul. The composition unabashedly harks back to the idealized Space Age look of much abstract sculpture of the 1950s and '60s. Embracing a not dissimilar sense of idealism, as well as a cavalier attitude toward violating the taboo against making a potentially anachronistic sculptural statement, Rogers adopted the composition as a kind of logo. It recurs throughout his oeuvre, including the earthworks, each of which contains a rock-wall transposition of the device. Rogers titled his entire global land art series "Rhythms of Life" to underscore his aim of conveying a sense of constant flux and movement, within society as well as in the natural environment.

Among other early endeavors, Rogers fulfilled several commissions for bronze memorials, beginning with *Pillars of Witness* (1999), created for the Holocaust Research Center in Melbourne. The research for this and several subsequent commissions allowed Rogers to explore his own Jewish heritage. His family, fleeing intolerance in Poland, immigrated to Australia in the early years of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

While working on sculptural projects that address historical and social issues, Rogers realized the importance of engaging the community with his art to achieve a meaning and vitality beyond mere static objecthood. An opportunity arose while he was an artist-in-residence at Haifa's Technion University in 1999. Invited by local officials to create a monumental sculpture in the middle of the Arava Desert, Rogers, with the help of assistants, produced his first geoglyph, *To Life (Chai)*, a rock formation in the shape of the Hebrew emblem celebrating life. Eventually, he created four geoglyphs on the site, including a version of *Rhythms of Life*, imaginatively transformed from sculpture to drawing and finally a network of meandering stone walls. The overall design becomes visible only from a substantial height and distance. The environmental splendor of the site, its importance in antiquity, and the residue of history embodied in the stones themselves are all factored into Rogers's geoglyphs.

THE PROJECTS GREW LARGER and more elaborate after Rogers enlisted the help of two young Israeli architects, Tidah Beca and Golan Levi, who have supervised the construction of most of his earthworks around the world. "Space and Time," the largest complex, is the culmination of this ambitious global undertaking. Rogers spent two years negotiating with local Turkish authorities to accept his initial proposal for a pair of earthworks; he gathered a formidable group of community leaders, educators and art experts to back the plan. In this regard, the effort recalls the practice of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, in which the negotiating process and team effort required to get the work green-lighted become part of the art. Certainly, Rogers's business acumen served him well here in maneuvering through delicate negotiations and in organizing hundreds of workers, overseers, translators, and transportation and food providers. Without the support of laborers, craftsmen, education leaders, and political and religious advisors, an elaborate undertaking such as this—financed by private donors, including the artist, public funds from the national and local government, and grants from several Turkish corporations—could never be realized.

On the site in Cappadocia, when I visited last May, progress was in full swing, with about 100 workers hurrying to complete "Space and Time" on deadline for the project's inauguration ceremony the following week. Rogers supervised the proceedings with graceful but frenetic energy, hopping in and out of jeeps and hot-air balloons, cell phone in one hand, walkie-talkie in the other. Just as diligently, however, he would join the bucket brigade, passing heavy rocks from one person to another lined up the hillside to the geoglyph sites that lacked road access.

The beginning of each new project and the inauguration of the completed work are always marked by colorful public ceremonies on the site, featuring local musicians and dancers who specialize in ancient rituals, and are presided over by the area's spiritual leader. The only exception to the kind of communal collaboration characteristic of his work occurred in China, where Rogers created three geoglyphs in the Gobi Desert. He found the bureaucracy there exceptionally daunting and ended up accepting the government's offer to use a 1,000-man army unit to construct the earthworks rather than employ the remote region's inhabitants. Rogers now admits that he regrets the decision, since it runs counter to the project's spirit and trajectory.<sup>3</sup>

In Cappadocia, friction among various ethnic groups gener-



Above left, close-up of the Döner Kümbet tomb, 1276, with date palm relief, outside Kayseri, Turkey. Top right, workers (including the artist, at center) passing rocks up a hill on the "Time and Space" site in Turkey. Bottom right, *Sustenance*, 2009, rock walls, approx. 3 by 330 by 330 feet.



ated intermittent tension on the site. While the Israeli architects Beca and Levi felt no animosity from Muslims, there were deep divisions among Turks, Kurds, Armenians and Gypsies, or Roma, who, at first, refused to work together, with some ethnic groups working only on certain areas of the site where they would not be in proximity to the others. Over time, the friction subsided, and at lunch break, all the laborers seemed to set aside differences to gather for the meal provided each day. The biggest controversy Rogers provoked in Turkey was caused by his insistence that male and female workers receive equal wages, a policy that caused outrage among some of the men, a number of whom walked off the job.

A key issue for Rogers was determining the designs for the geoglyphs. He consulted with local historians and artists to choose images that would meaningfully resonate with the indigenous community. In Cappadocia, he prepared the drawings for the geoglyphs in consultation with Halis Yenipinar, director of the Nevşehir Museum, one of the foremost art institutions in the area. After completing the first installation, a *Rhythms of Life* variation, Rogers created *The Gift*, an approximately 200-by-200-foot rock outline of a stylized horse that adorns the side of a sheer hill. The work is based on a 6,000-year-old carving in the museum's collection. For thousands of years, from the time of the Hittites, Sumerians and later nomadic inhabitants of the region, Cappadocia was known as a land of horses. While *The Gift* would be regarded as an utterly conventional design in Western quarters, it made a splash with the local populace, and has become a featured destination for the hot-air tourist balloons that launch in large numbers from Göreme and nearby centers. Grasping the site's potential as a major tourist attraction, the Turkish government eventually invited Rogers to expand the

Cappadocia project, permitting him to create six more geoglyphs in the area. It also offered him other sites in the country for earthworks, a proposal the artist is currently considering.

Among the highlights of "Space and Time" are two more works that allude to local ancient history, *Sustenance* and *Grind*, both 330 by 330 feet. A fanciful image of a date palm, whose abstracted stone-wall "fronds" drape over the sides of one of the steepest hills, *Sustenance* is based on a relief on the tomb of a 13th-century Seljuk princess located outside Kayseri, the province's largest city. *Grind*, the most striking of all the geoglyphs for me—perhaps because I was able to spend considerable time examining it from the vantage point of a hot-air

balloon, consists of a dynamic arrangement of simple stonewall circles inspired by ancient millstones from Göreme, which today are sometimes used as weighty doors that roll in front of the circular openings of Cappadocia's ubiquitous and still-inhabited cave dwellings. An austere design, the earthwork evokes classic Land art pieces by Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Morris. From the ground, *Grind*, with its gently curving walls and quiet incline up the hill, also calls to mind works by Richard Serra, whose enclosing steel walls invite a prolonged and contemplative passage. Rogers punctuated the piece by embedding in one of the walls an ancient millstone that was found in a nearby gully. The earth-hugging yet elegant circular forms work in concert with the soaring monoliths of *Time and Space*. Such eloquent visual harmonies might attest to a premeditated interaction among the various formal elements in the "Time and Space" complex. When pressed about such a grand scheme, however, Rogers has a stock answer at the ready: "I'm just having a little bit of fun." ◊

**1** A comprehensive exhibition of this documentary material, "Andrew Rogers: Odysseys and Sitings (1998-2008)," curated by Lilly Wei, appeared in New York at White Box, Apr. 8-May 13, 2009. **2** Eleanor Heartney, *Andrew Rogers: Geoglyphs, Rhythms of Life*, Milan, Charta, 2009, p. 14. **3** This and all other comments attributed to Rogers are taken from his conversations with the author, May 2009.