list of works

Richard GRAYSON and Steve WIGG

Triumph, 2012
installation
wet unfiltered terracotta clay on wooden armature
4.6 x 4 x 2.6 m

UniSA | SAMSTAG MUSEUM

Triumph: Richard Grayson and Steve Wigg
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University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001
T 08 8302 0870
E samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au
W unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum

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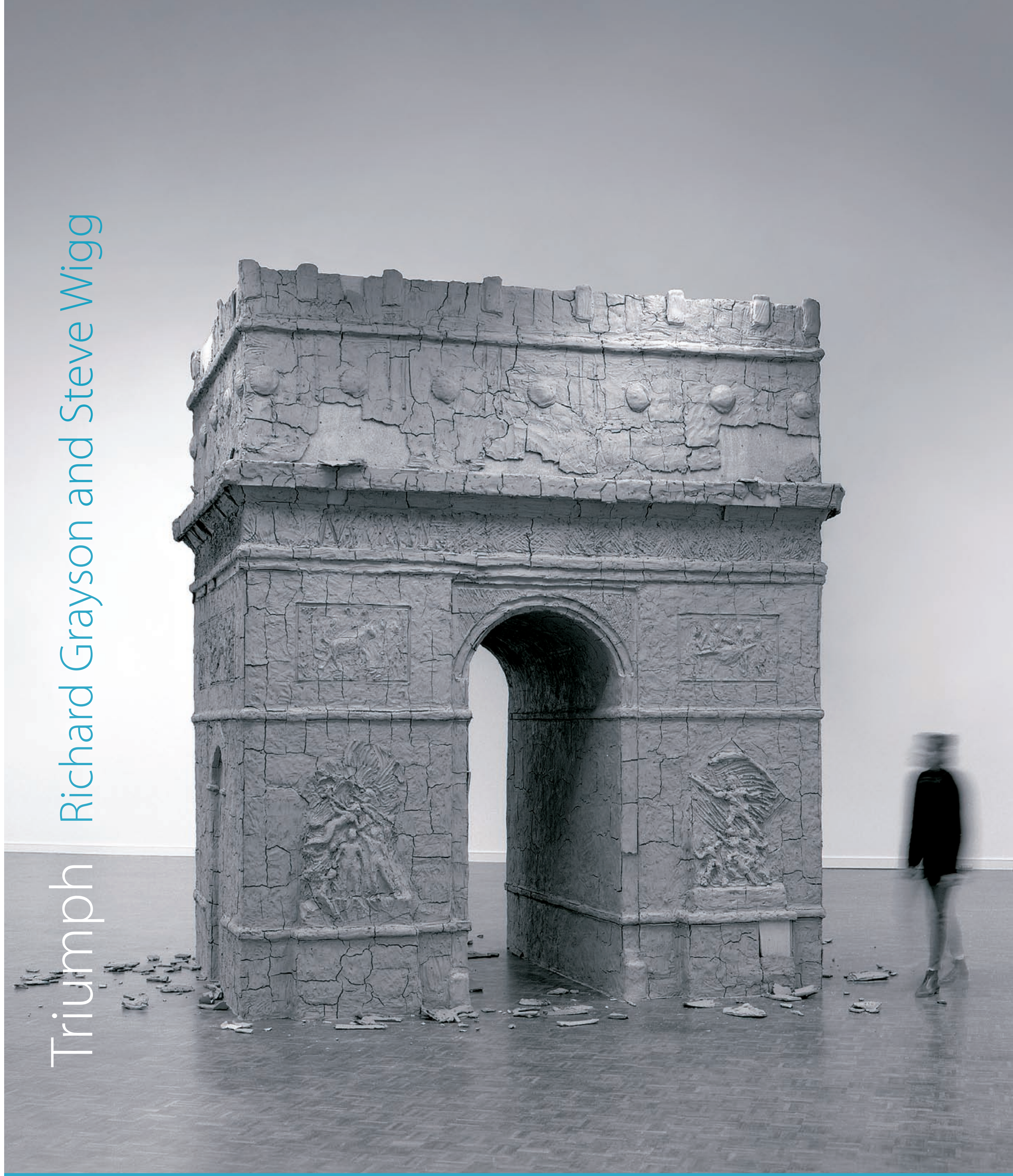
Cover Image: Richard GRAYSON and Steve WIGG, *Triumph*, 1996, installation view, wet unfiltered terracotta clay on wooden armature, 4.5 x 4.5 x 1.7 cm, courtesy Samstag Museum of Art



Triumph

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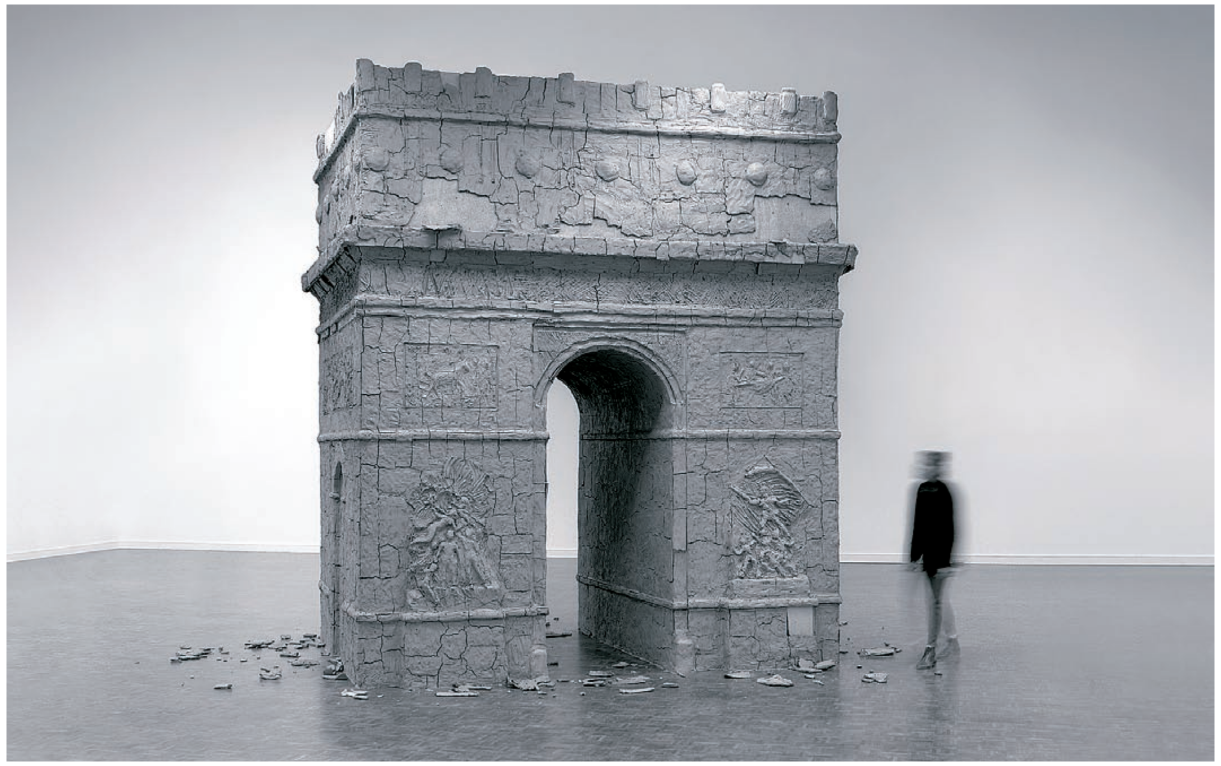

Tardis, Triumph and returns

In an episode of *Doctor Who*, 'The City of Death', first broadcast in 1979, the Tardis materialises in an art gallery in Paris. Two people look at it thoughtfully. The man – John Cleese – turns to the woman and says, 'For me, one of the most curious things about this piece is its wonderful a-functionalism'. The woman – Eleanor Bron – replies, 'Yes, I see what you mean… it has lost all its function… and seen purely as a piece of art, its sublimity of line and colour is curiously counterpointed by the redundant vestiges of its function.' Cleese: 'And since it has no call to be here, the art lies in the fact that it is here.' Then the Doctor and his companions hurtle past, dive inside and the Tardis disappears. The art lovers don't move, but Bron says quietly to herself, 'exquisite… absolutely exquisite'.

Seventeen years after this episode of *Doctor Who*, in 1996, a four metre high Arc de Triomphe made out of wet clay arrived in the large white cube of the Art Museum at the Underdale campus of the University of South Australia. Over its time there its slick clay bulk dried out, paled and flaked, scattering shards and detritus on the floor around it, and revealed an underlying armature of chipboard. Although a repeat visitor could follow the path of the model's dissolution, its construction remained unseen. It was complete on the opening night. The hours and hours of people moving blocks of clay around on wooden pallets, the slapping and shaping of the clay into this form, were hidden and could only be intuited in its mass and material.

Triumph had its genesis in a paperweight. Suzanne Treister had returned to Adelaide from France with a four centimetre high fake-bronze model souvenir of the Arc de Triomphe, which stands in the centre of the Place Charles de Gaulle (originally named Place de l'Étoile) in Paris. The ornament was a compelling object. When you held it on the flat of your hand it was dense, with the strange property of turning the person holding it into a Gulliveresque giant. Over an evening of wine and rambling conversation at a house in Frome Street, it became clear that it was imperative it should be modelled in clay, a hundred times larger than this paperweight. I can't remember why clay, although I can guess: the scale of the object made one aware of the hand that you placed it on, and that the object was originally made by hand. In the recent past, for separate shows organised by Alan Cruickshank, Steve had made video cameras out of cast and modelled body parts of pigs and I had made, (with Suzy's help), twelve wet clay statues of school children in uniform. Steve also had a previous secret life as a ceramicist before the compulsions of contemporary art took over. So clay was in the air. And then the sheer perversity of clay had its attractions. It was profoundly unfashionable, and the idea of all that labour to model something in an impermanent material was very attractive to those who, like myself and Steve, had spent much of their lives involved in the barking logics of performance art.

By making our model a hundred times the size of the original we were making something monumental – something that was very nearly a building – a relationship reinforced by the scale of the central arc in the clay version, which echoes the proportions of an arch in a colonial domestic house and refers to the human body. This bought into play interesting sci-fi slippages between monumental architectures and adobe dwellings, some strange survivor's mimesis on a post-apocalyptic planet. And even at four metres high the clay version was still some twelve times smaller than the original of our original, the fifty metre edifice in Paris. So our gigantic model of the paperweight was a miniature too.

At this point endless mirroring of models and originals generate. The Arc, commissioned by the Emperor Napoleon in 1806 to commemorate his victory at Austerlitz, was modelled on Imperial architectures of Rome; specifically the Arch of Titus built in 82 AD, one of over forty triumphal arches built across the Roman Empire. These became the models for arches spread across time as well as territory, with over twenty triumphal arches built in the last five hundred years from Russia to the Philippines, from Paris to North Korea. It is a sort of Platonic template of Imperial power. Classical architecture generally has come to symbolise those political and civic structures that wish to recall the glory of the imperium of Rome: as in the neo-classical vistas and temples of North Terrace in Adelaide. This function as metonym is underlined through the Arch actually built by Napoleon being itself a model made of wood and painted canvas rather than the stone one we know today. The 'original' wouldn't be finished until after his death. It becomes increasingly difficult to say which Arc ours might be a model of.

ARC DE TRIOMPHE

The Imperium that the architectures on North Terrace represent is not directly that of the Roman or French empires (although the what-if history had the French been the first to colonise Australia can haunt a middle class fascinated with terroir, wine and cooking) but certainly it is that of the Western tradition and by extension Rationalist and Enlightenment histories; it is also those of the British and American empires which have shaped and shadowed Australian politics and culture. At the time that *Triumph* first materialised and decayed, these narratives were losing their absoluteness and becoming contingent and qualified in a Post-Modernity that was paradoxically described and articulated – particularly in the Arts and Academia – nearly entirely through the lens of French and continental Linguistic and Psychoanalytic Philosophy and Theory. A debate and change that now might be seen increasingly to be associated to a past rather than the present.

In 2000 the Art Gallery of South Australia staged the exhibition *Chemistry*, a survey of work in South Australia over the '90s. In the catalogue essay Sarah Thomas used *Triumph* as a symbol for the decade: 'It's the visual memory of this crumbling pile, its abject failure as a (mock) monument, which lingers. A little bit abject, ironic and a bit trans everything. That about sums up the decade wouldn't you say?'

A monument refers to an event seen as significant in the construction of the present to the first audience for the monument – a significant moment that is seen as establishing or securing a new structure and reality. Over time, the monument remains but as the present it addresses fades away, the monument becomes a souvenir of an event removed from us until we reach the point that we have little idea what it is referring to, and the thing itself comes to indicate loss and disappearance. In *Triumph*, with its fast-forward entropy of drying clay, this Ozymandias effect is speeded up. As the poem ('Ozymandias', Shelley) says, '"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" /Nothing beside remains. Round the decay /Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, /The lone and level sands stretch far away'.

Richard Grayson
London, 2012