HOW TO MOVE A MASTERPIECE

When the world's leading artists and galleries want works of art transported, they need more than a man with a van

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In a yard in South London, four men are attempting to move fourteen apparently immovable objects. Ten of these are life-size human figures weighing three quarters of a ton each, which – because of their delicate patina – cannot be touched; the next three, which resemble lethal games of spillikins, consist of hundreds of welded steel spikes that threaten to blind anyone who gets too close; while the final one, made up of large ball-bearings, not only cannot support its own weight, but is still being worked on by a young man with a chisel whose look says, 'Pack this, and you pack me with it'. Add the fact that these are sculptures by Antony Gormley worth tens of thousands of pounds each, and that the place they have to reach in one piece is Brussels, and you have most people's idea of a nightmare. But Ian Edwards, the man in charge, is unfazed: it is, he remarks with understatement worthy of Captain Oates, 'a nice-sized domestic job'.

Ian and his colleagues are employed by Momart, an East London company which is among the world's leading experts in the highly specialised business of transporting art. There is not a prominent gallery, museum or artist you can name that it has not worked for: its institutional clients include the Royal Academy, the National Gallery, Tates Modern and Britain, Buckingham Palace, the Smithsonian in Washington and the Met in New York; its private ones, Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread. Its personnel have installed Hirst's shark in its tank of formaldehyde,

moved the V&A's enormous Raphael cartoons, and taken the RA's entire *Sensation!* exhibition to Berlin and New York. If *The Angel of the North* ever goes south, these are the people who will coax it down the M1.

Not that their customers are always satisfied. When they installed Tracey Emin's bed in the Saatchi Gallery, the artist had a blue fit. 'What we were told to do was set it up roughly, working from a transparency, and then she would come in and do it properly,' explains a former Momart manager. 'The problem was that the guys did it too well, so that it looked like an attempt to reproduce it exactly – and she hit the roof. Apparently if she sets it up it's art, but if someone else sets it up it's not. I wish,' he adds wearily, 'that they'd just left it in boxes.'

Twenty years ago, the art-transport business was a block-and-tackle industry run by glorified furniture movers. Today it is more akin to a science, heavily reliant on state-of-the-art equipment – though you would guess hardly guess this from the outside of Momart's headquarters. The barrack-like building lies in the mean streets of Dalston, neighbouring a taxi garage, and as you climb the soulless stone stairs, the Royal Warrant beside the entryphone seems like an elaborately conceived April Fool.

Inside, however, it is another story. The front door opens into bright, modern, open-plan offices where banks of PCs hum along with the air-conditioning. The table in the reception area takes the form of a giant leatherbound book, and the real books in the case beside it are equally telling: a six-volume monograph on Henry Moore weighs in beside Debrett's *Correct Form*. As for the staff, moving purposefully in grey shirts across grey carpets, they look more like the civil servants of the next millennium than mind-your-back truckies.

There are also many more of them than one might expect – 110 full-time, rising to 150 at the busiest times of year. ('When we're flat out,' I was told, 'you'll see staff on their knees *begging* at the transport desk.')

On the wall, a poster of Rudyard Kipling's *If* offers instant counselling for the overwrought – and its sentiments are well placed, because the people here deal with problems that gallery-goers hovering in hushed rooms cannot begin to conceive of.

'When we moved Damien Hirst's work with the flies to Germany,' remembers Momart's exhibition director Anna Maris, 'the Germans said to us, "Look, we'll supply the flies, don't worry." But when they did, it was deemed that the flies were not big enough to have this great impact – so suddenly we were running around trying to find some big, fat flies to put in the case. In the end we got them as maggots from a bait shop.'

The company began life in the 1970s with a name redolent of the hippie era – Jim Moyes' Compendium of Working Possibilities. Moyes was an out-of-pocket art student employed by West End galleries to paint walls and build plinths, until – 'Marlborough Fine Art had an installation of big, heavy brass panels, and they needed people to carry these things in,' explains Scot Blyth, Momart's former managing director, who spent over 20 years with the company. 'Jim happened to be a member of a rowing club, so he got the eight to come along and help – and it really all started from there.' ('Momart' is a contraction of Moyes's name and that of his first partner, Rees Martin.) Today the company – bought out by its management in 1997 – has a turnover of £10 million.

To begin with, the Compendium relied on old-fashioned methods – 'wooden wedges and rollers'; but it gained a reputation for moving large, complicated sculptures, and for employing more intelligent muscle than its rivals. ('A lot of the people they employ have trained as artists,' says Bridget Brown, an art consultant who is a regular client, 'so they're interested and sympathetic – which makes a big difference.') When the Eighties brought a scientific revolution in art transport, Momart – as it had now been renamed – had the right people to hotwire the bandwagon.

A key figure in the revolution was Gary Thompson, the science adviser at the National Gallery, who realised that there was little point in keeping works in pedantically climate-controlled galleries if they were going to be bumped around and subjected to wildly fluctuating temperatures when they were sent out on loan. Reasoning that the trickiest things in the world to transport were live explosives, Thompson contacted the MoD and asked it for the name of the people that made its bomb casings. With their know-how, a new type of packing case was developed, tailored to the individual weights of paintings and insulated against the coldest conditions.

'The museum world was picking up on the idea of "preventive conservation",' explains Scot Blyth, 'which means looking after things and avoiding restoration – and that coincided with the introduction of air-suspension for vehicles, which was developed for car-transporters. There was also an increasing demand for blockbuster shows: so we started investing in the equipment which the conservators wanted, and as a result museums were prepared to lend things they wouldn't previously have considered – and the whole thing just snowballed.'

There are now over 60 companies in Britain specialising in this kind of work, and no self-respecting canvas-carter is without his own climate-controlled, air-suspension, heavy-duty-tail-lift Fine Art Vehicle. But the scientific advances have not only been in transport. As artists have experimented with new materials, and conceptualism has closed its fingers on the windpipe of the gallery world, firms such as Momart have had to master some extraordinarily arcane media.

'With the Hirst shark, we suddenly had to become experts on shark anatomy – as well as formaldehyde and all the health and safety issues that raises,' says Scot Blyth. In the early days the Momart team had to don dry-suits and clamber into the tank with the shark, but since then a

more sophisticated procedure has been developed which involves filling the tank with water to test it for leaks, lowering the shark into it and positioning it with the aid of heavy-duty fishing line, and adding the formaldehyde (which in fact makes up only 5 per cent of the total solution) before the lid is finally put on. To complicate things further, the room has to be entirely sealed while this work is going on, and the air pumped out through carbon filters, to prevent the formaldehyde fumes being carried around the gallery.

Momart's biggest challenges, though, have been to do with sheer scale: the Richard Serra show at the Saatchi Gallery, consisting of 30-foot pieces weighing fifteen tons each, and the Raphael cartoons, which had to be moved during a refurbishment of the V&A. 'The cartoons were too big to come out of the building – and because of their size and fragility you're dealing with big, heavy steel frames and huge panels of glass, so it was a definite safety issue as well. In the end we built a kind of house for them on wheels so the building work could carry on around them.'

Meanwhile, back in Antony Gormley's yard, Ian Edwards and his team are still struggling like hapless game-show contestants with their impossible tasks. How are they getting on?

The most baffling conundrum – moving ten 700kg figures without touching them – turns out to be the easiest. The first statue has already been lifted by means of a pulley and a yoke fastened around its neck, and placed on a wooden base around which a travelling case is being constructed. Ian Edwards is trimming a wooden shelf to fit around it, which will be cushioned with 'plas' (as shock-absorbent foam is known in the trade). A waistcoated Trotsky lookalike who makes his own monumental sculptures, Ian has been working on Gormley projects for the last six months: 'And these,' he says, with a nod to the figure in its travelling coffin, 'are the easy ones'.

Their toughest assignment for Gormley was to send an exhibition of his work to Japan. 'There were 27 works,' says the artist, 'each individually packed – and the show visited six different sites. The most fragile works were loaves of Mother's Pride disassembled into bites, and it ranged from that to concrete blocks with spaces inside in the shape of my body. That's when you need these people most – when you've got a whole range of objects, each presenting a different problem. They're the best, no question.'

Meanwhile, Dave Hemmings – also a practising artist – has donned a helmet and visor for protection as he deals with his particular problem, the first of the spillikins sculptures. Hanging from a gantry, it looks as dangerous and fragile as a colony of sea-urchins, and its spikes splay out in so many different directions that even to measure it presents a challenge. Dave's mission, should he decide to accept it, is to find a way of clamping it motionless inside a case without subjecting the delicate welds to any undue pressure.

His solution is a system of steel rods running through the piece (or, in Momartspeak, 'pre-cut fillets to go under the internal dimension'). 'Let's put one through the head,' he says, like a medieval torturer warming to his task – though it is far from apparent where the figure's 'head' might be. 'One through the crotch, one through the knees. Is there going to be any lateral movement? Bear in mind that two other bars are going to lock it at 90 degrees.

'We're not engineers,' he adds cheerfully as the rods are screwed into position. 'We make it up as we go along.'

This is not strictly true. Any project of this kind involves a considerable amount of planning, and decisions about the kind of manpower and equipment needed. (Of Momart's full-time staff, 50 are involved in administration, compared to 30 in the transport and

installation team, and 15 each in packing and warehousing.) The solutions sometimes take clients by surprise: ‘There was a fantastic Van Dyck at Althorp,’ says Anna Maris, ‘and the house had a window which had been constructed especially so that the painting could be taken out through it in the event of a fire or an emergency. In the end, though, the simplest thing was just to walk it out through the house.’

Access, particularly to galleries and museums in central London, is a constant headache. ‘You simply cannot get the big vehicles down the back streets,’ says Anna, ‘so quite often you’ll need a smaller one as well, acting as a shuttle. We only have three or four vehicles that can get in under the archway at the V&A; and at the Royal Academy they’ve got cobbles at the back, so we have to lay plywood down so that the works don’t feel the vibrations. Even in quite new buildings like the Barbican it’s difficult.’

Momart has sixteen Fine Art Vehicles built to its own specifications. Other heavy equipment, such as cranes, forklift trucks and scaffolding towers, is hired from specialist companies. This is partly because the range required for different jobs is so enormous, and partly because the maintenance needs to be done by experts. ‘A lot of it’s to do with health and safety,’ Anna explains: ‘you’ve got to be so careful that chains on cranes have been checked and don’t twist.’

Anna’s teams rarely work abroad, unless there is a complicated installation to set up; instead, each consignment is taken over on arrival by a local agent. Momart’s work in turn involves unpacking artefacts sent here from overseas – which is not always as straightforward as it sounds. On one occasion a pair of wooden temple doors which arrived at the Whitechapel Gallery for an Indian sculpture exhibition turned out to be infested with insects; when the case was opened, they took to the air in such numbers that the fumigator had to be called in.

Security is another concern, both because the works involved are often very valuable, and because the teams have access to sensitive areas. 'We have to be very careful not to attract too much attention to ourselves or our vehicles,' says Anna, 'and make sure that our registration numbers are not caught on camera. It can be very difficult. Then you have the emotive side of things – for instance, the Myra Hindley painting at the Royal Academy. Some of our staff said they really didn't want to be involved in that.'

For these reasons, the company's trucks have no identification beyond a small 'MOMART' on the driver's door, and a number on the roof which can be given to police helicopters in an emergency. All are alarmed, and the newest models also have satellite tracking systems. In addition, police checks are made on personnel, the nature of each consignment is disclosed to the minimum number of people, and values are never mentioned on paperwork.

Then there are the external security measures to deal with: since Lockerbie, all drivers delivering to airports have been trained to check for tampering with their loads, and for bombs underneath their vehicles. As for staff dealing with Buckingham Palace, they have to undergo particularly stringent vetting: 'I've been working for the Royal Collection for 14 or 15 years,' says Anna Maris, 'and it still takes me three months to get a pass.'

In Antony Gormley's yard, the Momart team has moved on to the trickiest piece of all: the cluster of ballbearings, which – though it might be mistaken for a break in a galactic game of snooker – is another approximation to a human figure. The young man with the chisel has at last finished his work, and while a colleague readies a hook and pulley, Ian Edwards holds the figure upright. For a moment he looks like a good Samaritan steadying the world's most shambolic Saturday-night drinker.

Because the largest ball bearings – some weighing 15 kilograms – are in the head and torso, the danger is that the comparatively delicate feet and ankles will break off if left to take the strain. For this reason Ian has built a special case with a steel plate across the top, from which the piece can be suspended by a series of loops. As he and his colleague manoeuvre it under their gantry with nerve-wracking deliberation, it seems somehow irreverent to repeat what Antony Gormley has just told me: 'You make these pieces as well as they can be made – but you can always finish them off in the gallery. It's not the end of the world if a bit drops off.'