

WHERE DO IDEAS COME FROM?

Some years ago, in October 1994, I was shopping in Sainsbury's and looking at the cheese on the cheese counter. As I looked at the Swiss cheese – the one with the holes – the thought occurred to me, "I wonder what it would be like if the holes were so big that there was very little cheese?" This talk is really about three things – why such a thought popped into my head, why I thought it was a good idea, and how I pursued it. I've tried to trace the background to the idea and its consequences, both in relationship to things I've made and to things I've seen.

In the early 1990s I was becoming a bit bored with my own work and slightly frustrated. I was looking in various directions to change things. One strategy was to use different materials, another was to explore the possibility of using pre-fabricated or off-the-shelf parts. Almost everything I had made up to this point had involved the fabrication of elements myself. Working with bits off-the-shelf was a formal device to try and put me in a different position. The first image I want to show is a page from a catalogue of bends and elbows in cast-steel pipes. The work that I produced uses these prefabricated elements, linked by other curves rolled from lengths of the same diameter pipe, to make the three separate shapes. These were then skewered together by straight lengths of the same pipe – producing a sculpture that vaguely resembles a toast rack. Without really knowing why, I made the interior space continuous. At the points where a straight section meets a curve, there is a hole and a full junction. If there were a ball inside the sculpture, it could be rolled around anywhere. The sequence of three shapes piled up together built up a rather complex outline both inside and outside, as individual shapes cut in and push out. I was excited by the relationship between the simple process of layering and the complexity of the resulting profile.

These things were tickling around in my head when I was invited to propose a commissioned work for Waiblingen, a small town in southern Germany, near Stuttgart. The invitation was quite open – in part for the site to be determined by myself and for the work to be developed out of a visit to the town. The town museum is housed in a medieval building and turned out to be extremely interesting for reasons I shall try and explain. The basement of the building now houses exhibits. However, when the town first took over the building this appeared to be just a very shallow space. As conversion progressed it turned out that the basement had been used over the past four hundred years as a place to throw household rubbish. During that time it had, inevitably, changed from being a large room to a small one. This midden of household rubbish was cleared but a column left behind, exposing very graphically, in its layers of broken crockery and other bits and pieces, the history of occupation. This device of using sections is continued throughout the museum. On the ground floor, for example, the plaster covering on parts of the wall has been stripped away to reveal the infill in the timber structure. This is pretty extraordinary, as it shows that almost anything that came to hand was used – broken tiles, rocks, building rubble, logs, rolls of turf. So the building itself is also infilled with rubbish. Cutting away reveals medieval building practice. In a room on the first floor there is a model of the timber frame, so the building has within itself a diagram or model of its own making. This is reinforced by the presence of carpenters' marks on the exposed beams in the attic showing the numbering used in assembly of the pre-fabricated timber frame. The museum is something that talks about its own history. The formal devices of sectioning and sampling are continued in the attic in a geological section. Within the collection itself there is a curious group of roof tiles. From time to time when tiles were being made, tile-makers would use the backs of the tiles as a writing surface. There's a big variety to

the marks – doodles, impressions of the hands and feet of babies, cult symbols, pornography, calculations, political slogans etc. Once fired and fitted to the roof, the record remains hidden until turned over, rather like turning over a stone to find what is underneath.

There is a parallel between this collection of hidden and inconsequential mark-making – revealing as it does glimpses of forgotten individuals and their quotidian concerns – and the ways in which sectioning exposes the museum. We can draw these things together. The museum is a museum of local history. Within the museum the cut, the section and the underside are used to expose time and history. Waiblingen itself is a fairly complete medieval town, encircled by a protecting wall. In one sense the only thing that ever happened there was that the town was burnt down in 1634. Obviously lots of other things happen, people are born, people die, fall in love, make money, lose money, argue with their neighbours etc. – the very kinds of thing represented on the backs of the tiles – but in terms of a grand narrative this is what happened in Waiblingen, it was burnt to the ground during the course of the Thirty Years War. The town was completely destroyed except for a few buildings outside of the city wall, of which the museum building is one. In another of the first-floor rooms of the museum there is a solid block of earth, a soil sample taken from within the city wall. About two-thirds of the way up, there is a black line: this is the layer of ash deposited in 1634. It's an evocative display, perhaps made clearer by the way that sectioning has been used through the museum and one's understanding that the museum houses its own history. When the town was rebuilt, it was in the same place but not with the same plan, so what was garden before could become house or street now etc. A second plan is overlaid on the first and a map of the town pre-1634 would fall within the same boundary but not have the same configuration.

This overlapping, and its relationship to the idea of the section, triggered the work that I produced, titled *This Is Not A Story*. Formally, the work is built up by laying several curved shapes on top of each other, and linking them by a grid of straight elements. The sculpture is made from stainless-steel pipe, and as previously, where there is connection between curve and straight, there is a full junction. I was still unsure as to why I was insisting on this but it seemed the logical thing to do. I wanted the space inside to be complete and the sculpture to be, as it were, a case around it. The layering of successive shapes was now starting to have interesting handles onto the complexities of narrative, history, time and location. The title comes from the first line of Diderot's novel, *Jacques the Fatalist*. Whilst Diderot's novel is clearly a story and the sculpture is, equally clearly, not one, the phrase raises the question as to what it is, and introduces ideas of both narrative and truth. The sculpture has two clear 'points of view'. From the front there is considerable foreshortening, the curves all overlap each other, building up a very complex drawing. From the side, the separation of the elements and the grid structure is clear. A part of looking at the sculpture involves putting these two very different perspectives together. Equally, behind the making is the idea of doing something simple – in this case putting one thing on top of another – that generates a significant degree of complexity and that has the potential for meaning. Whilst I was making the work I became so interested in that overlapping, in the way that one thing could lead to another and in the ways in which one sequence was not the whole story, that I went off on a kind of sidetrack. This was to put together a sequence of photographs culled from various sources that linked in different ways one to another. The first image is of a cloud, seen dark against the evening sun, but the second image reveals that it might also be smoke – the image here is of burning stubble. The third image, from a newspaper, shows a similar pall of smoke hanging over the burning city of Dubrovnik.

So a similar configuration has been shifted from the pastoral to the threatening. The foreground of this third image shows a statue with an upraised hand, a gesture that is repeated in the fourth picture, which shows a journalist, who has door-stepped Paul Gascoigne's home, putting up her hand to protect herself from the water thrown by Gascoigne's mum. The water, frozen mid flight, is transmuted into a flock of starlings snapped over a Yorkshire town in the fifth picture. That flock becomes a swarm of bees in the sixth picture and in the seventh the massive crowds swirling around at the funeral of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The eighth and ninth pictures refer allegorically to those that have gone before. The eighth photograph is of the wind, recorded by the blurring of the tree branches as they move during the exposure. The ninth is an image of overlapping tree branches that have grown together in a web or knot. The tenth photograph comes from a window display in Vienna that evidently has not changed in fifty years. The illustrations from a pulp-fiction melodrama are displayed. There are more spaces than illustrations, so the same images recur, but not necessarily in the same sequence. Here the figure in the canoe is preceded by the sea monster, there the figure in the canoe is preceded by the kangaroo. So the same images tell different stories. The eleventh and twelfth images bring the sequence full circle. The eleventh is from one of the Benetton billboards, this one of a burning car with a plume of smoke, and the last is of clouds in a clear blue sky. The sequence runs through a whole range of possibilities, overlaying one thing top of the other without telling one story, but, rather, suggesting connections.

With this sequence in mind, and perhaps in relation to weaving as a metaphor for storytelling, when I thought again of building something by stringing shapes one on top of the other, I realised that, rather than spearing the elements, they could be interwoven. Straight parts would become the warp and curved the weft. Weaving and

basket-making thus became connected to the kinds of constructions I had been putting together. What had started off as a simple and quite formal exploration was developing into a constructive process rich in metaphor.

The resulting work, made in 1993, is titled *What Could Make Me Feel This Way?* – a line from the Smokey Robinson song *My Girl*. Made of steamed and bent beech wood, there are three curved elements linked together around six straight elements. When you make things, it very often happens that when you change how you do it, you carry over features of the original process from one thing to the next. An example would be the moulded sewing welts on plastic shoes. There is no need for them but there is some sort of conservatism at work, which says that this is what shoes look like. I think a somewhat similar process is involved here: the reasons for constructing a tube out of wood are a carry-over from having made two previous pieces in metal. Or else the wooden laths are perhaps too close to basket-making and I wanted to carry over some qualities that seemed important in the steel works – volume to the line for example. Pipe is a very ordinary condition for metal stock. In order to do the same in wood, I needed to build the tube. We are dealing with something that, in my head, is starting to be quite elaborate – a construction that brings with it ideas of depth, sequence, time and narrative. The work had two very different aspects: from the side, the sequence of three curves and their interlocking poles was very evident; from the front, the whole object seemed to be one mass of overlapping material, crowded but also having many in-between spaces. The wooden slats filled the volume like branches in a bush yet at the same time you were aware that this was a construction that was organised. I began to wonder what it would like if there could be universality to the structure, so that, from wherever you looked, the parts were woven together as if there was no ‘side’ view.

In 1994 I was asked to make a proposal for a site in Atlanta, Georgia, in connection with preparations for the 1996 Olympics. The site was close to both the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change and the Carter Memorial Library. The invitation to make a proposal occasioned by an event like the Olympics and the implicit sense of monument within the invitation did lead me to think in particular ways. These were to do with how you would convey or represent optimism and whether it was possible to make a monument. In part because of what I was reading at the time, I was struck by the idea that optimism was connected to freedom via uncertainty or ambiguity, by openness. One of the things that interests me about Martin Luther King, for example, is a sense of hope for a possible future. There are obviously ways in which, historically, monuments have been used as representations of hopes for the future, but more often they are celebrations of the status quo or even manifestations of oppressive regimes. These things were in my mind since, as you no doubt recall, throughout the early 1990s, there were continuously newspaper pictures of monuments being torn down. I wondered how I might produce something that had an aspiration to it without determining a specific future. So my proposal was for a monument to a non-specific future. The combination that existed in *What Could Make Me Feel This Way* of a complex interior and rational construction seemed to be a possible clue. Complexity had a bearing – if I could build something that had an infinite number of ways of being seen then I was starting to build something that had a large number of possibilities attached to it. I didn't get very far with working out how to do it. The presentation to the committee was by means of a group of drawings, one of which I collaged onto a photograph of the site. I used the drawings to try and describe why I might be interested in making such a thing. The first drawings came from the wooden work and played with a weave. However, what I wanted was not a woven shell but something more like three-dimensional knitting. I was clear about a couple of things, about the

idea of density and about the idea of inter-connectedness between the parts. I had some photographs of things that I thought were relevant, of tangles and piles and a small model made from aluminium rings knitted together like chain mail then scrunched up. I wasn't fully convinced that this was what I was after. So, when the committee asked, "Well, how would you do it?" I had to say I didn't really know, but I thought the drawings might help. Naturally I didn't get the commission.

It was shortly after this that I was standing in Sainsbury's looking at the cheese, when the idea occurred to me, "I wonder what it would be like if the holes were so big that there was very little cheese?" The reflection was, I think, something along these lines: if you have a piece of cheese with holes in it and it's a characteristic of that cheese that it has holes, then cheese and holes are the same thing – identified as Swiss cheese. The hole has a relationship of existential identity with the cheese. Absence and presence are equal. I was reminded of my insistence, in the earlier works made from steel tubes, of keeping their insides continuous. This was something of a mental shift for me, as I started to think of the models and drawings as if they represented absence rather than presence. I began making models that were to do with trying to pack as much hole into a given space as possible. My feeling was that I would then make the outside of the hole and that would be what I was looking for. I rejected some of the models, since they looked rather too much like knots and I wasn't making knots but trying to pack something into a space. The model that I chose to develop became the very large wooden work, *Laocoon* (1996), with the wooden ribs defining a continuous tube looped and folded into a single object. Although it is hard to show this photographically, the perceptual experience of looking at the work is one of awareness of the complexity of the structure and, because you can see into the tube section, awareness that the tube is hollow and that it runs through the entire work. There is thus a curious sense of being

able to see a material, physical object and at the same time see a void. Perhaps this is reinforced by the diameter of the tube being close to shoulder width – there is a bodily analogy to the dimension.

So that's what I did with the hole in the cheese.