

EIGHT CONCEPTS, EIGHT QUESTIONS, EIGHT REPLIES.

1. Ensemble – We, us, ours, between, these are all words that occur in my titles along with conjunctions – and, but, if etc. This is a reflection of two ideas, one that the work of art is something that is between the viewer and the world and the second that the work of art, like language, is something that is not yours or mine but shared. So two senses of ‘between’ are employed, that which separates, as a window is between the inside and the outside and that which joins, as a door is between one room and another. The work of art addresses the privacy and intimacy of the individual as separate from the world and at the same time invites community, meaning is something shared. Without there being anything between, there is neither subject nor object.

2. Objects – The world is made of material, of stuff, and is continuous. At the same time we see the world as having both foreground and background, objects separated from their surroundings as we ourselves are also separated. The object is the mirror of myself and is in the world as I am in the world. However, the boundaries are indistinct. When I drive my car my sense extends to a different body, the tool extends my arm and the telescope extends my eye. Reaching for a hammer, I perform an act of incorporation that, in turn, transforms the object I touch. Since we recognize this, after a while the object represents the act, the hammer becomes the hand, as the outline or the handprint or the trace became the person in early mark making. The boundaries of things are also indistinct in that dust, dirt, mess and confusion are the failures of objects as well as the by-products of activity.

3. Sculpture – The first sculpture that I can recall overwhelming me was at the age of six or seven years old, in Sri Lanka (my father was in the military and stationed at Negombo). On a tour around the island we visited the rock-carved Buddhas at

Polonnaruwa. These are gigantic (more so if you are only half-size) and awesomely impressive, in particular for me the reclining figure – perhaps because the head is closer – I was absolutely aware that the figures had been carved out of the rock of the cliff (they form a kind of enclosure) and that therefore there was something that had been taken away, but which was still somehow felt. At the same time the figure was very much there. This early experience of negative space, and of presence and absence, was profound.

4. Fabricator – The sculpture that I make is in most cases, neither carved nor modelled – the two traditional means of making sculpture – but assembled from parts. I am therefore a fabricator and what I make are fabrications. There is a sense, in English, of this being not only to make but also to make things up, to tell stories, which is a reflection of what I do: I make things up. Truth becomes a question to which wholeness is an answer. One difficulty of part-to-part assembly is that the whole is somehow lost and that the work comes to be either about the dialogue of connections or about fragmentation. If the sculpture we see in front of us fails to be whole, then there is a loss, which may be healed by treating the part as a fragment. Accumulation of detail and overall attention to surface are ways of sidestepping this, in that no part is privileged and the utility of individual connections is undermined. For example, many of my works are put together with screws. If there are two screws, then their purpose is clear, if there are a hundred, then that purpose is undermined. The screw passes between two surfaces, and may even project beyond the second, but in any case serves to mark, potentially a front and a back and a direction. But if the screw projects and the resulting surface is studded with points, then that has a meaning beyond that of connecting and the back can become the front.

5. (Social) Dimension – The work of art is in public; meaning is a shared response to what we see, though it is never simple. The work of public art is thus in a double sense before us, unless we think that the public sense of public art is something that is municipal or good for us, like public health or public parks. The social dimension of the work of art lies precisely in its ability to engage our individual attention. The work that I began making in the 1980s, and that I have continued since, was consciously hollow or empty. There were many reasons for this, but one of them was to allow the hollowness of the work to be a site for meaning, as a resonant space. Another was that the material shell was a container or membrane surrounding this site and that materiality was therefore the condition that one passed through in approaching meaning.

6. Ambiguity – 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. One of the things that interests me about Martin Luther King for example is a sense of hope for a possible future. However, that possibility seemed better guarded by ambiguity, than by proscription. I felt that the fundamentalist only wants one sort of future, whereas the libertarian embraces many different possibilities.

7. Malleability – I work in many different materials: steel, wood, paper, cloth, plastic, resin, glass, clay, copper, leather, rubber, stone, aluminium – the list is long. My

overriding interest is in the sense of material as a substance and in the malleability of that substance. Bending, shaping, twisting, joining, weaving, sewing, sticking are some of the ways that I work on the material. A part of the reason for this diversity is to allow the material itself to be an expressive element. Most of the procedures I adopt are ways of putting structure into the material and that, too, is an expressive element, as is the act of work that completes the task. Sculpture allows these elements of material, structure, form and work to unite but it doesn't tell you what to do.

8. Ceramics – Whilst most of the objects I make have a sense of being able to be taken apart, the work in ceramic, by virtue of the final firing process, undergoes an irreversible change of state. There is no straightforward answer as to why I find this interesting, but the interest in making ceramics has a beginning very close to that of the sculpture I started making at the beginning of the 1980s. A group of drawings, produced in New York, in 1978–79 was first followed by an exploration of throwing clay on the wheel as a way of working on the inside and outside of an object at the same time and as a paradigm for a way of working that produced volume around a hollow.

Published in catalogue 'Richard Deacon, Border Traffic', Fondation Marguerite et Aime Maeght, St. Paul de Vence, France 2008.