

Out of Order

Clarrie Wallis

In August 2000 Richard Deacon exhibited *Ummm* a new sculpture at the project space Fig-1' Reminiscent of apple peel that has been casually dropped on the floor, this sculpture represented a significant development in Deacon's distinctive sculptural language and acts as an important precedent for the wooden works included in this exhibition. Each ribbon-like component is made from a compilation of strips of ash that have been meticulously steam-bent into a repertoire of shapes and then screwed together to form evocative loops and curls. In this way structure and form are direct consequences of the process of making and assembly and the basic properties of the material. If shape and surface appear as one, the visibility of the screw heads offers an interesting difference between, or means of transgression of, the inside and the outside of the sculpture. While charting the terrain between space and structure they also emphasise the discrepancy between interior and exterior of the swirls of wood and allow possibilities for revision of inside to outside. If *Ummm* (2000) established new parameters in terms of working with materials, this vocabulary was further developed by *UW84DC* (2001) (You Wait for the Sea) a group of fifteen works that were shown together the following year at Dundee Contemporary Art. Here these combinations or sequences were built into unique forms that anticipate the organisational principles of recent wooden sculptures such as *Out of Order* (2003) and *Slippery When Wet* (2004). Individual elements are again connected together by small tabs that act as an important counterpoint to the twisting and turning forms and introduce an additional sense of rhythm, or musical notation. The work emerges from the repetition of these methods. This process in some respects echoes the artist's procedure for the making of an important series of early drawings *It's Orpheus When There's Singing* (1978-9). In both instances, elements emerge from a rigorous, formal and quite abstract procedure, where the curve and the counter curve are particularly important. As the artist described in his notebooks of the time, each drawing began with a geometric figure: 'a spiral links points on the figure. A series of arcs and curves partially tied to the spiral is sprung off various points inside and outside the figure. The development of these curves builds up a network or ground against which specific shapes are allowed to emerge.'² Thus the process of making allows the work to be autonomous.

Relationships between body and space, between interior and exterior, self and other have preoccupied Deacon throughout his career. Since the late 1970s he has made objects that further explore relations between the literal and the metaphoric. In early sculptures like *For Those Who Have Ears #2* (1983), form is often described not by its shape but by its boundary or edge. It is the interface between interior and exterior that is important, the divide between surface and edge, form and image, the

real and the imagined. If the contours of UW84DC also describe a series of open shapes in space, they articulate Deacon's fascination with the dialectic of inside and outside in a new way. Unlike most of Deacon's earlier work twelve of the fifteen sculptures have open ends -the sequence of curls and spirals does not complete an enclosure.

Made in groups of four or five. Deacon always intended that the sculptures would be seen together in the first instance and that the spaces between each component to be as important as the work themselves. To this end, he rented a separate studio to make this work and was thus able to keep an eye on the whole thing as it developed, creating a work that somehow balances volume and space. With UW84DC, the complex, serpentine forms play with the viewer's sense and experience of nearness and distance. The result is a sea of twisting and turning elements which covers the expanse of the gallery floor, heaving like a seething body of water, seeming to move in all directions at once. It has the effect of both confronting the viewer yet also withdrawing into the distance, of being 'too close together to be seen as separate yet too far apart to be one thing'.³

The installation also explores compositional issues relating to the notion of depth, surface and structure, figure and ground. This interest can in part be traced back to Deacon's writings on a painting by Poussin, *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake* (1648), in which he addresses the relationship between representation and the experience of spatial illusion." His curiosity with looking at how imagery can help explain spatial issues, for example the expression of deep and shallow space within two dimensions has also been probed by his collages of photographs and ink on paper drawings. However UW84DC's twisting and sweeping curves and the dynamic yet carefully controlled structuring of the installation, conjures up a sense of Baroque movement and figuration present in *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*. In this work Poussin achieves a unique and engaging spatial effect where the terror of the sight of the serpent draping the horizontal body provokes a visual energy or disturbance that 'ripples through the rest of the painting'.⁵ Drawn into UW84DC's midst, its writhing forms have something of an equivalent sense of vitality or animation, which encompasses the viewer. Elsewhere, Deacon has suggested that 'being alive and being dead are connected to curved, counter curved and straight'⁶ the energy that abounds in nature. If the open-ended curve creates a sense of motion - of life, the rigid line, in this instance of Poussin's corpse, is its antithesis.

Deacon's attraction to a curvilinear, organic visual language also extends into an interest in the spiral or helix - from the structure of plants and shells to molecular structures of biological systems. He has described how an aerial photograph he took of a spiral formation in the River Tay, Dundee, acted as an important catalyst for this latest body of work. At the time when Deacon was originally developing his lexis of shapes he also made some samples of a square section that were twisted.

This experiment in constructing a torsion bend was the result of a feeling of dissatisfaction with form-making that is the product of bending and folding in one plane and a wish to find a new way of moving around in space. The resultant barley sugar twist has proven to be an important and technically challenging element of this new vocabulary. For example, in the complex dynamics of *Out of Order* (2003), all parts begin and end at the twists. Built piece-meal. Deacon was interested in 'using the twisted core as a start and finish point for the other assemblies of curves'.⁷ Sometime after that he 'realised that the separate elements could be linked together, that there was a way in which the twisted pieces could be joined end to end to form a single line like a loose loop of string, supported by and supporting the loops and curves that spring off them'.⁸

Deacon is particularly interested in the concept of emergence as a property of complex systems. This is in keeping with his fascination with the 'non-shape', the unstable boundary or threshold between formed and unformed, which has been a consistent line of enquiry in recent years.'

He has described how he looked a great deal at images connected with transitional states such as cloud formations as well as the ways in which uncertainty has been represented - for example, the *Deluge Drawings* (c1515-17) by Leonardo da Vinci that depict the effects of whirlwinds, floods, hurricanes and storms. *Studies of Passing Obstacles and Falling into a Pool*, (c 1508-9) is a related drawing that predates the Deluge series. It is the result of many closely observed experiments Leonardo undertook to record fluids in motion. The central sketch shows water falling into a pool while in two carefully drawn studies water ebbs and flows around obstructions inserted at various angles into a swiftly moving stream. Deacon's two-part sculpture *Red Sea Crossing* (2003) has somewhat similar characteristics. Made of oak as opposed to ash, a harder wood to manipulate, there is a greater sense of physical tension in the material. Held in place by lengths of twisted 4x4 inch beams, complex, ribbon like components or waves, loop and double back on themselves. The sense of force, of materials 'being willed into shape', is compounded by its title, reinforcing the impression of a restrained sea.

In this way we can also understand Deacon's sculptures as an exploration into the concept of plasticity. He has consistently referred to himself as a 'fabricator', where the emphasis is on construction and manipulation and the relationship between the physical and the material. Irrespective of the medium - wood or clay - the challenge he sets himself grows from the nature of his materials and their relationship to an evolving form. Since 1999 Deacon has been using the workshop of Niels Dietrich in Cologne to make large-scale hand-built ceramic works. The contrast between these unitary forms and the very open structure of the wooden sculptures is particularly important. In both the choice of materials and method of assembling them, Deacon is intent on denying the inferiority of the sculpted form - or at least to renounce the interior of forms as a source of their significance.

This rejection of the idea of an 'inside' from which meaning and structure originates is further highlighted by the two wooden works, *Individual* (2004) and *Couple* (2004). As the artist explains both 'are organised around a complex, twisted piece of wood which, rather than forming a perimeter, is a core which generates a zone of influence (in one case) and separation (in the other)... What seems to me to be particularly interesting in the rolling, twisting, bending operations with material (is) that the enclosure or volume created [has] nothing to do with weight or mass, it is empty and therefore connected to meaning in a way that is independent of causality or rationality (that is to say that the outside is not caused by the inside)'.¹⁰

Individual is made up of three separate wraps around the twisted core. Self contained, its appearance is suggestive of an organic, molecular structure, in particular the super coiling of DNA, or an immersion heater. With *Couple* the idea of a twisted section or spine as the initiator of possibilities is developed in a way that the two poles are linked by loops, vaguely similar to electrical charges passing across separate wires. Here Deacon is interested in the space or distance flanked by the two lines, which gives the impression of a system of two equal forces that are parallel and in opposite directions. Neither figurative nor abstract, its title reinforces visual and verbal connections that hint at the link between individuals, between self and other - an association, bond or perhaps sexual encounter.

The swerving, radical bends of *Slippery When Wet* - its title a nod to the road sign - further draw attention to Deacon's preoccupation with the non-linear, or to be more precise, the moment of transition between the two states, linear and non-linear.

Enclosed loops, reminiscent of water droplets, spring off from the central twisted backbone - almost as if a cloth has been wrung. Reaching out into the surrounding space, *Slippery When Wet*'s baroque twists and convolutions double back on themselves so that

the forms oscillate between a state of distressed and the fluid. This potential for a sudden change in behaviour, or passage of one form to another is at the heart of Deacon's interest in the interface or threshold through which ordered complexity emerges - where water turns to ice, or molecules self-organise into a living cell. As he explains: 'The classic example is the turbulent flow in certain liquids: there's a point where the liquid is moving too slowly for there to be anything coherent about it and another point where the liquid is moving fast and it's entirely coherent. But there is also a point between these two at which ordered pattern emerges, in the form of vortices, ripples and eddies. This is what interests me, this openness that emerges between those states - it's not to do with generating a pattern from a mathematical programme, it's to do with a point of transition between order and disorder, where different kinds of ordering emerge.'¹¹

In his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*,¹² Giles Deleuze reworks the contrast between the Classical and the Baroque. The Classical is a closed regime of perception, with a central focus and produces an effect of clarity, structured around a

narrative. By contrast, the Baroque is dynamic and polycentric. Rather than providing a static perspective, the 'centre' continually shifts thus resulting in complex spatial conditions. Mario Perniola's account of the Baroque builds on Deleuze. Perniola first sets up a contrast between the secret and the fold. The secret is a simple truth 'the route to which may be long, complicated and tortuous; but once it is sighted, the secret is effaced'." Though Perniola does not make it explicit this could be seen as the mode of truth of the Classical. By contrast the fold is truth conceived not as an unmasking of a secret but of a complex 'unfolding'; 'the drawing out, the unwinding, the expression of something that is tangled, wound up, gathered in.'⁴ It is here that Perniola makes clear the link between the Baroque and the fold. The baroque presents a world of plenitude, of 'folds, complexities and the sinuousness of such a concrete reality'.¹⁵ We have already described the way in which the artist works with his materials, which we can now see as a baroque working with and tracing of the sinuousness of such a concrete reality. Thus Deacon's work can be seen to demonstrate both a Baroque style and the mode of truth, the fold that the Baroque exemplifies. The works are both literally made up of folds, entanglements and metaphorically the folds of Baroque truth. Moreover, the exploration of the literal and metaphoric, of inside and outside, of figure and ground is not the disclosure of their 'secret' as either form and content but the emergence of complex truths that problematises the very notions of form and content. In this way, his interest in complexity theory is understandable as a shared Baroque sensibility. Stuart Kaufmann, a leading scientist working on the laws of complexity, has characterised the nature of complex systems as entities that are 'tangled and interwoven, dancing together in rhythms, cadences, and profusion'.¹⁶ We might find here a suggestion of the characteristic sensibility of Deacon's work too.

1 *Uhhh* was originally presented with a soundtrack prepared by Martin Kreyssig using all the outtakes - the uhms - from a long interview made in 1991.

2 Richard Deacon in *Richard Deacon*, Kunstverein Hannover, 1993, page 129.

3 Richard Deacon in conversation with the author, 4 January 2005.

4 Deacon first wrote about this painting in 1977, see Richard Deacon in *Richard Deacon*, Kunstverein, Hannover, 1993, page 120. In 1997, twenty years later he returns to it in relation to *After Poussin*, a work he realised for the Munster Sculpture Project

5 Richard Deacon in *Skulptur: Projekte in Munster*, 1997; Ed. Klaus Bussmann, Kasper König, Florian Matzner; Verlag Gerd Hatje, page 116.

6 e-mail exchange with the author, 11 February 2005.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Penelope Curtis in *Richard Deacon*, Phaidon 2000, page 178.

10 Richard Deacon *A l'Atelier Brancusi: Passage de la Mer Rouge*, Centre Pompidou 2003.

11 Interview with Ian Tromp in *Richard Deacon*, Phaidon Press, 2000, page 158.

12 Giles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989.

13 Mario Perniola, *Enigmas*, Verso, 1995, page 4.

14 Ibid, page 5.

15 Ibid, page 6.

