

A Conversation with Richard Deacon

P.E. Bickers

P.E. Bickers. *I'd like, if possible, to discuss new directions in your work, but first could you retrace your decision to adopt curvilinear forms instead of rectilinear ones?*

Richard Deacon

Yes. I found that where one part meets another part in a rectilinear structure became a focus of attention. Whereas in a curvilinear structure the curve as it were rides over those points. There was a period when there was a considerable conflict between a desire to make work which was 'whole' or 'equal' and the tendency to get taken up with part-to-part relationships. One of the advantages of curvilinear as against rectilinear structures is that they are separate from the ground in a way which rectilinear structures aren't; rectilinear structures seem to be either on or in the ground, they . . .

Colonise it?

. . . in a way that a curved structure doesn't; a curved structure has an almost casual relationship to the ground, casual but entirely specific: they are resting on the ground according to themselves, not supported by the ground.

As the scale of your work increases, those considerations of the joins or supports, in order for the structures to tolerate that size, might lead you back into the problem of their having rather more importance than you intend . . . also, the casual placing might have to be sacrificed in works meant to be placed outside.

Well, I haven't so far; if one does place work outside, there is a sense in which it does need to be attached to the ground so that . . .

. . . *it won't blow away like tumbleweed?* That has happened to me. The large piece that I made for Liverpool disassembled because of its size; this is something I have avoided doing, making work which does disassemble because of precisely the issue you raised, that somehow the joints become focuses of attention. The largest proposal which I had for outside work was for one outside 250 Euston Rd. It would have been made in one piece and transported to site and erected as a large piece. Given the nature of the commission that would have been perfectly practicable within the budget.

Why was the project not realised? The finalists were Michael Sandle and myself. Michael Sandle is re-submitting, so it's still not resolved.

Your use of materials which don't have a natural weight, has meant that you will have to secure them, in some way sacrificing that apparent instability or equilibrium in your work.

We're talking slightly speculatively here. With that particular proposal (the Euston Rd. project) there would have been a small amount of movement with the wind just because of its size and the flexibility the thing has in it. The supports would have been visually clean at the bottom. I felt that this work would have retained the qualities that the other works have; the intention was to make something that was distinct from the built environment around it, that appeared almost in the same way as the flotsam and jetsam in the street so that it was an object, despite its size, which was potentially moveable.

You're really substituting the illusion of movement for actual movement.

Of the works made to go outside, it is interesting to note that there are, so far, two wooden ones and two metal ones. In these, as in all your work, the chosen material not only affects form and structural procedure but adds to the layers of meaning in each piece; I suppose I fear that the metal ones will 'take over' because metal is a more durable material.

Well, it's not. Wood is actually very durable.

Would not the laminated layers split apart? No, the glue is very strong. *For Those Who Have Ears II* is in one piece, clearly in one piece. It stood outside on a Welsh hillside in a very isolated spot for fifteen months. The two steel ones are virtually flat whereas the two wooden ones have a slight sense of transience: the two steel ones actually function more like markers. In the photograph in the catalogue, there was a fairly deliberate use of the pair of images; *Tell Me No Lies* which is a large interior work, is coupled with a distant shot of *Between The Two Of Us* in Basle, where it seemed to

be very much *there* as a place-marker whereas one thinks of some of the others as just having rolled there, to have 'arrived'.

Like a Ship is a very 'complete' work, a very 'sealed' work.

When making a work to go outside, the first thing sculptors tend to think of is making much bigger work to compensate for the loss of scale. I'm not sure that that's necessary. The work I have made to go outside probably arose out of the experience of taking two of the much earlier untitled works: the big 'basket-like' *Untitled '80* and the 'loopy' one outside and realising that with the first it was entirely counter-productive whereas though the other is largish, it is small relative to the things seen in the outside world yet it actually seemed to *grow* outside. *For Those Who Have Ears* //somehow derives from that notion that a flatter shape doesn't seem to suffer in the same way that volume does. *Like a Bird* is somewhat separate from that; it was an attempt to make a volumetric structure that had some equality of outside to inside using the most minimal of means to define volume without it being a 'lump'. The two steel ones are relatively small, they're not . . .

Monumental?

Not monumental works. Somehow they're scale-less, as shape they carry enormous distances. They seem to grow the further you get away from them and that, I think, is enormously interesting for making work outside. *Between the Two of Us* uses the same structural language as *Like a Ship*, but is a more complex entity.

There's a return to a certain conflict in the piece, the title indicates that as in: something coming 'Between the Two of Us'. Yes. On a kind of formal level, that's the state of play at the moment regarding work outside. Four years ago I was very resistant to making works outside. It now seems that I have made some progress. I would very much like to do something on the scale that the Euston Rd. project entailed but we'll see . . . I didn't think it was compromised. The one I did for Liverpool was just strapped across the bottom; it was a large work without any underground structure. In another proposal, it's possible that I will find a way of making something which is stable without being underpinned. There are other factors involved in making work outside which are, I think, potentially far more important. When a work is in an interior situation, one becomes aware of the work as being an envelope or skin between two sorts of volume, an interior and an exterior in an equal balance; in consequence, one has a very intimate relationship with the work. When you place a work outside, the absence of the framing that an interior provides makes that relationship far more difficult to achieve.

What about the possibility of a loss of intimacy? However large your pieces have become, in an interior they have retained an intimacy, an approachability . . . Right. I think that's a big problem with placing work outside. In the past, on the one occasion that I did take a piece out of the studio and place it outside, I found it so disastrous that I resolved that I wouldn't do it again. Where I was invited to make a work for an outside show, the starting-point, at least, was from the location, from the notion that the work was going outside to a particular place. The pieces of work which have stood outside, *For Those Who Have Ears II*, *Like A Ship*, *Between The Two of Us* and *Like a Bird*, were made, initially, for their locations; the first, which I think was particularly successful, in Margam Park in Wales.

In the catalogue (for Edinburgh and Lyons), For Those Who Have Ears II doesn't look like a permanent installation; it looks like a set-up for a ravishingly beautiful photograph. The transience of the situation adds to the fragile beauty of it. Did you take that photograph? No. Most of the other photographs in the catalogue were taken by myself, there may be a difference there between the way in which a photographer pictorialises the work and the way in which I take a photograph. I agree with you, it is a very beautiful photograph but the work also did have, and intentionally, a certain kind of transience to it, as we talked earlier, the reasons for making the transition from rectilinear to curvilinear structures, a certain casualness, in the sense that the juxtapositions of any moment are capable of being changed. So transience does seem to be an issue. The external works, *For Those Who Have Ears II*, *Like A Bird*, *Like a Ship* and *Between The Two of Us*, are all very clear about their relationship to the ground, their being on a curved base, so they seem ready to move off at any time. In photographs it may be that that appears dominant.

The Richard Deacon exhibition at the Tate Gallery runs 12 March - 9 June.