

Richard Deacon in conversation with Jon Thomson

Jon Thompson - I know that you're very, very particular about the way that you choose the material for any piece.

Richard Deacon - Yes.

JT - And it has a lot to do with both form and content I think.

RD - I am very particular. I don't know if it has to do with form and content. I've noticed recently that I tend to use materials which come in sheet form. The materials which interest me are materials which are not like stone and not like clay. Clay has no form and a piece of stone has a very strong form. Whereas a sheet of fairly thin steel has a bit of both, the same for a thin strip of wood or a sheet of lino. A lot of what I do is involved in giving structure to those materials. It's an act of will that's involved and I suppose why those sorts of materials interest me is because they are matter in a way that the clay or the stone aren't. The one is too unformed, too amorphous and the other is too solid, too much a block. What also interests me about a material like linoleum is the fact that it's a material with a surface that has no relationship at all to its mass, that seems to have skin and mass separate. A work like 'On the Face of it' was a deliberate attempt to make a work that had that quality of a skin and a structure that were separable. There are also a lot of other things you can say about the associative readings of that particular work.

JT - When you fabricate the metal parts of the sculpture, as in that particular piece, you fabricate in pieces of metal which are joined very meticulously together. So again you're separating mass from skin. Obviously the form as a whole is a mass but one's very aware of the fact that it's made from a skin and the skin is pieced together.

RD - Yes

JT - That seems to me to be a feature of a great deal of the constructions that you do.

RD - Working in a repetitive way allows me to slowly make the whole work without there ever coming a point where I am up against a focus. I spend, I don't know if I spend an equal amount of time, but I do spend a lot of time deciding whether I should put rivets at two or three inch intervals as much as I spend time thinking about sexuality or associations or whatever. When I'm making work, I'm very close to it, it's only afterwards or when I'm not there that I begin to see it in other ways; whilst I'm making it my attention is very, very close. I enjoy putting screws in and putting rivets in and I think you can talk about those things. I enjoy putting screws in and I enjoy the fact that they have a pattern in relationship to the work as a whole. I also think that putting one thing on top of another and joining them together by a piece that goes through them has connotations as does laying one thing on top of another and gluing them together repeatedly. Those activities of construction

have parallels with the ways in which we understand things in the world as having reference or meaning, whether as something applied to them or built up or hidden. I think all those things are a part of those constructive processes. I also think that making things has some profound relationship to language. One of the prime functions of language is to describe or re-form the world. It is something that is neither yours or mine, but is ours and lies between us and all this stuff out there. Making is not dissimilar. I tend to be excessive in my use of rivets or glue or whatever, but it's to do with trying to point to making in two particular ways. One is that processes and manufacture have connotations of sense or meaning and the other is that the act of manufacture itself has a particular relationship to the world which is akin to language.

It seems to me that when you look at something, when you see something, what you see is the skin, the outside surface and that that's the only part that you have any information about at all. If you attempt to discover what lies underneath the skin you find another surface; although on the one hand, one proposes that a body, for example, is built up through skeleton, musculature, organs etc. what constitutes the body for you, for me, is an appearance, a skin and there is nothing else. When I'm making sculpture I have a resistance to making things which are built up from the inside out, because if I do that, then I hide the bit that I've been working on. Whereas if I try and make it as if it were a skin all the time, then I have a continuous acquaintance with what constitutes the work, the surface.