

Richard Deacon Talking About For Those Who Have Ears, No. 2 and Other Works

RICHARD DEACON The way that I work, seems to be to start, if not from nothing, from minimal conditions. They're not amorphous, pure mass like lumps of clay, neither do they have the phenomenal strength of rock or a piece of nature. They have a certain independence. Making them into shapes is an act of will on my part. I do tend to notice that most of the material that I use conforms to that, being in sheet or strip form.

I started making work in laminated wood and galvanised steel at almost the same time in 1980; laminated wood preceded by six months working in galvanised steel.

What struck me about using wood in that way is that the initial material was neither log-wood, nor wood from stock. It was structural to an extent, but minimally so, and the process of laminating increased its structural sense, whereas in a traditional construction, basically, the structural strength is given by the material as it comes, and the making-problem is to eliminate loss of structural strength at the joints.

The technical procedures show less evolution than making works in galvanised steel. The starting point was similar, noticing that sheet galvanised steel, although it maybe has slightly more structure than thin laths of wood, basically one needs to do things to it, to make it stand up. I've tended to reduce the sheet to strips, and to tailor the strips together, which takes it closer to the operations for laminated wood; though, because one is cutting strips from sheet rather than splitting up lengths of timber, there is the additional possibility of making strips of very varied shape, so that one can generate a more complex form. But also, whereas, working with laminated wood, the more laminations you put on the solider it gets. One is joining edge-to-edge with the steel, it's stitched at the edges...

Another reason that I like laminating is because it seems to allow for a considerable degree of uncertainty without ever having to come up against structural problems. In the same way as when you draw, you may be a bit uncertain about the contours of the object, you tend to go round and round the same lines. Laminating seems to be similarly a process that allows you to go round and round to assert that something is there. Whatever it adds to the middle it does by a process of inflection at the edge. Whenever I draw I tend to avoid drawing the middle and try to make the line at the edge create the volume. I don't draw tonally at all.

Generally I have an idea for a size that I want to make something. I need the material to have a shape as well as a quality. Very early on I just used to make a shape of some sort. Now the initial shape I make is more specific and probably closer to the end shape than it would have been four or five years ago.

RICHARD FRANCIS *Can you describe For Those Who Have Ears, No.2, and the process of generating that shape? How much did that have to do with those drawings?*

It has something to do with the drawings just in the kind of shape it is. What happened was, I wanted to make a work that utilized an ear shape and I made a jig for the lower half of an ear shape, or a kidney shape. I felt that the work should not only be the ear shapes but somehow between the ears. I began to make a linking device that went between the ears. Subsequently I realised that the part in the middle was the part that I was interested in - the two ear shapes were redundant for that work and I put them to one side. So *For Those Who Have Ears, No. 1* was originally between two standing ear shapes. When I came to make *For Those Who Have Ears, No.2* I had an idea of the size from the first one and I had also the jigs for another half of the ear shape and so what I did was to make several 'LP shapes. There were some drawings that accompanied it, just in terms of sorting out how they'd go together. It's a very indeterminate process -I knew the sort of shape that I wanted to use. I knew the sort of size I wanted to make it. I knew the material I wanted to make it out of, but I didn't know how to put the things together. I was also conscious that I was making a work for outside. In order for it to be 'readable' outside and to have the kind of qualities I wanted it to have, I knew from previous experience that a flatish work would sustain itself much better than a volumetric thing, which tends to become too much of a lump.

But that linear quality affected what it was made of, too, didn't it? Could you have made it of steel?

I could make it in steel now. In fact the top section of the work is very dependent on it being made in wood, because although the bottom four loops are all made in a jig, assembled and laminated together so that the surface is smooth, the shape of the top section is made by having a single strip bent through a right angle. And the curve that it has is entirely dependent on it starting off as a straight thing which is then twisted, whereas the other curves could be made in some other way.

Do you start from a drawing?

No. Unless I'm making a jig and then I draw the shape full sized straight off.

But there are sketches for objects?

There aren't any sketches for objects. I do draw occasionally whilst I'm making things, in a note book kind of fashion. I also doodle fairly repetitively. There also was a series of fairly complex drawings done in '78-79 which do anticipate some of the later sculptures.

There is a specific relationship between the title of the drawing and the title of the sculpture. The link is Orpheus isn't it?

The subject matter of the drawings was the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. They are all called *It's Orpheus When There's Singing*. The title of the big wooden work is *For Those Who Have Ears*. The content has to do with a notion about song or what Orpheus' song does to the world and what the nature of the song might be. The notion that I tend to work with is that as a myth or a story concerned with the origins and functions of language and the way in which language works on the world. As expressed in the story of Orpheus the trees and the rocks move and the wild animals lie down and ultimately he has the power to bring the dead back to life ... What I think is that song is the power of speech. I think of speech as being in between our private selves and the world. The power of speech is a social condition of being human. Language is one of the primary means which allow us to operate on the world, both to recognise and to give it shape. The shape of the drawings that tended to be arrived at was a hollow enclosure with an opening and that seemed to be able to stand for either the head of Orpheus singing or listening - the aperture could be either a mouth or an ear - or for his musical instrument which is a means of production of sound. Orpheus has both a singing voice and an instrumental voice. Or for other very domestic objects particularly pots and pans, shoes, hats - there are lots of objects which have a volumetric shape with an opening and all those objects seem to be set in one way or another in the drawings.

But by the time you are working with On the Face of It and with Falling on Deaf Ears the subject is much less speech and language and much more sexuality and sexual metaphor, isn't it? While mediated through another myth.

Yes . . . *On the Face of It, Falling on Deaf Ears, Turning a Blind Eye* and a lot of other works have been equally concerned with a relationship of perception to the world, but as much concerned with with inauthenticity or untruth. The sexuality of some of the earlier work came as a slight surprise and the later work has a lot to do with the recognition of that sexuality and the exploration of it in the work. *For Those Who Have Ears* is a very clean work in terms of content.

A work like *If the Shoe Fits*, although initially made from the same premise, having been made, there are a whole series of undertones. If initially the work is made from the notion of making a resonant container, its references to shoes and through the tide to a story which has a very heavy sexual undertone and the way in which the surface, it it's a shoe, implies a degree of aggression or mutilation. The later work has a lot to do with coming across those elements in earlier work and wanting to push them a bit further.

If speaking is a condition of being human, hearing is a medium of that and seeing is what you do to the objects I make. Seeing as a mode of perception is much more ambiguous than listening. You have a kind of interactive relationship with the world, with language. With vision you have a very much more active relationship with the things that you have in the world, you project yourself onto them, or you distance yourself from them, you apply content or you read a metaphor or whatever. There are a number of works that try to explore the relationship between the eye and the world. Because I think that one's sexual desires are projected primarily through vision and I think fairly incessantly, there are a number of works which try and make more sense of that: Taking *Turning a Blind Eye*, the work has several different things going on for it: The shape of the work is both an eye and the shape of the vulva and also it has a plough-like shape at one end . . . the work itself is eye shaped, the drawing is like the exterior mount of an eye, the eyelids.

And the metal on the end of it does the turning.

Yes. It's obviously blind because the eye within is empty, but it does occupy an area of ground ... The plough and the way the plough turns the soil is a fairly well established - a fairly clichéd metaphor for the male and female sexual relationships. 'Turning a blind eye' is the cliché for letting things happen which you know, but decide to ignore. The work itself in its eye shape is also blind, because it's empty. Without wanting to wrap it up completely, the content of the work seems to be to do with trying to make looking, aggression, female and male sexual stereotypes, boundaries of propriety, of decorum or decency, subjects within the work. I think it's actually quite a

beautiful work, but its content seems to be almost at variance with its visual quality. It does two things: If you read it as an eye that cuts it has a reference to a certain aggressiveness of vision. If you read it as a vulva that cuts, it seems to be the opposite of that. It inverts a stereotype.

There is a similar inversion involved in *Falling on Deaf Ears* in that it is again talking about language and the conveyance of truth or untruth through language. Truth is in any case a social concept, it's not an absolute. So *Falling on Deaf Ears* is concerned with the revelation of inauthenticity on one level and there is this very specific narrative in it, of a very specific story that one can set up in relation to the work. If you take classical myths then it's the story of Ulysses and the Sirens. It's a story about being misled on the one hand by song, but the way the myth is read is the strong-hearted Ulysses misled by feminine guile. The opposite value is that of Penelope at home misleading the suitors. The way in which that story of siren song, or the notion of a siren, is interpreted is as feminine guile misleading male virtue. Although the work is called *Falling on Deaf Ears* it seems to me that you can also read the things not so much as ears in visual terms, but what guides the work: the kind of prow at the front. One way of describing that is that an eye looks down on the green curtain. The tip of that piece is readable both as an eye or a mouth; so either light or sound. The other end of the work is closed, shuttered rather than open; curtained. In terms of the sexual thing the curtained area seems to represent a female element in the sticking out prow .

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I feel slightly uncomfortable about calling things by such specific names, because if you say 'that's a boat' - it's not a boat, or 'that's an eye' - they're not eyes. Those happen to be the names - the shorthand - for some of the qualities that the work has. Possibly what establishes the connection is [that] the work itself looks like a boat.

Talk about the reading of the bit with the mixed materials. You've referred to it as a head in the sense I suspect that the fabric of it is a little like Egyptian hair-styles. Is that right?

No. It has sexual connotations but it also seems to be the location of receptors, so in that sense it's a head, and it looks like a head because it has a face and a back, in the way that a head does.

It's also quite like a plant form: the head is like, well the female part of the plant; the capsule bit at the top sliced in half with the layers inside, a bit of poppy or something. How much is there of biology? Is the language there entirely of human biology?

No, no, it doesn't show in the pictures, but I think there are in all the works elements which derive from within human biology. The question is very complicated because the organs have more than their anatomical descriptions, so that an ear and an eye have a load of additional meanings.

In all the work the organic, the inorganic, and the human, are somehow combined: so that the outline of the bottom of the head is a very sinuous line. As decoration it relates to plant and flower form, that's the source of it as a line. It also reinforces the reading of the segment of the work with two materials in as being organic among other things.

A piece of nature of some sort or a representation of a piece of nature.

Is that you heading towards the natural rather than the social?

It's not that conscious. It comes up through structure, rather than anything else, I think. It may be that at this point because I'm fairly good at structuring things or have a repertoire of structures, that I'm able to more consciously derive structures from other sorts of things than in the past, but that might have been more accidental, more coincidental.

Sure. But. . . how much is the development of the borrowing of the structural or the decorative elements, an increasing freedom within the work to allow other allusions to operate?

Very much. I think that's what's been happening in the past year; the work has much more conscious borrowing and reference in it than previously.

Was that an ambition that you'd had before?

I can give quite a history, but I don't know if it's how you'd read it. The first sculptures were set up . . . within the last four or five years there's a clear set of works:

Structure and surface were coextensive, and the interior of the work was hollow because of that. Partly for reasons of the skin of a tiling being all that one could see, that was the only thing that I should concern myself with; partly for reasons of wanting to suggest that if the external skin was built then the internal chamber was the container, the area of meaning within the work and so the work was quite pure in intention, if you like. That was important.

Coincidental to working within those premises, I began to make structures which had connotations, the connotations enriched the experience of the work.

On the Face of It, which has a structure and a skin separated, is equally concerned to establish a means whereby the structure establishes something and the skin establishes something, but the two things are not the same. In all the work the way the work is structured is part of the way you read it. You read it as being made in a very definite way. What the formal structuring does is establish a skin over something indefinite, but the shape of the work suggests that the skin is over this or that kind of thing. In *On the Face of It* I wanted to try and make a work which had both the structure and the skin on the surface of the work, but so the two were separate. I saw no necessity why skin and structure should be the same, because what's in the middle is indeterminate and it may be true or it may not be true, or it may or may not be authentic.

In some early works the hollowness was seen as a sort of resonant - the emptiness was seen as being positive, whereas in *The Heart's in the Right Place* the emptiness is both positive and negative - it's both empty and full. Both have 'signifying' connotations. Originally I was going to put a fabric on the work, but in the end because the shape is what it is, it doesn't need the fabric. It does both things just by virtue of its shape. So *On the Face of It* was the same thought projected on to a different object.. .

The *Art for Other People* series, the smaller works, were originally started as a very deliberate exploration of the social area of the work. If the work has connotations, references, then certainly one of the areas it points to is areas of discourse, and the use of a much broader range of materials, a smaller scale, and a much more allusive set of forms, was all in recognition of that development within the work, and that carried on. I think within all that body of work there was still some notion that if one laid out the connotations, and did it in the right way, one would arrive at a nexus of meaning, which would be authentic, in some sense. The recent work has proposed that the nexus of meaning is itself perhaps somehow illusory ...

In a sense, you're not trying to make essential objects, works which have an essence.

I've always found the notion of essence somewhat dubious. The notion of immaculacy: Michael Freed in *Art and Objecthood*¹ finished up with 'presentness is grace': it's his last phrase when he's talking about Caro's work. And that notion of grace or sublimity is certainly within the discourse of that, in the minds of many British sculptors.

So where does your apprehension of that fall from grace, the necessity of that fall from grace, come from?

That's tricky. It comes from Judd, from *Conversations with Stella and Judd*, in Battcock². It does come from the work, but what he says about the work leads you to understand the work in a very particular kind of way. At one time I think I might have said 'Yes, he's right'. Now I think I might say 'Yes, he's right, but that's not all there is to it'. The notion of the matter of fact which seems to be within Judd's work, returns to discourse, and becomes metaphorical, through them becoming public.

Does that mean you haven't given up the search for the Essential?

There isn't any such thing, on one level; but there is, because we can talk about it. So that it's a rhetorical concept, even a rhetorical experience.

Notes

1 Michael Freed, *Art and Objecthood*, Artforum, June 1976, and reprinted in *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Geoffrey Battcock, New York, 1968.

2 Bruce Glaser (edited by Lucy Lippard), *Questions to Stella and Judd*, in *Minimal Art*, op.cit.

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