

Richard Deacon Interviewed by Patricia Bickers about his recent Public Sculpture

Patricia Bickers: The last time we spoke in 1984-5 AM, 83, you had made your first 'outside' work, For Those Who Have Ears, Like a Bird, Like a Ship, and Between the Two of Us and you had just become involved in the Euston Road Project that was eventually aborted. So for the first time, at the end of '84, you were thinking about public art, yet in the catalogue accompanying the unveiling of Between Fiction and Fact, the museum at Villeneuve d'Ascq, the Director wrote that, when the idea of commissioning a public sculpture was first discussed, Richard Deacon's name leapt to mind. What transition did you have to make from the concept of outside work to public art?

Richard Deacon: The transition really is to do with practice rather than anything else, and interest. So in '85 I did the work at the Serpentine Gallery (*Blind Deaf and Dumb*), in '87 I was in the show, 'Sculptur Projekt, Munster', in Minister At the same time in '87, on the basis of those works, I was invited to make a proposal for Warwick University (*Let's Not be Stupid*) and I was also successful in a competition for the Yonge Square in Toronto, (*Between the Eyes*). So Warwick University and Toronto are the first works which really fall into the category of commissions or into a tight definition of public art. Earlier, in '86, I'd been to Gateshead to discuss the possibility of making a piece in Gateshead - that was an abortive proposal because the site that I was working with disappeared, although I did subsequently make a work for Gateshead. At this stage I'm unsure how much a sequence of opportunities gave rise to a transition of interest rather than there being a conscious decision that at certain point I was interested in making public art.

The transition between what you've called outside art and the commissioned work is not a clear one. *For Those Who Have Ears, Like a Bird* and *Like a Ship* occupied rural - even in Liverpool - green field sites, whereas the works in Warwick University and Toronto were urban sites. The transition occurred with *Blind Deaf and Dumb* at the Serpentine Gallery. That's the most important work in this connection and that's the work that bridges the two kinds. On a purely practical level that's the first work for which I really used an outside fabricator and could therefore engage with a set of practices which married up, to some extent, with my studio-based practices but which also had a root in building, in making structural steel work. I was able to plug in to an expertise which allowed me to work with a dimension of material which I didn't have access to before.

There's a kind of practical level in which, by a happy accident, I clicked with the fabricators. Also, the work outside was drawn before it was done, which was a radical departure in practice from the studio practice but by forcing myself to produce a sequence of production drawings, or near-production drawings, I was then able to make a proposition to someone else and say this is what I want to do. It's a *sine qua non* of commissioned work that you're able to do that. So there was a practical route.

A second element would be to do with finding that I did want to make sculpture on a different kind of scale, either smaller or bigger. I remember a conversation with Nicholas Logsdail when I described myself as wanting to make sculpture that was not necessarily framed by the gallery, wasn't defined by gallery possibilities.

The third element I think occurred to me when I was working on the proposal for Munster, where I began to realise that an urban situation had more of interest than a green field site, that I wasn't actually interested in putting an object in a green field situation. The problem that I have with that in the past has always been to do with the inertness of the object in relation to the environment.

The two original sites in Munster were two empty corner lots and the sculptures (*Like a Snail A* and *B*) were thought of as being like houses. In a sense the possibility of working in an urban situation did enable some of the inside and outside qualities of my work to be transferred from an interior situation to an outside situation. It's as if there is a possibility of borrowing the inferiority from a building and using it outside of it, so that the spectator is able to enter the sculpture in a way that has associations with the way one enters a building but at the same time you're seeing it as shape or form.

I'm not interested in making architecture, I'm interested in making sculpture, but it does seem that the juxtaposition of a volume against a building allows that interior quality, which is part of one's experience of a building, to be applied to the sculpture. That sense of interior, whether it's an imaginative interior or an actual interior, is a part of the spectators' experience.

There is additionally a question which comes up concerning what way that space is different from the space of a gallery or a museum. This is a very complex question about the meaning of 'public', because as a word it has multitudes of meaning, both negative and positive. One of the meanings of 'public' is a social welfare meaning, another has to do with 'freely available to all'; 'public affairs' is 'a matter of concern to us all', while 'public life' is distinct from 'private life'. I would resist the notion of public art as being an act of social welfare and have tended to work on the assumption that making sculpture is itself a public act in the same way that to speak a language is a public act. In order for it to be an expressive medium there has to be some sense in which 'public' is applicable to the idea of making sculpture. In that sense, there is considerable continuity between sculpture which I make for a gallery space and work that I make for an outdoor space.

The outdoor works are structured according to site but they don't have the rigid criteria of site specificity that for example Richard Serra might envisage, although in practical terms, their movability is distinctly limited. They do belong to the site and, in making the work, or making the proposals for the work, there is considerable investigation into both the geographical and historical conditions of the site and also, through model-making, the actual dimensions of the place. In that sense they are tailored to the space, but they probably don't fit the tight definition of site specificity and, in a certain sense, the notion of separateness is tied in with the way that I think about making sculpture anyway: the notion of the completeness and detachment from floor and, in some senses, detachment from surroundings, is part of the rhetoric, or part of the vocabulary, that I use in making sculpture.

It's actually something we talked about in '84.

Yes, we talked about the difference between a house and sculpture.

- and the idea that your sculpture looked almost casually placed, as if it had just 'arrived'. Of course in public sculpture you can still retain that quality but you do have to secure it, as in the Warwick piece. I was going to ask you about the Toronto piece which rather wittily uses a plinth.

I actually always thought of it as a bench rather than anything else. The site in Toronto is a square in front of a new development; the new buildings occupy two sides of the square, and the other two sides of the square are bounded by streets, one

of which runs alongside the Toronto Lake front; the street that runs north from the site is an old logging road and goes all the way from Toronto to Winnipeg, so the geographical position of the plaza is quite specific.

In some ways it's a classic modernist situation: a square into which a man on a horse or whatever was to be placed. I always thought that within that situation, apart from the object, there should be another way of being in the square other than walking through it. I thought that there should be some place to sit down. I did toy with some other configurations of bench until it occurred to me that it could be made into a foot for the sculpture which also, in some senses, echoed the kinds of thoughts I'd had about the site anyway, in the way that the sculpture steps off the plinth the way the road steps off the water. And it seemed to enable you to sit down and to use the plaza as a place to be without having to look at the work.

Going back to what you were saying earlier about your preference for urban sites, it is interesting that in the Warwick project you chose a site that was already there and in fact specifically you said that virtually nothing had to be altered beyond the removal of two concrete flower holders and, of course, some lights were sunk into the site. So, would you balk at the idea of a purpose built site for a Richard Deacon sculpture?

Well, the Toronto situation is a purpose built site. Brand new. When I first visited the site, there was nothing there. It was a competition and the intention was that the successful artist would collaborate with the architectural partnership in the final design decisions about the plaza and the artist was given some clout to make it possible for that to happen. I must admit that those are the situations that I find the most complex and the most difficult to deal with. I've been far more comfortable with the situation in Warwick or Gateshead or Plymouth, or even in Villeneuve d'Ascq, where there was an existing situation with which I was interfering or with which I was interacting. And I suppose that if I really think about why that might be, it has to do with the ability to retain an independence in the sculpture rather than it being a part of a whole.

It looks more 'other' in that it's an interloper in an existing space.

There are no rules in these things obviously, but that very specific relationship of object to building can very easily, lead to the one becoming a sign for the other and that isn't a relationship that I find particularly interesting. I'm not happy about making sculpture that acts like a logo for the site or for the building.

I am interested in making sculpture that interferes with the space, not in any particularly aggressive way, and it may very well be that I'm interested in engaging with the spectator and the spectator's perception of the space, but I suppose I'm not interested in making a play park and I'm not interested in making a subservient sculpture, but neither am I interested in making a dominant or an aggressive thing. To take a simple example, I've got no objection to people sitting on the work but I don't want the work to become a bench, much as I like and admire Scott Burton's work.

I would like the sculpture to behave on site in ways not dissimilar from the ways in which I think Brecht thought of using the theatre. The work makes certain demands on the spectator as well as allowing itself to be appropriated in certain ways by the spectator, so that there is a relationship between the spectator and the work which isn't only one way. That would be an interesting way to define publicness: as being the capacity for reciprocation rather than as a piece of social

engineering. The capacity for reciprocation seems for me to be at the heart of what I think of as 'public'.

What did you mean by Art for Other People' and how is it different from 'public' as you've just defined it?

The two aren't exclusive. I always thought of the works in the 'Art for Other People' series as 'letters' and their scale was to do with a sort of domestic utterance, but they were never addressed at specific individuals so in that sense they were addressed publicly. Ostensibly it implies a one-way communication as in 'I write, you read', but in fact before I begin to write I have to know that you can read. There is in fact a reciprocation built into that. It's a thought that has struck me several times, that, in some senses, a lot of the work that I make in the studio is as much made for my own interest and understanding, and as a way of engaging with the world, and that in that sense it's for me, whereas the intention behind the works in the 'Art for Other People' series was always - and with foreknowledge - that they were externally directed. That's where the distinction arises.

The external directedness of the 'Art for Other People' series did marry up quite well with the external directedness of the large-scale work. I also did note that there were much stronger formal connections between the two than there are between the larger sized, but still studio-based, work.

That might have to do with model-making or it might have to do with the notion of objecthood that is employed. The 'Art for Other People' series is much more portable, much more transient in some ways, but their identity remains constant in a variety of situations. One of the sensations that I've wanted to have in the larger scale works is the sense of their being distinct, in the sense of an object being distinct, and to make use of both the double sense of objecthood and a borrowed inferiority as being two of the components that the work has. They're not intended to be lumps, but the notion of the complete thing is an important element that needs to stay in the work, in order to act as a foil or an opposition to other senses: it's one of the core experiences for the way in which you deal with the identity of the work, and that would probably be the link.

In relationship to the other work, I've tended to use words like 'envelope' and 'skin' as being the core parameter that the work has, but that doesn't really work in the 'Art for Other People' series because the size of the work mitigates against it. It's something to do with the object being the same scale as yourself, the sense of reading it as a body.

/ thought it was very interesting that you introduced, if you like, that third category, because of something that Peter Schejldahl said on the question of scale which I thought was very good: 'Small, medium and large, they are not for him just different conditions for the same thing but distinct genres corresponding to different orders of rhetorical engagement'.

I thought Peter said that very well.

The next question is obvious; there are 29 works in all in the 'Art for Other People' series, 25 of them were done between '82 and '87, but there have been only four more since. Is this merely because you have been occupied in making public sculpture?

I think there's a number of hours in a day, and areas of activity that didn't exist before have arisen. It's also true that - once the parameters of what you're doing

become too clearly established -I think it becomes slightly more difficult to make something. They ['Art for Other People' works] are made kind of idly.

A species of three dimensional doodle?

Yes. I think idleness is a much more profitable source of ideas, and source of things that are of interest, than being prodded by necessity. There is a suspicion that the small works are much more marketable than the big works; it may be to do with a certain amount of self-censorship. In fact all these factors seem to be components, one: just time, two: looking for occasions just to be idle and three: not wanting to make items on a market-oriented basis. I mean, there's nothing wrong with working for the market, I don't want to give the impression that I've got any antagonism to it. That doesn't seem to be why I make sculpture. There is a certain amount of orneriness: if people continually ask me why don't you make more [small] sculpture, then I think I'll tend to make big sculpture. If people continually ask me why don't I make big sculpture then I'll probably make lots of small sculptures.

Finally, do you feel that you are being groomed to be Sir Richard Deacon?

The question is 'Do I feel part of the establishment?' And the answer is that I don't particularly feel part of the establishment and I'm not particularly interested in becoming a part of the establishment. I am a Trustee of the Tate and I agreed to become a Trustee because I have a great admiration for Nick [Serota] and what he's done there. That's a much more establishment role than I would have envisaged for myself. I have no other ambitions to become a larger establishment figure.

I think you're quite right to point out that broadening critical recognition particularly in relationship to large-scale work in public places has often had a very damaging effect on artists' production. I feel that about Henry Moore and I feel that, to some extent, about Anthony Caro. As a counter-example, I would put an artist like Richard Serra, the critical edge of whose work doesn't seem to be blunted by that kind of public exposure.

This interview took place on April 10 and Sept 10, 1992.