

Undetermined Pleasure and Unnecessary Beauty

An interview with Richard Deacon by Ian Tromp

Richard Deacon prefers to call himself a fabricator. Several aspects of Deacon's self-perception as a sculptor, as well as his conception of the place and role of sculpture, are wrapped up in this label. He says, "Material and its manipulation are core areas in what I do. 'Matter' and 'stuff' are the words I tend to use." Whereas a sculptor like Antony Gormley represents the stuff and matter of the body as a point-of-entry to and signifier of transcendence, Deacon's practice and his language always return to the material, to the work of fabrication.

When I met him in London, he spoke of the tendency of some materials "to erase their materiality" if they are worked too much and too finely. Previously, he related participating in a 1983 project called "Making Sculpture" at the Tate Gallery in London.¹ Deacon described working alongside Michael Pennie, who was carving a block of wood. To Deacon, it seemed Pennie was taking away from the wood—"the more he did the less there was"—while he himself was making a stack of metal. Whereas Deacon started with nothing and ended up with something, Pennie progressively removed wood, erasing the materiality and the "identity" of his medium.

But while Deacon's is a material art, there is also a kind of transcendence in it. He would not choose to speak in these terms, yet one senses a shadow, almost an undertow, of immateriality in his work. Though he remains determinedly uninterested in engaging abstract philosophical topics, the work itself is allusive and imaginatively suggestive.

Not representational in a mimetic sense, Deacon's sculptures inhabit a space between meaninglessness and meaning. His forms seem to swim into significance and then dissolve again or recede. There is a play of advance and retreat in many of the works, as if their forms would become almost recognizable, knowable, but then pull back again, leaving the viewer once again in an unfamiliar space.

Deacon emphasizes the importance of meeting the work "as if you are in front of another person and in...relation to particular bodily sensations."² It is possible to derive two principles from this statement. First, the work is envisioned as dialogic—it functions within the interaction, the exchange, between work and viewer. Secondly, the viewer's experience of the sculpture is grounded in his or her own somatic apprehension.

It has been standard procedure to distinguish Deacon's works by reference to their size. Deacon himself has said, "The small works are domestic, the medium works are gallery size and the large works are public."³ But this shorthand undermines the two principles mentioned above. Rather than relating to the works in terms of our body size—in terms of how we experience space—these principles suggest that we give attention to the ways in which the works interrupt that experience. By reversing the exchange, the emphasis is shifted—the sculptures are in the world and I have to walk around them, stand among or over them. This has the effect of making me relate my body to them on their terms, rather than seeing them in relation to my body.

A passionate intellectual, Deacon speaks with authority and great clarity on a wide range of topics. When he stacks up words—speaking for instance of "tone and intensity, dark and light, shine, shadow, transparency, translucency, opacity"—each follows rapidly in succession, demonstrating his ability to think in lists and make quicksilver categorical distinctions. Behind this easy familiarity, in the example cited, with the different ways that forms respond to light, there lies a depth of reflection and a careful weighing of the separate significance of each category. At the same time, Deacon manages a lightness, a playfulness, in dialogue that echoes and emphasizes these qualities in his work.

Ian Tromp: *In a recent talk, you spoke of your working methods as "means of making something indescribable." In a notebook entry quoted by Jon Thompson you describe your series of drawings It's Orpheus When There's Singing (1978-79) as "intentionally extremely representational," but then you say you have "difficulty in deciding of what they are representations."⁴ I find this very interesting, because you seem to be saying that when you're working you don't really know what it is you're making.*

Richard Deacon: I think that when we look at art, one of the things we want to do is to attribute meanings. We try to uncover what it is that the artist is trying to do in this or that thing. This is a mode of transaction which at its simplest is to do with a certain kind of recognition—we recognize that something resembles something else. We don't only do this in looking at art; seeing resemblances and recognizing that things look like other things is part of how we meet the world, but it becomes very focused in looking at art. The question for me is whether resemblance can be detached from objects. That quote about the drawings has to do with trying to work out whether the conjunctions of resemblance, looking like, reminding of, referring to, are simple associative categories or whether they refer to something else. Metaphor is an example of a way in which objects can be put in relationship without them having any necessary resemblance; two things are put into conjunction and then you see the one in the other. It was that ability to evoke those kinds of responses—looking like, resemblance, and so on—which I had been trying to create. It requires a certain level of ambiguity, a certain level of giving and taking away at the same time. That's the kind of thing that I was interested in.

IT: *You're distinguishing between a category of meaning-fulness on the one hand and, on the other, specific relationships of this thing meaning, or referring-to, or standing-for something else.*

RD: Yes, in general that's the kind of place that I'm trying to put forward.

IT: *You've also talked about the importance of trying to be in situations where you don't know what you are doing.⁵*

RD: Yes, idleness is quite productive in that sort of way.

IT: *I believe you're interested in chaos theory, which is concerned with the appearance of form in the world. One basis of chaos theory is in chance, but it seems also to be procedural, as for instance in computer-generated images that are outcomes of mathematical procedures. You've just been speaking about chance, but have you also been affected by procedural or systems thinking in your form-making?*

RD: Originally, I got interested in chaos theory because of the idea of interconnectedness that it seems to imply, and then I started to find interesting the idea that order comes out of disorder. Now I would say I'm much more interested in ideas around emergence, which is more related to complexity theory. Emergence says that it's inevitable, in any sufficiently complex system, that order will emerge. There are some kinds of systems in which randomness springs out of control, and there are other kinds of systems which are entirely constrained. Between those two kinds of systems you have an interface, and along that interface you get emergence, which is where complexity, but ordered complexity, emerges. The classic example is the turbulent flow in certain liquids—there's a point where the liquid is moving too fast for there to be anything coherent about it and another point where the liquid is moving slowly and it's entirely coherent. But there's 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 two states—it's not to do with generating a pattern from a mathematical program, it's to do with this point of transition between order and disorder, where different kinds of ordering emerge.

IT: *Would it be stretching the point too far to come back to what you said about a category of meaningfulness and this realm of emergence?*

RD: No, it's not stretching the point at all.

IT: *In describing your plans in bidding for a commission in Atlanta, you talked about "hopeful indeterminacy" and the sense that "things could be other than they are." Does that relate to the idea of emergence, in the sense that things could emerge differently?*

RD: And better. I think the hopeful was quite an important part of that, because things could always be worse, but it was the notion that things could be better that was quite interesting.

IT: *In looking closely at your work I was impressed by what I recognize as signs of making, unmaking, and remaking in different stages. For instance, What could make me feel this way*

(A) looks as though it had been joined differently at some time. I assume this is to do with individual sections being made separately and then jointed together—there are screw holes and marks where screws seem to have been.

RD: Some screws are taken out and some aren't taken out. Screws are used to hold pieces in place; they come in and go out and they locate things. In that work the diagonal strips were bent on the work, rather than off the work—the work was its own mold and its own former in a way that the other two large bent wood sculptures aren't. Fundamentally I tend to keep the screws in at the ends of bits of wood, because that's where the joints are the most fragile. I have in the past taken them all out, as well as left them all in. I want to get a balance of making them work in a way that isn't purely instrumental, that isn't purely functional, so that they either appear as a part of pattern or excess or else their absence becomes notable.

IT: *In Liverpool you were asked a question about finish and you talked about levels of attention—you said you left things neat or untidy on the basis of a judgment as to what level of attention that feature was going to get.*

RD: I did say that, yes, but it's not so much to do with the level of attention that the thing gets as the level of attention that it needs—or a combination of the two. Saying "the level of attention a thing gets" implies a certain sense of covering over, or of only finishing up to a visible degree. One of the reasons that you have a skirting board in a house is to hide the awkward gap between the floor and the wall, and it allows for a level of craftsmanship which doesn't pay particular attention to articulating the gap more directly. But if you specify no skirting board then you need to really attend to that. In most of the sculptures that I make, the finish, irrespective of whether you can see it or not, is consistent throughout the piece. So the answer was more to do with the fact that that point of attention would have received the same kind of articulation if the work had been the other way up—if those joints had been hidden, they would still have been attended to. The question was in relationship to the small work, *Table (E)* (1999), and had to do with the difference between that and one of the bigger works, *After* (1998); why was the jointing more elaborate on the small work than it was on the big work? The answer is that these are two different objects and the convergence of the ribs is actually a different thing in the two works. Whereas the ribs on *Table (E)* converge around a form, there's a sense of unfocused sequence in *After*; the joint is treated in a different way in *After* because it's one of a much larger series. You see each joint sequentially in *After*, but in *Table (E)* they gather around a middle. I could have pointed out parts on *After* where the detail had been very tightly attended to, for example on the steel fence that runs through it.

IT: *You could say the lines are end-stopped on the table surface, or they lead to the table surface, whereas in After they're more progressive in the sense that they lead on.*

RD: Yes, that's right. The question was also to do with the way the joint was housed. The joint is housed in a kind of dovetailed detail on *Table (E)*, and it's just butted up in *After*.

IT: *Another aspect of making and unmaking can be found in some of the plastic works, for instance Not yet Beautiful (1994) and From Tomorrow (1996); I noticed that you'd drilled holes, almost as if the plastic sections had been sewn together at some time.*

RD: Those works are made-over formers. I've been using plaster formers and mapping the surface in order to eliminate three-dimensional bends in any of the pieces. I take templates of that mapping with pieces of paper which are then used to cut the small pieces of rigid plastic. Once heated, the rigid plastic becomes malleable and is located onto the surface to its corresponding pencil mark. But because it's quite hot when it comes out, and it's a manual process of pushing down and shaping over the surface, we devised a system of screw-pegs which holds the plastic down, screws set into the plaster and then a wooden peg that grips the edge. So the first piece you put down abuts on all sides to plaster—when you hold it down the piece of plaster is perforated. There is a conundrum which arises in that the next piece you put down has some of its edges butting-up to a piece of plastic that's already laid in. For fear of loss of alignment, rather than removing that and putting it back again, we drill through those sheets of plastic to provide a point to pull the edge of the hot one. You can't drill into the hot plastic, because it's soft, so you have to pull it down with a peg. So as the work goes on, you end up with corresponding holes in the work, which are a function of this business of holding down, and as it's built up the sections are welded together into a complex sheet. However, they're not completely welded together—there's a larger division of the form into however many parts will separate to allow you to take the solid away

subsequently. And so if there are 10 pieces, each piece made up of fragments, those little holes become very useful because they enable us to do exactly what you described, to sew them. Using wire loops we sew the plastic back together prior to making the final weld and then cutting the wire. I liked what the holes did because they were quite like what we've said about the screws. I liked their absence. I did make one on a commission without making holes in it, just to see what it was like to do it without holes. It is a very different surface. It was very elaborate to make—we had to make the pieces oversized and cut them back to fit. It does get quite complicated, because I think that in a way the more you finish things, the more the material disappears. It's particularly so with very picturesque materials like wood that become extremely beautiful the more you finish them. They tend to erase their materiality. In the plastic works, in fact, the transparent material is probably more beautiful than it could ever be when it first arrives—no amount of work you put into it actually improves it.

IT: *Do you approach sculpture primarily from the point of view of material and form and the viewer's body meeting the body of the sculpture, or is there an affective or imaginative level on which your sculpture works?*

RD: I think it's difficult to distinguish form from the imaginative ways one constructs form, so I think when it's successful the material is present, the form is present, the structure is present, the associations are present, and the sense of meaning—or the possibility of meaning—is also present. There are some things which are very concrete, but equally some things which are much less concrete—which aren't concrete at all—but should be present with the same force. What I think gives the sculpture its drive or its potency is a tension between what you can see and what you can't see, what you imagine, or you picture, or you construct, refer to or associate with—all of those things. The sculpture retains its physicality while allowing a richness of readings, but it never ceases to be a particular kind of physical object, a particular identifiable physical object made of a particular material. In some senses I also think that in an exhibition situation the presence of other sculptures somehow allows the material in which *this* work is made to be evident in its materiality in a way that if they were all made of steel or something would be less so.

IT: *You seem very interested in materials.*

RD: I don't want to overemphasize that, but yes I am. I'm interested in the fact that there is a continuity between the world and materials, that the material is of the world but also sustains an imaginative response, so that it points in two directions at once. I'm not less interested in the imaginative response than I am in the material, it's just that sometimes it's harder to say precisely what the nature of that imaginative response is.

IT: *You've talked about exhibitions as an extension of your studio practice. That's interesting. In Liverpool I had the impression of the show being planned as a conversation, with individual works like words adding up to put across an argument.*

RD: Liverpool was a very strong version of that, the most diverse and complete version.

IT: *It showed up your practice in various different ways, because it had the different works—and in themselves they're very diverse—but then it had them arranged in a diversity of ways too.*

RD: Yes. I can do other kinds of exhibitions. If it had been an exhibition of just three big wooden works then that would be something else, or if the exhibition was all made of wood, or there were only works made of plastic, or only small works.

IT: *Most of the small works you make are in the series Art for Other People. When did you start making these? Was the seed for them a kind of democratic urge in making art?*

RD: I think I used the name of the series very naively to begin with, from a very simple impulse. I first made them in 1982, and it started very simply: I went to an interview and I was making a real hash of talking about a group of works that I'd made, and when I came out afterwards I thought, "Well, I don't need to do this, I can make sculpture that does this." So they were made in a way like writing, like sending letters to people. They were intended to be non-contextually determined, so that you could take them anywhere; they

could function anywhere, and they're also mostly not particularly gravity-dependent, so that they could exist on other kinds of surfaces, so that it doesn't really matter if you lift them up. If you lifted up any of those and looked at them, the only one that would have seemed to have an underneath would be the flat, very highly polished wooden one (*Art for Other People* #34, 1997). What I also found interesting afterwards is that if you call something "Art for Other People," then of course when you look at it as a viewer you don't think it's for you—and you wonder who the other people are. You know it's not "me," because one is never "other people."

IT: *You said that those works were individuated by being in relation to one another rather than by their size, which is the way you distinguished the bigger works—you pointed out that it's possible to see each one in its own space. You also talked about their color, and said their light was a very important aspect.*

RD: In Liverpool they had an extraordinary number of different ways of responding to the light. Color is an element of that, but tone and intensity, dark and light, shine, shadow, transparency, translucency, opacity—those are all things that I think are present in quite a lot of the works. They respond to light quite particularly, and that's very intuitive.

IT: *This brings us back to talking about your exhibition practice—it struck me that the works were laid out very carefully. The yellow one ('Art for Other People' #30, 1993) was placed right next to the screens, just to the left of the entrance, where there was this wonderful skylight in the ceiling and light poured in. Then there was the highly polished work in a dark corner, which, though closer to the windows was quite dark a lot of the time because of the angle of the light.*

RD: Yes, but that also became a light corner at times: there was a point when the light came in there and the piece reflected the sky.

IT: *Do you make drawings as art objects in themselves, or do you make drawings as a stage in making sculpture?*

RD: It goes in phases. Every five years I seem to come up with a group of drawings. When I was at school I made a lot of drawings. I loved to draw; I drew obsessively and continually. When I went to St. Martins I stopped drawing completely and started writing. In a funny way drawing and writing are very similar. Partly it was a contrary attitude, because I was starting to have quite strong beliefs about how you should and shouldn't make things, and what it was that I wanted sculpture to be. I definitely didn't want it to be workshop practice—the idea that you drew something and then made the thing you drew seemed to me not what I was interested in doing at all and I stopped drawing in order to not do that. Then I did a lot of performances and there was a period before and just when I started at the Royal College when I began drawing quite extensively. That rehearsed a way that I started to make sculpture. And then I stopped again, until I went to the States and did the *Orpheus* drawings, which also rehearsed some process that I was trying to change or trying to make sculpture about then. I was trying to look for form, to make form that had ambiguity in it and that had multiple referents, so what we said earlier about representation applies here. And then some five years later I did a thing for the Serpentine Gallery, and I wondered what it would be like to have someone make something that I'd designed. So I tried to draw something completely, tried to describe something in drawing so that someone else could make it. It was a long process. And then I started to use drawing in a slightly different way because we were starting to work with quite a lot of steel—I drew things and then used the drawings as templates, so that they started to disappear into the work. And there was another group of drawings in two sets from 1990. One set was very interested in shape, working on the relationship between shape and line; the second was more concerned with detail, with texture and line. Both sets were paired with photographs and became an artist's book called "Atlas." And then the drawings on the screens followed on from that really. And then the group of small drawings in the middle room in Liverpool. The way I have been drawing has been fairly consistent over a while—black, non-tonal drawing.

IT: *There are distinct styles within that: comic book styles, biological or medical, and architectural.*

RD: I have an interest in the ways that drawing has been used. One of the interesting things about drawing is that it is used in a number of different ways, and it refers to those ways of dealing with the world—science, archaeology—it refers to and also represents the ways those disciplines see the world.

IT: *All the time we've been talking you've been playing with an elastic band—is that another way of drawing?*

RD: [Laughs] I am planning to use this. It's on the table for a purpose.

IT: *Yes, it's described forms—at one moment it looked a lot like the forms in* What could make me feel this way (A). *So do you do that to come up with forms?*

RD: I play with things. Like I say, I think idleness is a rich source.

IT: *In your studio you've only got pictures of flowers.*

RD: Yes, I've been trying to work out what it is about flowers. I've been thinking about flowers for the last six months or so.

IT: *Is that to do with form?*

RD: Actually, I don't know what it's to do with. It has got to do with form, but I think too that it's got to do with something about pleasure. Undetermined pleasure. I don't really know why plants are so beautiful—they don't have to be. It's to do with unnecessary beauty. This is new, and whether it will become anything, I don't know. There are mostly pictures of flowers and there are plants, but there are also plastic animals and toys.

Notes

¹ Lewis Biggs, "Richard Deacon: The Word Made Sculpture," *Tate* 1999, p. 68.

² Quotation from "Pier Luigi Tazzi in Conversation with Richard Deacon" in *Richard Deacon*. London: Phaidon Press, 1995, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ Jon Thompson, "Thinking Richard Deacon, Thinking Sculptor, Thinking Sculpture." in *Richard Deacon*. op.cit., p 46.

⁵ See Tazzi, op. cit., p. 18