

Richard Deacon

The word made sculpture

For the past two decades, Richard Deacon has been a major British sculptor with a substantial international reputation. As Tate Gallery Liverpool prepares to stage Deacon's first big show in Britain for ten years, director Lewis Biggs talks to the artist about his recent work, public sculpture, material culture, politics and an ongoing interest in the spoken and written word.

Lewis Biggs: *Since 1991, your work has been shown around the world, not least in major exhibitions in Germany - in Krefeld and Hanover in particular - but it is still largely unknown in this country. Why have you chosen the title "New World Order" for your show at Tate Gallery Liverpool, which features work made over the past ten years?*

Richard Deacon: There's a raft of reasons. In the past few years, I've tended to think of my work as being neither abstract nor representational, but somehow showing a different sort of world. Previously, I had emphasised metaphoric or allusive qualities in the work, which I think are still there, but less so. *Literal qualities have always been as important as the metaphoric qualities...*

Yes, that's true, but (without wanting to sound too *X-fles*, or too *Alien Resurrection* or whatever) if I'm making a landscape, I'm not making a representation of an existing landscape as much as a new landscape. So the title might have been "Another World Order". Also, it's not to do with fantasy. There's a certain amount of forward-looking Utopianism, or imagined others, implicit in the work.

What do you mean by fantasy? Fantasy is unreal, whereas what you make is real.

I didn't want to associate what I am saying too closely with the fantastic, or with *fin-de-siecle* symbolism. Fantasy is not a bad word. The second reason would be that the phrase "new world order" is definitely associated with George Bush and the Gulf War, and there's a synchronicity between his introduction of the phrase into wide currency and the dating of the works in the show. It's interesting that language comes to be like an object or to describe a condition. "New world order" operates as a nugget of language which contains an ideology, circumscribing a world view. I've often used language in the work as a means of trying to point out how the ways we talk about the world and the ways we think about the world are not entirely disassociated from the way the world looks. Somehow there's a certain symbiosis between the two. "New world order" seems to belong to that language-become-object category. I'm attempting, in the title of the show, to take hold of that object and, if not directly to question it, at least to address the intellectual processes involved in forming a world view. So it does have a sharpness, but in other ways it's a meaningless phrase. I think it's interesting how a meaningless phrase becomes almost like a weapon.

Many people have suggested there's an ironic aspect to your work: is one intention of the title to foreground irony or satire?

Actually it wasn't. I have a certain anger about the claim for a "new world order" that was not *my* world order. And it might quite simply reflect a need to irritate. I'm not constructing a satire, I'm trying to reclaim a world view, but to do so in the presence of reality and not sealed off from reality. But the work is capable of multiple propositions.

Yes, because there is always playfulness in the work. Play inevitably produces new solutions all the time, it's about shuffling the cards and producing something new.

But that doesn't sit very easily with the anger, which is more direct. [Silence.] / didn't want to get you in the psychiatrist'.? chair...

There is a Freud quote from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when Freud describes imitative play as a means of mastering the environment. When I was thinking about the constellation of realism, mimesis, representation... yes, play does present new solutions, but it's also a way of describing the world.

Or of calling the world into being...

Yes, and of transforming the world, in that you make things stand for other things.

Could we talk more specifically about what's in the show and why?

The show starts with an "empty room", defined by the positioning of the series of seven drawings on translucent plastic screens in aluminium frames called 'The Interior is Always More Difficult'. Beginning with this series provides a location for the exhibition as a whole. The work is either inside the room, outside it, or on these screens. It provides a kind of model "environment". Because it's not just the drawings, it's also the screens and the aluminium frames which together act as a key or a coda for the other elements within the exhibition. As you go into this "empty room", to the left are the smaller works ['Art for Other People'] across the floor, which are materially, structurally and formally very diverse, and which you perambulate. To the right is a group of much more bulky objects, which block the way, and all of which are enclosed.

Volumetric?

And hermetic... except one which leans against the wall. And then, in the rooms with higher ceilings overlooking the river, there's a sequence of three large wooden structures. They are very different, but their material structure and their volume are wrapped together in each case, so the space and the volume the work occupies are both empty and full at the same time. The wood of which they are constructed is present throughout the object (this is particularly true of 'Laocoon') and occupies the space, but at the same time there is a hollowness which also occupies the space. So that whereas in the first galleries both the smaller and the bigger works "are" material skins... ...

in the higher gallery the larger works have space inter-penetrating freely.

The works in this show are materially very specific and formally quite complex (and the things they resemble, the things to which they refer, or look like, are much less clear), so that they have this high clarity as "made objects". *The analogies are reduced?*

There are some analogies, but reduced. The openness they have refers back to the "empty room", where the two conditions of form and material presence are signalled in the window drawings. The conditions are present in the same surface, but they're not mixed: it's a drawn shape on a plastic window within a frame. So the three-dimensional works in some ways actualise those conditions. The "windows" are not drawings for objects. When I first installed them in Krefeld I thought they were sculptures which had been fragmented into component parts and yet the component parts were still present in the same place. The subsequent works are like reassemblies of those components. That's why the windows are at the beginning of the exhibition. There are other things which I think are of interest in their in-between state: their transparency and the ways in which they are both to be looked through and at, at the same time. They obviously describe this process more programmatically than the sculptures, although that is also an aspect of what the sculptures do.

I'm struck by the way your work has evolved in the past decade. The development visible in the large bent wood works ('Laocoon', 'What Could Make Me Feel This Way A', 'After') is the way in which space is allowed to flow through them, netted,

perhaps, but not contained by them. They're highly complex in form, made out of repeated units which set up rhythms and intervals so that they seem composed less of shapes than of energy. On the other hand, they've also retained the attractive quality of many of your earlier works, in that they invite close inspection. They are intimate despite their large size. But in the galleries overlooking the dock, there will be a number of marks which are less attractive, even slightly repellent in their surface — literally repellent in the sense of shininess, or the reflective surface of plastic or glass.

They're more hermetic. The works from the 1980s tend to be structured in a different kind of a way. Their particulate nature is more evident, and so the rhetoric of all the detail of their assembly is part and parcel of what you see. Funnily enough, I think that the new wooden works are more mechanical than the hermetic works, which have a greater plasticity. Hollowness has been a significant feature, too, enclosing a shape completely and not allowing any entry point. Towards the end of the 1980s, I became dissatisfied with the necessary consequences of bending and folding, the kind of form making that bending and folding allows you to do, and began to look for a more fluid form, without wanting to make a solid.

At the end of the 1980's you made a large number of sculptures for placement out of doors. Did this have an effect on the way in which your work developed?

The first one I made especially to go outdoors was in Liverpool, for the Garden Festival in 1984, although it was only a temporary work. Then there was a rush of work of this kind for me at the end of the 1980s. It made me think a lot about the notion of the "public". I had a certain amount of anger as well, not so much in the beginning, but it developed into a polemic against the appropriation of public space. I wrote a piece with Lynne Cooke at the beginning of the 1990s. It was just after the Berlin Wall had come down, and there were all those photographs of toppled monuments. I imagined, if the situation had been reversed, which monuments would have been destroyed. I wondered about the relationship between the monument and the public place. Sculpture was often seen as a decorative element within the public place and I was trying to assert that, to the contrary, it was a kind of guarantee of publicness. It had meanings in public, not in the sense of social engineering but in the proper political sense. I also wanted the work not to be governed by... Let's be arrogant. I thought sculpture came first. It preceded the gallery and the museum. Sculptures were being allowed to "be" only within the con-s text of the museum, whereas in fact the museum was there only because those things were there. The constraints of this museum-orientated situation were inhibiting the capacity of the public to engage with sculpture publicly. So the rush of the work in the late 1980s and early 1990s was in part a consequence of opportunity, but also in part a consequence of my wish to engage with this debate.

The studio work may go to a museum or a private house; you have little control over where it ends up, and to that extent no control over its meanings. The 'Art for Other People' works were intended to be autonomous, and intimate wherever they were. On the other hand, public sculpture, because it's fixed by its nature to a specific site, offers a whole new range of possibilities for engaging with meaning. Did you experience this as a liberation?

Yes, although I now find I get a lot of invitations to make proposals from people who know what they want and imagine that I will give it to them. At the moment I am mostly refusing the invitations. My interests have moved. I don't want to make very large sculptures... A year ago I was thinking I wanted to make tiny things, but the most fruitful area, and the most difficult one for me, is to make middle-sized, sculpture-sized sculptures. In the early 1980s I deliberately rejected that as a size because it seemed to bring too much with it in terms of history, context or whatever. I now think it is the most open area. Also, it's the most evacuated area. No one is trying to deal with it. It seems I have a certain kind of fluidity or comfort in making quite large objects, but what I'm interested in now is relatively modest scale objects. I am beginning to get very suspicious of installation, of site specificity, of those

seemingly liberating notions about practice. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the public place was very liberating for me; it gave me confidence. At the moment it seems to be an overly complex way of making work: there are too many negotiations you have to go through. I'm not antagonistic to the ideology of it, but the critical engagement with it has somehow shifted away from the art and into the "field".

That's interesting, because up until ten years ago the range of analogy which was brought to bear on your work was basically from the language of the body, most particularly the ears, eyes and internal organs, and domestic instruments - the pots and pans. You moved away from that, but now you are saying that actually it's the body that interests you again. Well, perhaps not the body, but anything mid-size relates primarily to the body. Is it in any sense a move back to where you were?

Well, I didn't think it was... And I'm not sure that your assertion is correct. There's a size that is smaller than the body which doesn't refer to the body.

Like 'Beauty and the Beast'? That size?

Yes. I made a show earlier this year in which there was one 'Beauty and the Beast'. Part of the difficulty I had in the past was that when you get to a mid-sized sculpture you always see a body there. But I have begun to think that maybe there doesn't have to be. I find that very exciting as a possibility. In that sense it doesn't seem to me to be stepping backwards.

At the end of the 1980s, you seemed to be following several different strands in the work. One was about subjectivity and otherness, which is perhaps most manifest in the inside/ outside theme. Another was an exploration of structure in a very holistic sense, looking at the world of objects from a structural point of view: what is it all made of? The works which address this most clearly are the 'Beauty and the Beast' made from folded cardboard, 'Laocoon', or 'What Could Make Me Feel This Way A'. These feel like something microscopic which has been enlarged. As opposed to domestic instruments or bodies, or sense analogies, the analogies these works appear to conjure are for the energy paths which produce structures.

Which are then materialised. We can go right back to the beginning and say that structure is undoubtedly a part of the "new world order". If you can bring structure into the frame as a carrier or a component in the search for meaning, if you can make structure an issue, then you also initiate an engagement with how the world is. In the past I think I've used structure as assembly; I've often talked about structure as a component in the work. Whereas the structure you're talking about now is more to do with materialisation than with assembly.

Yes, more to do with how to feel the world, or imagine the world, than how to assemble an object.

In a sense some of the sculptures are to do with something like an externalisation, a manifestation.

Maybe it's important to talk about individual sculptures. What is it that they are manifesting?

Well, that's more problematic... It could be that they are just about nothing. *That hasn't been the way you have worked.* I made some works about the idea of the beautiful, and I have made works about ideas of libertarianism and authoritarianism... such as 'Nothing is Forbidden' and 'Nothing is Allowed'.

Maybe analogy is the wrong tree to be barking up. Maybe the work is less analogous, more something else...

Yes, I think that's true, but you still have to answer the question as to what the something else is.

More metaphoric. Analogy has simile in it, whereas metaphor allows for the complete disjunction of the object from the original source of energy which suggested the object. Dealing with more abstract issues produces more abstract sculptures...

I suppose I would say that the issues are more abstract, but the means are more concrete. There's material specificity and a multiplicity of means. The material is obviously manipulated, but less overtly than before, less descriptively - that's the word, less descriptively- which leaves you in the funny position where the work is performing negative functions but at the same time being positively present. It's not a particular image, it's not this, it's not that, so a certain kind of negativity or negation is used. And also transparency (it plays a part there somewhere) is used as a way of trying to represent a formal subjectivity.

You were reported as having said that "the nexus of meaning is itself perhaps illusory". Referring to the sculpture as a "nexus of meaning" seems a perfectly sensible and logical thing to do. Was this a moment of pessimism or depression on your part?

[Deacon laughs].

Or was that not what you were saying?

No, that was what I was saying. I think it is possible to doubt. I think it's possible for objects to carry meaning, and I don't think it's necessarily the case that they always do. I used to say a long time ago that I made sculpture because it was a way of looking at the world, and sculpture acted as a kind of screen. What I was interested in was that it was an in-between fact, it wasn't me and it wasn't the world, it was between the two of us. The notion of the in-between has sociability built into it, hence my interest in language. And also to some extent my interest in public work. I gave a rather stupid version of it just now, but actually it's to do with sociability, and the consequences of that being in between us. I still think that's what I do when I make sculpture. I use it as an in-between. What I think has changed is that a number of the sculptures I made in the 1980s used that in-between and then themselves constructed a metaphor for the act of perception, the acts of apprehension, through the organs. So there was a complicity between the organ and the experience, in a material form. The subject was apprehension and apprehension of the world. Progressively, I've become seemingly less interested in that than in the constitution of a world. I still think that sociability mediates through that in-between notion, between my fingers and sociability. In recent interviews I think I have tended to over-emphasise the material.

It has to be counter-balanced by your interest in the cerebral. That's what happened. In the ig80s it was more hand to mouth to eye... now it's more brain work.

Brain to material. Back in 1983 I did that thing called "Making Sculpture" on the lawn at the Tate. I was next to Michael Pennie. Michael started with a very large piece of wood, and I started with some sheets of steel stacked up at the back. I was very interested in the way that the more he did the less there was, and the more I did the more there was. And in the notion of the will in relation to that: the thing I made was more willed than what he made. He seemed to take away something basic, something brutal from the object, and replace it with something else.

So carving is less "willed" than constructing?

He started with a massive piece of wood; with an incredibly strong physical presence as an object. Something disappeared, which was the object. The object disappeared and was replaced by something else. There was no object before I started, and there was at the end. So I thought I had an object and an image, whereas Michael took away some sense of identity, some presence, which was a consequence of this physical

mass. By removing the mass you do remove something. You could look at that as a historical question. Why Michelangelo's 'Slaves' are interesting is because they are imprisoned. Rodin is also engaged with that problematic at some points.

You were once involved in an architectural project with Richard Rogers.

We made a film, directed by John Tchalenko, after the Serpentine show in 1985, about Pierre Charreau's house. It was the time that Richard Rogers was making the Lloyd's building, and he was describing how he used the Maison de Verre as a model for the building. I thought it was interesting because - for a modernist icon - the architecture itself seemed to be immensely referential. The house was far from being a machine, but had within it all kinds of references to other sorts of structures, so we talked about it in terms of symbolic architecture. For example, there are five staircases in the house, each one built differently. One is like a spiral staircase in a castle, another is like a hanging bridge in the Andes, another is like a drawbridge in a castle. It was interesting to find that level of experimentation, well, openness and indeterminacy, in a high modernist icon.

Architects have to deal with a far more circumscribed set of problems than the public sculptor has to. Maybe people 's expectations are lower for architecture?

One of the differences between architecture and public sculpture is that architecture comes with a brief. One of the problems with public sculpture is *when* it comes with a brief! Artists aren't good at working to briefs. That lack of function, the absence of a brief in the strict sense, is a positive virtue, but it doesn't imply that anything goes. It has to make sense.