

Mark Francis: Ummm has three elements - a wooden sculpture, a chair and a soundtrack. Which came first, the sculpture or the soundtrack?

Richard Deacon: The soundtrack was recorded about ten years ago in an interview with Julian Heynen in Krefeld for a show I did there.

Partly because I was stressed and partly because we did it in a park, in an outdoor theatre, and were continuously interrupted b) the arrival of tourists and coaches, by someone mending their car and by aeroplanes, I was incredibly hesitant. To keep the train of thought going, I said ummm a lot. When we came to hear the interview I said to Martin, who is a film-maker, we should make a tape of the umhhs because they seemed to be as articulate as the words. Then early this year [2000] I wanted to work in a different way with wood. I wanted not to make drawings but to try to use the wood as if I were drawing with it, with some freedom. In the past, when I have bent wood it has tended to be in the same plane. I was looking at different ways of bending it which might enable me to produce a curve that moved in more than one plane - a three-dimensional curve. By the end of February, I had a pile of bits on the studio floor and I was spreading them out when the CD arrived in the post from Martin, out of the blue. It occurred to me that the hesitation and the effort to resolve something had a lot in common with the way I was trying to work with the wood. The chair "arrived" at the same time. I went down to see Ian McKeever in Dorset and as I was Hearing his house I passed this common with a traveller encampment on it. Outside one of the caravans was a line of interesting chairs, and I stopped and bought one - it seemed to relate to the way I was bending the wood. So the three things kind of arrived at once and over almost six months progressively started to congeal.

MF: When I first came to see the work at your studio I sat down to look at the sculpture and listen to the soundtrack. The tape lasts more than ten minutes and so, as you listen to it from beginning to end, it encourages a much more contemplative way of looking at sculpture than is usually the case. 10 minutes is quite a long time to look at a single thing, even if it is a short time to listen to something, whether it is a voice or music. Overall, the piece could be said to be about the elements of language, the sounds of language and the narrative or the temporality of it. There isn't a single point of view, there isn't a single element, it is quite rich in that sense. You follow a line of thought. Could it be that it is a visualisation of language?

RD: I think the work is extremely strongly image-based and has a certain momentary image quality. It is quite lyrical in places, quite evocative, and also the kinds of phenomena it refers to have been frozen by the fact of making them into a piece of sculpture. They are arrested in time. The language is implicitly continuous in time, and there is a conflict and tension between the work that is frozen in time and the interrupted continuity of the speech on the tape. The tabs, which remind me of things I used to use a long time ago, interrupt the sequence although they are necessary to put it together. They also stutter in the way that the tape stutters, so I think it's the opposition between being frozen in time and living through time.

MF: Unlike some of your other works which may resemble, say, a human ear or a mouth, this sculpture does not seem to have a referential quality. The shapes within it are so complex and so unpredetermined by other objects or

images that it could be seen as another kind of language, like music where there are linear elements and so on.

RD: Yes, I accept that.

MF: Yet like your other sculptures it has a very conscious relationship to rhetoric in sculptural technique. It has a plain rhetoric - the elements are there /or all to see, there is nothing hidden or ambiguous about the way it is made. The material itself is very plain and scrubbed or burned.

RD: It is stained from the steam. The steam produced that stain.

MF: It could have been painted and the surface of the wood obscured.

RD: There are points when I have thought about making other decisions and I think certain things will get ironed out if this becomes a much larger project. I have been thinking about knitting and weaving techniques for a long time. Those were the kind of movements I was looking at. Knitting and weaving are, to me, very evocative processes and there are rich possibilities in the way elements move through space, behind and then in front of one another.

MF: Didn't you make some work back in the 1970s that included sound pieces? I am thinking of Stuff Box Object.

RD: I did some performances just after that which were to do with the sounds you could produce by hitting yourself or that you could make with your mouth - clicking, tutting, smacking your lips, clapping...

MF: Now it's a whole genre called heat box in New York.

RD: Oh really! That was in 1971. You can make a whole variety of sounds, depending on how fit you are, and I was quite fit at the time. You could slap your bum with your foot and make a very specific noise. It's quite an interesting combination of sound and dance. Also, in 1972 and 1973, I did a set of performances with other people where the format was that there was one person working and two people interrogating him or her. The interrogation was to do with descriptions of intention, predictions of what would happen next, questions to the performer about why they were doing a certain thing - it could be quite aggressive or trying to work out meaning.

There was always a specific range of materials involved, quite simple materials: a rigid sheet, sheets of coloured paper and silver foil, and they could all be manipulated easily. The performances lasted one or two hours or sometimes a whole day and the roles changed about. There were several of us doing this - they were called Speak Work and they are not unlike Ummm.