

Isabel Parkes: I've been reading *So, And, If, But* to prepare for this and was quite struck to learn that you began your art studies in performance. I'm curious as to how it then fit into your work and how now, looking back on it, you feel that it has continued to shape how you produce your sculptures.

Richard Deacon: Ok, it's a complicated answer, because I think the way you look at it changes with time. We begin talking about a period from 1968 to '72, '73, somewhere around there, when there was a lot of political radicalism around and sales was a kind of dirty word. And objects understood as consumables - well, objects for sale - were somehow mocked. The notion of the object as an item that could be sold was an issue. When I was doing my foundation at Somerset College of Art, two of the people who taught me - a man called Ian Breakwell and a woman called Rose Finn Kelcey were both actively involved in performance-based work. Ian a bit more than Rose, though Rose continued to make performance work for longer, whilst Ian went back to painting. Rose was actually teaching printmaking at the time and she'd just done a work that involved embroidered flags that said "this is a gale warning," which were hung up on flagpoles along the Southbank so the works were performative. Ian was very involved in written and performance activities. A third influential figure was John Hillard. We did various performance things on the course but there are a couple of works that I think were quite interesting. One was a chair covered in photographs and the second work, which was shown in *Lens Based Sculpture* in Berlin recently, was where I organized a group of my fellow students to carry a piece of my sculpture through the streets. Ian was quite involved in that. This was one notion of performance attached to how sculpture behaved that was at least a part of my interest when I went to St. Martins. You're talking about a 19 year old now (*laughs*).

I still thought object-making was what it was about, but I thought the object could be perambulatory and that you interacted with the object. During the course of my time at St. Martins I became less focused on the object and more focused on the kind of behaviors or kinds of things you did in making it. How you behave with materials. I started working in a much more open ended way. I made material at one point and I also made the costumes you needed, the work wear; I was thinking about what you *need* to make sculpture. I was having trouble working out what sculpture was and I came up with a broad definition: that it was something that was made by somebody, somewhere at sometime. So the making and the somebody - all of those elements - seemed to be important,

even the time.

I began to use description rather than photography as a way of talking about and documenting these things that I was making, to try and incorporate the idea of time into it.

IP: What do you mean by description?

RD: I wrote letters describing day to day activities. And then I also began writing about photographs, trying to fill in the gaps between sequences of photographs. The constant in all of those things was a kind of manipulation of material, and being interested in a bodily engagement with a material. I made a series of works just to do with sounds: the sounds that you could make with your own body, for example clapping your hands. Sounds you could make by touching or hitting all the bits of yourself that you could reach. This was a very self conscious performance-based work, recorded by photograph and with tape recorder in the photograph and stop clocks -

IP: Was it live?

RD: I did do it live on the radio, but I realized it was a dead end for me. That I wasn't going to get anywhere with it. At the same time I'd started working with a group of people who graduated at the same time as me, and we were doing performance-based works under the rubric of speak/work, which I'd initiated. You had three people and a set of very simple materials and you role played. You swapped around, one person working, the other two talking. I was trying to bring how you talked about things into the same context as the thing you made. So sometimes we were good friends but sometimes what people were saying was quite challenging. And sometimes it was purely descriptive, and sometimes it was whatever, but we did these things both in public and in our own studio, so there wasn't a real difference in doing it in public *except* that when we did it in public, I became very aware that actually my personality was on show - you know, my hesitations and my anxieties - and really that wasn't what I was interested in. I was interested in something that was more neutral, which was to do with trying to make something but the material became almost a theatrical thing, a prop. However in those situations I'd started making things that I actually liked -

IP: Objects, then?

RD: Well yeah, it was paper, colored paper and thin strips of wood, sometimes tin foil, sometimes not. Always things you could manipulate with your hands but which also had certain minimal structure that you could build on. There was a group of some things that I started making that I thought I was quite happy to walk away from, and to leave them as objects. I was quite comfortable - or would have been quite comfortable - with them continuing to exist, although everything tended to be thrown away at the end of the performance. That changed the way I thought about my dissatisfaction with being on show and my interest in the things I was making. It changed my view about what I was doing. And then I began to think, well actually all of that performance stuff was me learning how to use the studio. That it was an apprenticeship in not over-determining what you're going to do. That it was a way of not pre-planning, and learning to trust your ability to make things. There was a tendency, which I didn't like, in sculpture departments for you to have to say what you were going to make and how. So you would have to pre-plan what you wanted to make. Whereas if you were drawing no one would ever ask 'what are you going to draw? and how are you going to do it?' You would just do it. And I thought you should be able to make sculpture like that. I began to think of the performance as somewhat like a kind of process that enabled me to learn how to use a studio, which is something you do have to learn. So then I began to use the studio a bit like an abstract expressionist. The studio became the field of activity. Actually a lot of my work does and did involve making things that were as big as the studio, or folding up the studio floor, things like that. So the studio became a place that was important and the objects became finally the thing that I could walk away from after a more or less protracted period of working.

IP: So the notion of value in an object was still shifting for you during this time?

RD: In terms of gallery value or sales, it was still irrelevant. A lot of the period in the seventies was spent making, working very long hours in the studio but actually not producing many pieces of work. They were all very often started with a pre-determined amount of stuff and I tried to get something out of it. Another sort of breakthrough came at the end of the seventies when I did a whole bunch of drawings that used a similar process but introduced a new range of forms. Then I became much more confident about the kinds of things I wanted to make. I started to really imagine the things I wanted to make, really clearly.

IP: How were you introducing forms at this stage, in the drawings for example?

RD: Well in the drawings it started with a geometric shape that I then changed into a curvilinear shape. In the same way as I'd start with a specific quantity of material - I started with a specific geometric figure on the paper. So I treated the paper as if it were the studio and a piece of geometry as if it was a specific quantity of something or another.

IP: So a sort of setting limits and playing within them?

RD: Yes, trying to work out what the rules were and working within or around them. I kind of felt that if there weren't rules then you were a bit - well, if there weren't rules, then you had to make things up, and making things up, I thought, tended to put you in the position of coming up with what you knew rather than with what you didn't know. So if you had rules you could come up with what you didn't know.

IP: This sounds very reminiscent of your interest in minimalism, the ultimate rule makers of that creative moment in time.

RD: Yeah but I think they're actually quite liberating. Whereas I think that spontaneity can be a bit of a trap. Or just a reinforcer of habits.

IP: From what you've said it seems as if you're often, well you've been speaking about an object as a whole, as one -

RD: There was also that. I think I know where that came from. I don't think that was an issue in the beginning, in the early seventies. I don't think it was particularly a concern. I had made a material and the material had a quantity but it didn't really matter.

Then when I was at the Royal College I became interested in something like wholeness as an attribute of an object, but I think that is probably a reaction of having said to you that I found it uncomfortable to realize that in a performance situation it was my subjectivity that was on show. So I wanted something that was not me or had a boundary. And I think it came from that really, although I got interested in all that *Gestalt* stuff at the same time. But really it was more like needing something that wasn't me to be working on, and wanting to be clear

about the boundary between myself and the object.

IP: Can you talk about that in terms of your specific practice? Or in terms of making an object?

RD: I cleaned the studio. I didn't put my cup of coffee on the work. I tried to keep everything there at the same time rather than cutting bits off and putting them to one side. But it was more to do with the object being in the middle of the room and that anything else was on the side. Things like not putting your coffee on the work or not leaving your tools on it were actually kind of big issues for me. I'd get really pissed off (*laughing*) -

IP: Sounds like a control thing -

RD: Well it was actually a thing that Tony Cragg was going through at the same time. He was at the Royal College when I was, and was doing a lot of floor-based work. Tony was in the sculpture department whilst I was in a department called environmental media, so we knew each other but we didn't have studios next to each other. And he had a hard time with his fellow students who would walk in and walk over the work, deliberately. And so the first stack was made somewhat in reaction to that: to make something that you couldn't walk on.

IP: It's interesting that you say this though, because something of yours I was reading this morning - "In Praise of Television", in which you talk about peoples' creative capacity - suggests that you're moving in an opposite direction. On the one hand to let an idea or form arise spontaneously from another, and on the other, to exert control in order to create.

RD: Well I don't know why they're opposites. Why are those opposites?

IP: Well for me one side is about entropy and the other control. The former is about the latent randomness and luck of an object.

RD: I think we can see one thing in another. And I think that's a creative process. And we can mistake haphazard formulations for intentional acts. But I don't know how that would contradict having rules.

IP: Doesn't one have a stronger way of pre-determining an outcome?

RD: No, because rules don't tell you what to do, they tell you what not to do. The outcome isn't determined. It is the consequence of applying the rules. So I think of rules as opening up rather than closing down processes.

IP: Yes, I see one in the other, I do.

RD: I think the same applies to musical composition. If it wasn't for scale, then you would just have a kind of chaotic continuity. Being able to play the instrument allows you a considerable degree of freedom. The piano always produces a sound when you hit it, but a saxophone doesn't always produce a sound when you blow it. You have to learn a bit about how to blow a saxophone. Poetry is a bit the same, I think. Or us having a conversation is a bit the same: it's kind of rule bound. In order for us to understand each other we have to work within a certain set of rules. But it doesn't tell us what to say, it just tells us how to construct a sentence.

IP: How about applying a set of rules in terms of your own creative process? In terms of those you work within or have worked within? The set is probably drastically different from what it was in the seventies or eighties.

RD: Yes, it's not continuous. If we talk about *UW84DC (2001)*, then those wooden works were composed from a lot of parts, different spiral bends, and the works were made by composing sequences of those parts. One of the rules was to do with that there should be some kind of continuity to the development, so that one curve always fed into another. You never get an angled junction. In the nature of the curves - and obviously some curves are returned and some are not - they are also built around a spiral, so that the line moves away from a single axis. The developing curve is generated in space. The rest were sort of compositional issues and unlike almost any other work that I'd made since the late seventies, they were open ended.

IP: In what sense?

RD: Well they didn't link back on each other.

IP: Ah, so physically.

RD: Exactly. The line had open ends. When I look at the things I've done both before and after, it actually seems to be very hard for me to leave things open. But it wasn't a rule that would be -

IP: I was going to ask! Was that a rule that you broke or was it a non-rule?

RD: (*laughing*) It was a non-rule. And yeah, it's a habit more than a rule. It's a habit that comes from your question earlier about wholeness. The circle is the classical, complete object. And the tendency for the work to have boundaries is partly to do with that, partly to want the work to have an inside and for the inside to be not necessarily described by the outside. Or the outside to be not necessarily determined by the inside.

IP: Do you feel that is important for viewers' perception?

RD: Yes, well the analogy I used to use when I talked about this was that there's a certain amount of rationalism involved by starting in the middle and building to the outside. Whereas if you made something that was just an outside, then you weren't determined by rational relations on the inside. With *UW84DC* I became interested in the idea that the work could be both hollow and full at the same time. It didn't have to be a case around something. That somehow the empty space could be permeable and the material could be on the inside as well as on the outside. So I began having things that were open-ended. That was one strain in the relationship, the exploration.

IP: It brings in an element of speculation -

RD: Yes, and if it doesn't have an end then it doesn't describe anything.

IP: And then you have a title that's a description -

RD: Well, sort of (*laughs*). The title is a code: a constructed, reduced form of language. Yeah, ok.

IP: Maybe say a bit more to that, to the reduced form -

RD: Well I've always been interested in language. In the way that speech interacts with behavior, with thought processes. In 2001, people were just getting

interested in texting, and I think there had been an incident where someone was marooned in a boat in the middle of the ocean – somewhere off Indonesia. And they texted a message back to England, although their battery was dying, and that got the message sent to get the coast guard out.

Texting seemed to be a funny mix of speaking and writing, I think that's what got me.

IP: Well it was before we had iphones. Now we are told what we want to say, thanks to predictive text.

RD: Yeah (*laughing*), that's right. And I thought that the kind of externalization that's involved in the increasing ubiquity of mobile apparatus did imply change in social relationships. It's quite true that I'd also just done an Open University course - because I'd wanted to get better with computers - and funnily enough I found that a lot of the reading around cybernetics that I'd done when I was at St. Martins was absolutely connected to things that we are talking about currently. The transmitter, the channel and the receiver. An idea I'd liked very much at St. Martins was that the more noise there is, the more information there is. The greater the uncertainty.

IP: Something you still believe?

RD: Very much.

IP: And is that interest in language and perception, and their relationship to technology something you feel is reflected in your work today?

RD: Well the way I make work has changed, so it's, well, I would say that was part of the substrate of my mental activity. How conscious it is, I'm not 100% sure. So that the show I did at the Lisson two years ago was called "Associate." All the works were put together and had titles which either implied social relationships or structures. Like "Republic", "Congregate", "Fold". "Alphabet" is a bit out of it, although still a group.

And before that I was interested in twinning, specifically in the way that Siamese as a description of conjoined twins had dropped out of the vocabulary, but had retained its meaning in relation to plumbing apparatuses. So a Siamese joint is

conjoined and a Siamese outlet is one that splits into two. I began making works and drawings which were conjoined, which shared a part and then became more complex by being conjoined, without quite working out what it was about twinning that I was interested in. Twins were one biological relation that I was exploring, and host and parasite was another one. Things come and go in the way that I think, and if you ask me what I'm interested in at the moment, then I'm probably going to have to draw a blank.

I read lots of stuff all over the place and follow lots of trends. So the essay that you read on television and representation captured many of my interests at the time: the difference between resemblance and representation, the relationship between that and prehistory, and how the human capacity to see one thing in another evolved, where that cultural basis is and how far back you can push it. It seems to be able to be pushed quite far back.

IP: Can I also ask about your relationship to Germany? To teaching there and working with your factory in Cologne, but also your influence under writers like Rilke -

RD: Yes well the ceramics came before the teaching. But I once wanted to learn German so I could read Heidegger, although I never did. (*pauses*) It's a tricky question. I'm not that interested in being English, you see. I have been a lot less interested in English artists than I am in artists from other places. In the beginning it was more American artists. So when I was a student in terms of art, sculptural practice, it was more Americans that I was interested in than Germans. Although I was kind of interested in Beuys. Though not a wholehearted fan (*laughs*).

IP: Well America's an awfully big place, to love it all.

RD: Yeah but I do also like the landscape. It's also a bit to do with having spent time there as a teenager. My father was based in Norfolk, Virginia. In the early sixties. I was not there all the time but was for the summers and Christmases. '62, '63, '64. It was always like being in a film, being in America. And I stayed for three months in '73, traveling around, and actually not seeing what I was trying to see at the time - Jackson Pollocks and David Smiths. In fact they were very hard to see. They were out of favor. David Smith in particular. But it was also just to do with traveling around America. And I didn't want to be in

London at the time, or in England.

IP: Why?

RD: I'd just graduated from St. Martins and hadn't got the faintest idea what I wanted to do. I was really depressed and the whole British Art scene seemed to be insular and uninteresting, which wasn't true in fact. It's probably truer to say that I didn't know what I was going to do and America seemed to be a good place to imagine you could do something else.

IP: It still is.

RD: Somewhere you could imagine something else happening. It was on that road trip in '73 that I decided I was going to be an artist after all. The performance thing had become quite serious at that point. At the Art Institute of Chicago I did an evening course to do with theater rather than to do with performance or art, with a man who'd worked with a Polish director called Jerzy Grotowski. This was the summer of '73, actually a critical moment. I'd got disenchanted with performance as a basis for publicly making art and it was probably within the context of that Grotowski thing that I became conscious of performance as being something you could do without having to be a performer. You could do performance without being a performer. That's what I learned in America.

The interview took place on September 24th, 2014 in Richard Deacon's London studio.