

RICHARD DEACON Talking with Caryn Faure Walker

C.F.W. *You studied at St. Martins from 1969-1972 and worked in a relatively unconventional way there, almost a performance method. Why did you do this in an institution committed to object sculpture?*

R.D. I'd done some performance and installation work on my Foundation course in Taunton. Ian Breakwell, Rose Finn-Kelcey and John Hilliard were teaching there and it was partly their influence, at least in showing me that there was a different way to make work. Then there was the project that Peter Kardia, Garth Evans, Gareth Jones and Peter Harvey set up for the first year at St. Martins. This tended to produce a shared involvement in work.

C.F.W. *One work you did at St. Martins was stuff/box/object'. You contained loose material in a box that you then wrapped in concrete. When this was completed you undid the process. At the time the work was made, 1971, many women artists directly referred action and materials to self definition, rejecting both studio skills and programmatic action to make the point. Was this work too anonymous, too like mechanical activity that aped industrial processes?*

R.D. Classical analysis in terms of control over the means of production I felt was illustrated in many art works produced in the early seventies rather than actually put into being. The production of material was a simulacrum of control over the means of production. The presentation of that work in terms of writing that I could produce myself was a similar thought. The box that was involved was not made by me. It was received in exchange for an amount of material that I'd fabricated from rubbish and then used as the material element in a situation in which three people were working, each of us manipulating the material. My assumption of responsibility towards the material and my subsequent use of it gave a use value. Then its actual function in an exchange gave an exchange value. The box was enclosed in another concrete container which seemed to effect another transformation. There was a use, there was an exchange. Then the final transformation seemed to return it to a kind of inertness.

The last part of the text accompanying the piece is based on a series of letters about the day to day activity in the studio without actually revealing an intention to make a particular kind of thing. I wanted to build up by a series

of accumulated descriptions an object, an inert object. One can also suggest other meanings in terms of the kind of wrapping that went on.

C.F.W. *You used the word 'illustration' to describe the lack of success other artists had in using mixed media formats to convey content. Could you be more specific as to why you yourself found the format inadequate.*

R.D. Time was obviously an issue. What I found was that recording real time operations left me with a documentary which, if it was a sequence of photographs left the viewer to assume continuity; if in terms of film only repeated the performance without allowing for psychological time. Also in the beginning of 1974, I was doing performances with a group called '*Manydeed*'. One person would work with materials whilst two others would narrate, describing what was taking place. The description was not structured, although enacting that situation several times did rehearse it and one became aware of differing forms of analysis that one could put forward. From the situation I began to produce work that had a degree of independence. The identity of that work was reduced by its being shown as part of a performance. It became a prop. But there was a clue in the objects to producing a kind of work which would conflate into one thing the elaborate formats I had used: texts, photographs and residual stuff.

C.F.W. *From 1975 you made constructed objects using wood and plaster extensively. These materials have qualities which seem diametrically opposed. You use them together Why?*

R.D. I was unwilling to use steel because of its associations at St. Martins - it wasn't a material that was naturally available. Wood and plaster didn't have the same values attached. My subsequent use of those materials was habitual rather than consciously chosen.

C.F.W. *Some of Schwitters' works uses plaster as a mock art material. It's cheap and one can give it all kinds of identities. I notice that you have used veneers in addition to plaster.*

R.D. I've used fake materials; Formicas, chipboards, wood grain and embossed wallpapers.

C.F.W. *Even with the flexibility of plaster, these materials were unsatisfactory. After 1978, you stopped constructing objects and began to*

draw and to make pots. Was it the directness of these methods that attracted you?

R.D. The kind of construction method I had been using was part to part assembly. I found myself taken up with the meeting of one part to another and in making constructional decisions about that meeting I seemed to become divorced from the reasons for my making things. It came up from time to time in relation to the work. When I went to the States for a year in 1978 where the drawings were done, it gave me an opportunity to reflect on ways in which I could go against both the rectilinear geometry which had been a feature of earlier work and that part to part assembly that I'd found myself engaged in or continually fighting against. Certainly drawing as a paper and pencil activity and throwing as a very simple and somewhat continuous activity were attractive to me. A certain degree of continual sameness in my studio activity had been something that I was trying to get. I can recall, even before I went to the Royal College, trying to consider ways of working which had some analogy to the ways in which a pianist could work at his or her performance.

C.F.W. *A rehearsal?*

R.D. Yes. Part of the effort in the early work at St.Martins had been to keep the focus of the work moving between the discreet object which was present and the period before when the object was being produced. The form which the work achieved was the result of consciously building up the attributes of the object from day to day. A kind of lamination where the result could be plotted as layers of moves of a similar kind of working over a given period. The available, repetitive structure - one thinks of my recent laminated wood pieces and early St. Martins work - begins to answer questions about the relationship of form to content. Suggesting that the two can be integrated in independent objects or time based work if the work procedure is right. Since then my studio procedure is one where I want whatever I am working on to have a similar kind of working on it daily.

C.F.W. *The drawings you did start with a grid and apply a rule to the grid. What were you trying to pull from them?*

R.D. The business of having a starting point and a rule was to do with not knowing what I wanted to draw but feeling that I was more likely to discover it in a procedure that controlled the mark making process and which was extremely sensitive to nuance. I felt that the rule would enable me to

overcome my habits in that I had drawn a fair amount before, mainly from the figure. I have a lot of admiration for certain kinds of figure drawing - Slade drawing for example - as being rule governed in much the same way as my drawings were.

The other thing, obviously, was that I wasn't drawing from an objective source. The object that I was drawing was a sequence of poems, Rilke's, 'Sonnets to Orpheus'. Not knowing how to draw a sequence of poems, adopting a certain rule seemed necessary

C.F.W. *At two points you left sculpture to make functional objects - the mock chairs at St. Martins and more recently pots. How important was the functional aspect?*

R.D. In relation to the chairs I was less conscious of it. But in relation to the pots, function seemed to operate in similar ways to the way in which 'figure' operates in Giacometti, as a thing which coheres the object without being necessarily overt. It's a centre. In some pots and certain dishes a similar kind of thing seems to occur in relation to function, presentation or containing as a device against which the object is cohered. It's a kind of nexus.

C.F.W. *In the chairs, which had no seats or backs, and the pots, which have no foot to make them stable, you sabotage function. Similar to the way Caro does in recent work shown at Kenwood last summer. Are you also involved with aestheticizing function?*

R.D. The chairs possibly suffered from this. The ceramics no. They are pots and I think that's what interests me about pots, they're just pots.

C.F.W. *Their ordinariness?*

R.D. Yes. Ordinariness is what I think I was after in the ceramics. It does connect with my reading of the Rilke sonnets and the kind of ambition that I now have for the sculpture. I find that certain ordinary objects, particularly objects of use and dress have a certain quality which is resistant to the kind of aestheticizing I think my chairs were victim of. One of the sculptures I made at the Royal College rested on the ground in a state of equilibrium. I found this interesting. It was not until I began doing the drawings that I began to put that business of being on the ground in such a neutral way together with the notion of ordinariness. So in part the reason

why the sculptures I have been making recently all tip or roll has to do with that notion of wanting them to be ordinary like everyday objects.

C.F.W. *The new work is very workman-like in construction, but also idiosyncratic. In "If the Shoe Fits", you use new sheet steel, but cut and patch it. The screws and steel braces in number exceed structural demands. Are these for decoration or possibly related to the grid/rule operations of the drawings?*

R.D. The screws are used partly for decorative effect. They are also a means of differentiating the inside from the outside of the skin. Drawn segments of the grid which are on the surface of the sculpture relate to drawing up the flat sheet which is transferred from a small piece of paper scaled up onto the steel. Leaving them seems to open up the work. Recalling your reference to Schwitter's use of plaster - these devices make the sculpture obvious as a thing made. But it's obvious as a thing made anyway so it's like belt and braces. Doubling up so much on the quality of its being a thing made possibly does something to the way you perceive the surface. I'm not absolutely sure what it does but it has to do with self-referentiality, and over-securing something.

C.F.W. *Yes. It's this quality of over-securing. As if you were making an ironic use of craft techniques. Perhaps to suggest that a return to the 'truth to materials' approach by some younger sculptors could mask too much elegance and solidity.*

R.D. I hadn't been conscious of that. Maybe that's the thing the surface does. However, I always think of myself as being practical. I'd like to say - "I just make it, I don't know about things like that". At a slightly more considered level, I'd say that the structuring procedures I have for making work - laminating and rolling - seem akin to ways we talked about the drawings in that a certain continuance is generated which allows me to come across particular kinds of things.

Certain of my procedures have also consciously mirrored other procedures. At St. Martins, house building was a model activity and my use of plaster and wood related to that.

C.F.W. *This most recent work is also similar to work by Phillip King of 1962-1964 - 'Rosebud', 'Genghis Khan', 'Barbarian Fruits'. King's work uses a cone to hide a section of space, at the same time perforates*

the shape to suggest possible access to the centre - a lure for the spectator to come close to the work. Is detail used the same way in 'If the Shoe Fits'?

R.D. I feel close to the works you mention. They are ones I think are extremely good, work which I haven't thought the later sculptures by King match up to.

But to answer your question. I want the spectator to be able to 'move' inside and outside the sculpture and for the sculpture to remain inaccessible from both viewpoints.

At close quarters a certain richness of detailed emerges. But the way in which it falls into outline or silhouette isn't apparent. At a distance the silhouette doesn't register detail. I'm fairly conscious of this strategy because I don't want to make sculptures that one can mentally pick up and take away. I do however want to make sculpture that seems engaging at any one particular time.

C.F.W. *Do you establish a difference at the level of meaning between the encapsulated space or hollow in your work and the surrounding environment? You position openings or apertures so that there is a passage through the work.*

R.D. The question is, is the inside both as important and different at the level of meaning from the outside. To go back to pots. They're radically different inside to outside at the level of meaning. A container is wholly different inside to outside and the wall mediates between the two. In the large laminated work which resembles a basket, as you move around it your body sensation changes from being distanced from the object to being enclosed by it. The two experiences - being within and being without -aren't compatible. The disjunction is similar to the ways one experiences oneself and the ways one experiences others. In terms of the sculpture, there is an analogy drawn between trying to come to terms with distance and closeness - spatial measurements - and the other, to try to create equal respect for both positions.

C.F.W. *You don't refer directly to autobiographical or political events which influence your work, although I know that you are active in CND. Is there a reason for keeping the two areas separate?*

R.D. I'm perfectly happy to associate myself with CND - particularly The Movement for Nuclear Free Europe. I may be interested in making propaganda, and work which has some degree of radicality to it, but the issue

needs to be considered as a whole, rather than as radical content and conventional form. My social and political attitudes are embodied in the work - I'd refer to our discussion of 'ordinariness' and of 'distance and closeness'. But I'm not wholly convinced.

There is a problem that associates with an individual in relation to a collective society which makes an individual's political or social sensibilities have a degree of irrelevance to the conduct of society. I don't know how much one does as an individual without aligning oneself. Yet the alliance frequently sacrifices to expediency some of the values which prompted it in the first place.

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