

Richard Deacon: the Shape of Utopia

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Randomness (or complexity) allows for reading, opens a horizon to possibility. There is thus an aspect of optimism in the undetermined, a willingness to read into that opening which has a public place. Both in social and individual terms alternatives are declared possible”.

Richard Deacon ¹

The catalogue that accompanied the most recent retrospective on Richard Deacon, held in Strasburg and Hannover, ² presented, for the first time, detailed information on his activities as a young artist in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was precisely the period of the emergence of Conceptual Art, Post-minimalism and Performance, among other movements, and one that located sculpture at the forefront of artistic practice. The theoretical bases that underpinned all these aesthetic trends prevailed in the type of teaching offered at Saint Martins School of Art in London where Deacon was a student at the time. Much of the new material presented in the above-mentioned catalogue consists of texts written by Deacon himself (an artist who writes unusually and exceptionally well), ³ in addition to numerous photographs of performances taken at the time, drawings, manifestos, letters and diagrams as well as some photographs of his earliest sculptures. These were apparently simple works with an emphasis on curved lines and highly finished surfaces but ones that in fact look forward to greater complexity in their varied and unexpected viewpoints. From all the information presented in the catalogue it is evident that Deacon was always interested in the materials with which he worked, not just in a visual or tactile sense but also with regard to the way they could be worked and transformed into sculptures. One of the most recurring characteristics of his works is that they allow us to observe the technical procedures that have given rise to them.

From the material republished in the catalogue referred to here I would like to single out a little known and early text entitled *Utopia and Structure* (1969).

Over the course of its four pages it offers a type of written and illustrated meditation on the different relations between physical and social structures. Some of the images that illustrate it recall drawings in Leonardo da Vinci's codices (as well as the geodesic cupolas by the visionary US architect Buckminster Fuller), some are diagrams of circular and symmetrical forms while others are curious representations of energy flows with curves and branching elements. It seems apt to single out this text for two reasons. Firstly, because over the past decade, which is the period covered by the present exhibition, Deacon has given some of his works titles that refer to different social structures such as *Assembly*, *Republic* and *Tribe*, to which I will return later. Secondly, because when he wrote the text it was already evident that the origin of the abstract forms that would come to characterise his sculpture did not lie in formalist concepts. Deacon's work may emphasise the literalness of his technical procedures but it is always open to metaphor, and this oscillation between the two constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of his work.

In 1997 Deacon completed the writing of a significant lecture, published elsewhere with the title *In Praise of Television*.⁴ Among other things it reveals his interest in transitory forms and in permanent mutation, for example, those seen in flocks of birds, clouds, crowds, smoke, water and insects' hives or nests. Deacon gave all these images the generic title of TINAS, a word created from the initials of the phrase *This Is Not A Story*. Furthermore, ideas deriving from his reflection on these phenomena, with their complex, random nature, have influenced much of his recent output, leading him to experiment with new concepts, materials and forms. Over the past few years Deacon has taken numerous photographs and made numerous prints and drawings, printing sheets of paper using an ancient Japanese technique called *Suminagashi* which largely relies on chance, using these works as the basis for sculptures;⁵ he has worked in collaboration with other artists;⁶ he has produced public sculptures that could be described as experimental, such as *After Poussin* in Münster (1977); and he has further expanded his already extensive repertoire of materials to make sculptures, now frequently using polyester foam and resin, vinyl, rubber tubes, polycarbonate, leather, curtain rods, screws, PVC, rigid plastic, cables, epoxy and ceramic.

The ceramic works are perhaps the most surprising and one of the most revealing facets of Deacon's recent practice. They frequently have a

spontaneous, experimental character and are polychrome, as a result of which colour has become a central issue in the artist's work. This activity began in 1999 when he made his first visit to Niels Dietrich's ceramic studio in Cologne, leading on to an extremely fruitful period that focused on this medium. Deacon had already worked in ceramics as a student and had written about the work of various ceramicists, including Jacqui Poncelet, to whom he was once married,⁷ but it is only now, through his collaboration with Dietrich, that he has completely focused on the potential of this ancient medium. I will discuss specific works later in this text.

As is widely known, Deacon belongs to a remarkable generation of British sculptors that emerged on the international scene in the 1980s, of which other representatives are Tony Cragg, Anish Kapoor, Richard Wentworth and Bill Woodrow. This affiliation should be mentioned here given that while they all developed their artistic careers through the formulation of different styles they nonetheless inherited an interest in the theoretical issues that prevailed in international sculpture after Minimalism (on more than one occasion Deacon has mentioned his interest in the work of Donald Judd) and Post-minimalism. While Minimalist artists opted for a reductionist aesthetic in which form was all-important, Post-minimalists emphasised semantic issues. For the latter artists, the creative processes and the ideas that gave rise to them seemed the most interesting aspects of their work. In addition, they introduced the use of a wide range of materials that were unusual at that date such as sand, felt, fat, neon, video and tree branches, which would permanently and radically change the appearance of sculpture. The British sculptors of Deacon's generation – and others such as Martin Puryear, Tony Grand and Susana Solano – assimilated this shift but without forgetting the final appearance of their works. This is also true of the work of the most interesting abstract painters of that generation such as Terry Winters, Juan Uslé, Jonathan Lasker, Philippe Taaffe and Olav Christopher Jenssen, whose images often describe thought processes. In addition, it located Deacon's work in a context that emphasises how the changes in his way of working largely respond to Post-modernist theoretical or programmatic issues.

Deacon is primarily known for an impressive group of biomorphic and abstract works that arise from a detailed analysis of the language of sculpture and which are often made from laminated wood and different metals. He has continued to

pursue this direction over the past few years, resulting in equally spectacular works such as *Out of Order* (2003). At first sight this looks like scrap metal, a shapeless mass of material with a technological or industrial appearance, broken and abandoned on the floor. However, its different parts are carefully joined and folded as a result of which, and following more careful observation, the work starts to look like a deliberately constructed and designed circuit although clearly one without a specific function. Made of steam bent oak and stainless steel, it is a work of convoluted, superimposed forms that create circles or knots and which could be described as baroque. Easy to relate to the above-mentioned forms that Deacon termed TINAS, it is the image of organised chaos.

Last Minute (2007) is also easy to identify as a work by Deacon. Its shape, which curves into itself, suggests a leaf – the acanthus leaf on an Ionic capital – a curl or a snail. It is made from six wooden planks joined at the sides and carefully steam bent. The widest surface rises up from a type of rectangular container, creating a scroll that comes down onto the floor then curves up again on itself. Its exterior is punctuated with screws arranged in lines of two and three, which gives them an ornamental as well as a structural function. The 'container' from which the wide plank studded with screws emerges is a block of polyester resin in which are embedded many shards of different coloured plastic. In *Last Minute* form and structure arise from the treatment given to the material, questioning the difference between interior and exterior. In addition, the centre suggested by the work is impenetrable and its meaning is therefore elusive.

Another recent series of works is entitled *UW84DC* (2001), which are letters and numbers that if read individually in English produce the phrase *You wait for the Sea*. Works in this series include *UW84DC* #10, the form of which recalls that of the letter A and also has something anthropomorphic about it, and *UW84DC* #9, which suggests an asbestos roof even though it is on the floor. The repetition of curves evokes direction and speed, giving the work the appearance of a flying carpet about to take off. I think it is significant that the first piece in the series resembles a letter of the alphabet as many of Deacon's simplest sculptures having something about them of units, as if they were phonemes, letters or words from specific formal languages and that if combined with sculptures from the same family or language they would produce more complex structures and forms. The above-mentioned *Out of Order* is one example, as is *Slippery When Wet* (2004), which is seemingly made from the sum of "units" from the *UW84DC* series.

Of even more recent creation is a series of large-format drawings and wall paintings entitled *Bamako Twins* (2009), executed in graphite. Deacon visited Mali and wrote a text entitled *Monuments of Bamako (Notes)* (2009) ⁸ about the roundabouts and public sculptures of its chaotic capital Bamako that is of help when interpreting these works. The images that they form once again suggest closed geometrical circuits or prisms made of straight lines that turn back on themselves at angles and which can be seen as abstractions of city street maps. Nonetheless, these are abstract works although *Bamako Twins #2*, for example, suggests a rose as it is more circular in form, while *Bamako Twins #3* has something about it of a brain. They bring to mind the earliest works, generically termed *Glyphic Brain*, exhibited by the US painter Philip Taaffe, which were made with sticky tape, generally black in colour. Like the works in Deacon's *Bamako Twins* series, Taaffe's collages produce images that are closed in on themselves, following a mysterious order, and it not hard to imagine that they could grow indefinitely just as cities grow. In both cases these are images that also relate to the concept of a fortress. From all these possible interpretations it seems appropriate and feasible to read them as cerebral images as they are forms that seem to possess their own intelligence, as I noted earlier, and to develop according to a system. Deacon's works on paper have always functioned to express ideas that can subsequently be used to generate sculptural forms. In addition, *Bamako Twins* is also a continuation of other experimental works by the artist, such as the paintings on glass that he executed in a Mies van de Rohe building, the Villa Esters in Krefeld, the series *The Interior Is Always More Difficult* (1991), which are paintings on plastic that are visible from both sides.

Congregate (2011), for example, is related to the *Bamako Twins* drawings. It can also be seen as a model of social structure and of perfect utopian structure in which the whole is the sum of the parts. These parts support each other, thus permitting a reading of the work in political and democratic terms. The sculptures in the series *Two by Two* are the units, referred to earlier, which allow for the realisation of a more complex work such as *Congregate*. In my opinion the latter has all the characteristics required for a perfect public sculpture and there is in fact a related work, *Nosotros Tres* (2008), outside the Museo Würth in La Rioja.

Among recent works that point to new formal and conceptual directions is *One More For The Road* (2007), a title that refers to the widely used expression for having a last drink before saying goodbye. I consider this an unprecedented work. It consists of two lines of seven stainless steel brackets that are attached in parallel to the wall. Resting on each bracket is a small abstract form made in rigid polyurethane. They perhaps bring to mind the presentation of archaeological material or the way in which the German artist Thomas Schütte (with whom Deacon has worked) presents his celebrated bronze portraits.

Finally, I would like to look at Deacon's work in ceramic, which I referred to above in relation to its rich, polychrome surfaces. As its title indicates, *Flower B* (2004) suggests a flower with numerous petals, again perhaps a rose. Other pieces suggest cakes, for example, *Between A Rock And A Hard Place* (2003), which resembles a sphere lined with macaroons (small French biscuits made with ground almond, egg white and sugar) or some other type of red and green biscuit. Similarly, *All Sorts* (again of 2003) is a spherical form made of rings that recall both doughnuts and a work of 1998 entitled *Eat Me*. The resulting works have a playful, iconoclastic feel.

Other ceramic pieces by Deacon have more chaotic forms, such as *Almost #1* (2002) or *Oh Happy Day* (2003), the shapes of which seem to be the result of folding clay into itself. In *Tomorrow, And Tomorrow, And Tomorrow H* (2000) the folded back form has something liquid or gelatinous about it, suggesting Hans Arp's biomorphic forms. The shape of another ceramic entitled *Vincent* (2005) also recalls classic modern sculpture in its geometrical simplicity. All these works have a playful aspect and can perhaps be seen as a parallel development to the series of works on a domestic scale that Deacon produced during the 1980s and which he entitled *Art for Other People*. Like them, Deacon's ceramic creations have an intimate quality while also giving expression to sculptural ideas related to folds, malleable compacted material and soft volumes.

Gap (2004) is another series of ceramic pieces, this time made from the joining of halved, open ceramic bodies resembling traditional vessels that have been sliced down the middle vertically. By joining the two edges of each one to another similar and adjacent unit on either side they form s-shaped curves, successively linking up with more vessels to become small, snaking walls that eventually meet up and close. They suggest models of medieval castles or the

fortified mud houses built by some West African peoples such as the Somba in Benin or the Gurunsi in Burkina Faso. Ultimately, they are peculiar containers given that they are open and have no lids. Deacon has presented them on the floor, perhaps confirming the idea of a fortress, but when he showed a similarly constructed group of works in the Welsh Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2007 he mounted them on the wall, which emphasised their abstract nature and suggested cloud formations.

Another series entitled *Republic* (2010) comprises forms that seem to imitate pieces of superimposed wood, producing a form that vaguely resembles a bonfire but also piles of coloured French fries, all maintained in seemingly precarious equilibrium although the elements are firmly stuck to each other and are – perhaps ironically – set on pedestals. Works of this type once again bring to mind Deacon's text *Utopia and Structure* mentioned at the outset of this essay, although to some degree they also suggest random forms like those small sticks that are thrown on the floor to produce a configuration that is “read” to predict the future. *Range* (2005) is an earlier, related series that involves similar ceramic works, again set on pedestals. The forms in this series once again evoke monuments and the idea of organisation, in this case through autonomous and perfect circuits of interconnected rods. *Tribe* (2002) is also related to these works, consisting of a circuit of tubes surrounded by rings in the manner of necklaces.

In their famous book *Learning from Las Vegas* the American architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown discussed how the city is an apotheosis of the signifier, arguing that the form of the buildings must express their function and proposing two ways to achieve this: that the buildings are functional behind a giant awning or that the façade is totally autonomous with respect to the functional interior.⁹ Another of their essays takes the form of a manifesto entitled *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. In some way, Deacon's works on pedestals have suggested these ideas to me, undoubtedly due to the pressing manner in which they express their monumental intent and thus demand immediate interpretation.

Many of Deacon's works are constructed from the idea of the centre, which is generally empty but which gives form and meaning to the work. This characteristic has been the subject of discussion and has often been compared to the tradition of modern British sculpture, particularly to Henry Moore. On

occasions more than one centre is to be found, as in *What Could Make Me Feel This Way (A)* (1993), which is once again a work that seems to take shape in a simultaneously expansive and inward-looking manner on the basis of its own logic, as we encounter in some of the paintings by the US artist Terry Winters. Significantly, Winters has also painted knots, emphasising their nature as metaphor and also referring to mathematics theory. In addition to his writings on complexity and guessing and on utopia and structure, Deacon's use of abstract forms that close, such as bows, folds and knots allows us to understand his work in its entirety as an attractive metaphor of the presentation of hidden meanings behind a seductive material and technical apotheosis. The spectator is located at its metaphorical centre, encouraged to collaborate in the creation of the work's meaning by projecting his or her experiences and subjectivity. In other words, Deacon invites us to dream as well as to think, something for which we should be enormously grateful in these predominantly didactic times.

1. Richard Deacon, *In Praise of Television: Television and Representation*, Association des Amis du Musée Départemental de Rochechouart, 1998, revised in 2000.
2. Richard Deacon, *The Missing Part*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010. The exhibition opened at the Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain and at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Strasbourg then travelled to the Sprengel Museum, Hannover.
3. This has only been published in Spanish so far, in a compilation of the artist's writings: Richard Deacon, *Por escrito. 1970-2010*, Pamplona, Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2012. Translated by Gabriel Insausti.
4. Richard Deacon, *In Praise of Television...* op. cit.
5. Deacon learned this technique at the STPI in Singapore that same year. See Richard Deacon, *Beware of the Dog*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2012.
6. Deacon exhibited with the German artist Thomas Schütte, who had also worked with the ceramicist Niels Dietrich, producing, for example, a group

of co-created installations at the Lisson Gallery in London in 1996. Both artists also worked with the filmmaker Martin Kreyssig, who made documentaries on each of them and their work.

7. Including Henry Pim, Martin Smith and Sara Radstone
8. Richard Deacon, *Por escrito*, op. cit., pp. 339-344.
9. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1972, revised ed., 1977.