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Richard Deacon – drawing

The subtitle of this monograph and exhibition contains the familiar, object-related terms ‘drawings’ and ‘prints’. And indeed the main focus in both is on this important aspect of Richard Deacon’s work over the last forty-five years; it is on the material basis of individual works and series of works on paper. That is of course the main, inescapable form associated with the artistic act of drawing and with the mediation of drawing in exhibitions and publications. However, aside from the merits of a positivist stock-take, the question as to why the focus should be on drawings and prints could suggest a slightly different title for this undertaking. The introduction of a verb – as in ‘Richard Deacon: Drawing’ or ‘Richard Deacon drawing’ – would place the emphasis on the activity of drawing, on the process. The title would thus no longer be tied to different forms of execution – hand-done drawings or prints – and would instead home in on Deacon’s artistic process, on his artistic thinking as such. And if the action were given precedence over the outcome, this could then also include, on a purely pragmatic level, the wall drawings (with their very different sizes and placements) that Deacon has produced in recent years. The act of drawing also serves as a barometer of Deacon’s sculptural work, without necessarily being linked to it in the sense of preparatory drawings. In his case drawing can ultimately be seen as the basis of his artistic thought processes, as a concept or conceptual prerequisite for his artistic actions. He once said of his friend and fellow artist Mrdjan Bajić that he ‘also has a, to me enviable, ability to make the thing he is thinking about appear as a drawing. It was a revelation to me to discover his practice’.¹ In a recent conversation he referred to the connection between thinking and drawing in his own case, but also pointed out that the two can be both mutually supportive or obstructive (see p. ...). Drawing is not only a process with the closest physical and mental connections to art, the act of drawing is already art. For the person holding the drawing tool, the act

itself already contains within it the essential features, or rather, the core of what he (in this case) is doing. This is not to say that this already gives him a clear picture of all the details of, for instance, the sculpture he is thinking about. No drawing could do that. Indeed, as he draws he does not necessarily even have a particular sculpture or idea for a sculpture in mind. In the case of most of Deacon's drawings the all too easily assumed direct connection between (preparatory) drawing and execution does not apply; on the contrary, in his case the realm of prints and drawing and the realm of sculpture should each be presumed to have a certain autonomy. In Deacon's case drawing equates to research into things and ideas that interest him, or a search for drawn solutions that he can use to give form – actual yet open-ended – to his own thoughts and feelings. For him drawing is an experiment in the sense that although it may be prompted by an initial question, the path it takes is certainly not preordained. Not knowing exactly where one is going is one of the main drivers in the act of drawing.

Deacon's early series of large-format drawings, *It's Orpheus When There Is Singing* 1–9 (1978–79; fig. B17, B18), crucially informed his subsequent development as a sculptor. However, despite being triggered by Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, these are not free-flowing, intuitive responses to the poet's motifs and ideas. Rilke makes a central point in his sonnets: 'Once and for all / It's Orpheus when there is singing. He comes and goes.' Ultimately Deacon's interest in Rilke led him to discover the possibilities of metaphor in his own work. The drawings in this series owe their existence to a particular construction method, almost a self-imposed handicap. Arcs were created using a pencil on a length of string secured by a nail; these arcs were then variously rejected, adjusted or altered until they connected to each other, creating a more or less continuous linear form. Thus the artist's intention to react to what he recognised in the poems was filtered through a manual process without a predetermined aim. This indirect procedure served not least to prevent

illustration; instead its (interim) results were recorded during the course of an open process. The potential and constraints of a specifically selected technique become the main catalysts driving the evolution of ideas and forms – a method that Deacon still values today with regard to both sculpture and drawing. The underlying flexibility and open-endedness of metaphor, which rationalists often regard as obfuscating or poeticising, comes particularly into its own in the drawings. No sooner has an idea found a relatively fixed form, than new, similar forms on other sheets open it up again. And despite this openness not necessarily being present or the viewer not being aware of it, even the most compact forms in Deacon's drawings tend towards metamorphosis.

Drawing is a more or less continuous activity for Deacon, although there is of course a difference between his notebook drawings and the works on paper. As a rule the former serve as source materials whereas the latter can find their way out into the world as works in their own right. At certain times the drawings are at the forefront of his creative work, at other times they appear to recede into the background. The same can also be said of his prints, although these are of course also dependent on the opportunities he has to work with printers. Following the *Orpheus* drawings in the late 1970s, the generally sporadic drawings from the 1980s can largely be seen as sculptor's drawings, that is to say, as variously complete, preparatory sketches for sculptures. They range from variations on simple notes through different views of objects to construction sketches and drawings. And it is not by chance that it was in the etchings and aquatints in the *Muzot* series (1987, fig. B25, B26) that drawings developed into autonomous works. Even if their forms adopt and simplify aspects of the series of reliefs that make up *The Back Of My Hand* (1986) (fig. A1), they nevertheless look like completely independent works. Their various techniques and picture carriers play an important part in this. And it was also not by chance that the artist's book *Atlas* (1990, fig. B45) significantly contributed to the liberation of

drawing. In this book photographs ‘partner’ the gestures of drawing. The drawings in this series appear to ‘react’ to photographs of landscapes. The interplay that unfolds here and in other works combining both mediums is all about space, planes and marks, facticity and imagination, different scales, outside and inside. This same combination is developed and seen in an even more complex semantic relationship in the portfolio of screen prints *Show & Tell* (1996) (fig. B87-B92). Photographs of small-scale structures pushing the boundaries of legibility, of single (mostly natural) objects and differentiated artefacts are punctuated by relatively small ‘windows’ or ‘stamps’ with generally sharply drawn motifs. Found objects and inventions, reality and abstraction are clearly distinguished from each other; this in turn instigates a dialogue about affinities and contradictions. These works may appear to be far removed from sculpture, yet there is a similar relationship between the drawings and photographs on one hand and clearly defined sculptures and the changing, unlimited space around them on the other hand. Meanwhile, the etchings depicting anthropomorphic vegetables (fig. B48-B50) from five years earlier seem like a freak excursion into satire. Allusions to caricature or to the organic forms of art in Great Britain (and elsewhere) between the two World Wars slightly obscure the fact that these figurative ‘guises’ are also underpinned by investigations of the kind seen in Deacon’s ‘abstract’ drawings. One need only compare *Study for ‘The Back Of My Hand’* (fig. B21-B24) with *A Curious Apple* (fig. B49) or consider, more generally, the relationship between expressive, contour lines and internal structures, or look at the series of *Untitled Drawings* (1998, fig. B101-B104) in light of *Another Curious Potato*, with particular reference to the connections between irregularity and concentration.

In the diverse drawings connected with the *Infinity* reliefs (1999) (fig. A2) similar questions are posed, albeit reduced to just lines. Twisting undulations seem to be testing out how the repetition, variation and overlapping of the gesture of the basic

motif might achieve a precarious balance of order and chaos (*Studies for the 'Infinity' series*, 1998, fig. B98-B100). A similar effect is created when these questions are rendered as a grid system (*Study for 'Infinity' Figures*, 2004, fig. B111-B113). In *Layout for 'Infinity #22'* and *Layout for 'Infinity #23'* (both 2004, fig. B114, B115) the process edges closer to the clarity of a technical drawing, without losing sight of the original co-existence of the comprehensible and incomprehensible, of constraints and 'infinity'.

Deacon's many works on the theme of *Interference* (starting in 2005; fig. B116-B121) were inspired by certain factual observations (see p. 53), yet they seamlessly connect with the *Infinity* drawings. Although an important feature of the first works of this kind is the relationship between the optically disturbing superimposition of similar or identical structures (leading to a distinct, organic, overall form), later on the structures themselves become the main focus of interest (fig. B130, B131). Non-sequiturs and the ensuing problems of perception, together with colour and a figure-ground motif, are combined to create an idiosyncratic balance of definition and discomfiture, of fluidity and stasis. A different form of superimposition determines the images in the *Bamako* prints (fig. B125-B127), where complex polygons are seen strangely proliferating inwards. These large-format block prints in metallic hues are clearly related to Deacon's steel and aluminium sculptures from the same period. In the *Alphabet* series (fig. A3) perfectly matched irregular shapes made from 'U' channels are combined to form linear reliefs. At the same time, the compactness of these extremely 'flexible' looking formations makes it impossible for the viewer to distinguish between 'original' pieces and 'fillers'. Each individual element is both at once, or, to put it another way, there is no hierarchical order here. Consequently structures, rhythms and forms become one. A little later a series of drawings seemingly zooms in on structures of this kind (fig. B142-B145) and breaks these forms back down into a potentially endless figure. However, the *Bamako* prints also relate

to metal, spatial sculptures such as *Congregate* (2011) (fig. A4) and take on the appearance of flat projections of views into and through three-dimensional works of this kind. If anything, at this stage there is considerable cross-fertilisation of questions in Deacon's works on paper and sculptures, without individual works specifically relating to each other. A line could for instance be drawn from his ceramics and works in wood (fig. A5, A6) from around 2010 to yet more block prints, such as *Landscape Division* (2012, fig. B134). The latter appear to concentrate or stabilise the finely balanced beam formations of the three-dimensional works. These examples show how freely Deacon's experimental procedures in space and on paper interconnect, without being pinned down to design and execution, question and answer, or any targeted development. They also show how suddenly – in the midst of investigations into some seemingly much more important issue – very different themes and forms may surface. Witness the organic, somewhat threatening 'flames' drawings of 2012 (fig. B138-B141), or the unusually colourful straight-edge drawings done three years later (fig. B148-B151). While there are clearly links between these and certain sculptural works, the latter are not conclusive or better: the drawings and the sculptures impinge on each other because they all arise from the same searching, exploratory approach and because they are all materialisations of the same thought processes.

In 2009 the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy published a book called *Le Plaisir au dessin* [*The Pleasure in Drawing*]. In this study the observation of artistic drawings serves both as a backdrop for deeply philosophical questions and as a means to casting a clearer light on these questions. Nancy takes the view that drawing functions as a metaphor. As such it has to be pliant and it has to have a wide, general application; he rarely, if ever, discusses particular drawings by individual artists, not to mention different kinds of drawing, or historical perspectives. Yet the opening lines of the book certainly seem to chime with Richard Deacon's works on

paper: ‘Drawing is the opening of form. This can be thought in two ways: opening in the sense of a beginning, departure, origin, dispatch, impetus, or sketching out, and opening in the sense of an availability or inherent capacity. According to the first sense, drawing evokes more the gesture of drawing than the traced figure. According to the second, it indicates the figure’s essential incompleteness, a non-closure or non-totalizing of form.’¹² Nancy suggests that the term ‘drawing’ is situated in a semantic field that also includes music, dance, poetry, speech and song, a field ‘where act and force [*puissance*] are combined, or where the sense of the act, the state, or the being that is in question cannot be detached entirely from a sense of gesture, movement, or becoming’. Even if it is not the dominant mode, a similar openness and potentiality is seen not only in Deacon’s drawn notes and fully developed drawings but also in the prints, which require a much more complex production process. The ongoing process of reflection regarding the world we live in (in both its material and social aspects) and how that world could connect with artistic work features importantly in Deacon’s output, not least in the numerous statements and texts he has produced ever since he was a student. These reveal an artist who from the outset makes no distinction between his own wide-ranging thirst for knowledge and his artistic activities. But the aim of these reflections is not to achieve certainty regarding this or that or a work of art as a final proposition. On the contrary, they are prompted by the artist’s sense of astonishment at all kinds of different things, and the intention is always to gain knowledge and to relate this to his own personal experience and ideas. This in turn means that all conclusions have to be tested, in the awareness that a new phenomenon, a new insight, a new combination of existing factors can take the process of reflection in a very different direction and into a new field of operation. At the same time, the fact that these reflections can never draw to a close is not something that merely has to be accepted; if anything this is what compels the artist to engage with these things at all. The ensuing freedom of movement enjoyed by the artist’s ideas – their love of adventure and their obstinate enquiries into ‘world’ –

proves to be genuinely creative, in other words, it provides the necessary foundations for art.

Deacon has always set great store by the social matrix in which sculpture exists. This is true not only of his works in so-called public spaces, but of his work as a whole. Put simply, he has often described the work of art as ‘something that is between the viewer and the world and . . . that . . . like language, is something that is not yours or mine but shared. . . . Meaning is something shared.’³ This could in principle also apply to the works on paper, even if in the latter case two circumstances cast the social dimension in a rather different light. The ease with which drawings can almost be done anywhere and everywhere, with a minimum of materials and without assistance from others, means that they can become closely associated with an artist’s individuality, that is to say, a realm that others cannot generally access. And even if it is not their maker’s express intention, drawings can be seen as a reflection of that individuality. As two-dimensional objects, usually in easily managed sizes, drawings are at the mercy of the viewer’s comparatively private form of consumption. The active body, that plays a crucial part in the perception of sculpture and directly connects with the sculpture’s existence as part of a social matrix, is generally much less involved in the contemplation of a drawing. In short, it is perhaps true to say that a drawing initiates an encounter not so much between two social perspectives but rather between two much more intimate realms. Here, too, the function of the object (the drawing) is to mediate, yet the topic to be mediated remains much more in ‘potential’ mode than if it were mediated through sculpture. The meaning of drawing seems much harder to define. However, its lack of material ties is compensated for by its extra openness and by the wide range of ways that the individual viewer can take up and consider all that is seen in the drawing.

The main title of this publication and the accompanying exhibition – *Out of Line* – could be described as typical of Deacon. He often uses idioms and other catch phrases as titles, giving his works an additional verbal resonance. And although his works have distinctive titles, they never fall into the trap of letting themselves simply be identified with their titles. The titles merely suggest a structural or semantic milieu, or rather, the words operate in parallel to the works, which in turn creates a connection with language, albeit a potentially distant connection. The expression ‘out of line’ of course plays on the idea of a line as the main component of drawing, as its underlying concept. However, in its metaphorical sense the title shifts away from any direct allusions and points instead to the fundamental dialectics of intention and deviation, of the plans and license that are intrinsic to drawing, which is always poised somewhere between intentional exploration and pure spontaneity. When Deacon was asked to come up with a proposal for a sculpture, in connection with preparations for the 1996 Olympic Games, he went a stage further: he became fascinated by the idea ‘that optimism [is] connected to freedom via uncertainty or ambiguity’. Uncertainty and ambiguity thus appear to be prerequisites for freedom and the associated notion of optimism. Another comment by Deacon alludes to the multiple meanings of the English verb ‘to fabricate’, which can refer both to making physical items and to making up stories. The invention of things is comparable to the experimental, generally not objectively verifiable development of a drawing. And if these ‘stories’ and their natural ambiguity provoke questions concerning what might be described as reliability, Deacon tellingly transposes question and answer: ‘Truth becomes a question to which wholeness is an answer.’ Yet ‘wholeness’ is not a clearly defined factor in his drawings, it is not a fixed concept, or even a formula. Wholeness is the ever elusive coherence of individual ‘stories’, the totality and ambiguity of lines – as ‘out of line’ and ‘in line’ oscillate, releasing visual and conceptual energies.

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott

¹ Richard Deacon, Foreword, in *La qualité de l'ombre. 3 x 3 Künstler Europas_European Artists*, exh. cat., Museum Ludwig, Koblenz, p. 18.

² This and the following quotation are taken from Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 1.

³ This and the following quotations are taken from Richard Deacon, 'Eight Concepts, Eight Questions, Eight Answers' [2007], in Richard Deacon: *So, And, If, But. Writings 1970–2012*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Richter | Fey Verlag, Düsseldorf 2014, pp. 225–27.