

Group, gather and start to build: new work by Richard Deacon

Deep malachite green glazed blocks, fitted with complete precision though irregular with regard to their neighbours, and identical in their upward trajectory: a lustrous bamboo forest, a petrified velvet curtain. Neither a row of easily traversed columns nor a wall, its angles baffling and reflecting the light, *Fold* (pp.67-75) is structured as a complex and composite unit, though one that does not seek to attain the impermeable finality of the barrier. We are neither outside nor inside: despite the initial resemblance to brickwork, stone blocks and tiling, the space produced is that of sculpture, for we address the work in the round. Moving around it, we see that the columns do not touch; between them slip space and light, a momentary glimpse of the other side that causes a flickering between impenetrability and openness. The obtuse angles of its ceramic blocks conceal its overall form; within a few steps it transforms in aspect from a single column to a deeply irregular slatted wall, from an ambiguous, obstinate shield to a protective aegis.

'Fold' - the homing of the flock at day's end, a welcome for the neophyte, a place of safety, an enclosure. Also, the crease in the paper that makes two dimensions into three: a beginning for sculpture, a first move, an initial and decisive differentiation. And the folding we see here in the work allows for difference: well fitted, flush and exact, its components nevertheless differ among themselves, in their sizes and their forms. The verticals may be unbroken, but there are few uninterrupted horizontal lines. *Fold* moves us through an architecture in transition from redoubt to entry point, from exclusion to admission, from uniformity to complexity. It gives us a model of the way that tight-knit composite structures are built up through open accommodation, linkage and association. While it cannot but evoke architectural features - the wall, the column - *Fold* simultaneously undercuts this evocation. For where architecture is frequently bound to purpose and regularly condemned to the closures that stage and restage the social creation of those inside and those outside, sculpture is capable of addressing the organisation of space in more expansive, interrogative and imaginative mode. For sculpture, free of architecture's eternal pact with utility, can attend to the deep mechanisms through which human spaces are organised, occupied, and thereby socialised.

Buildings have never had to represent visible things in quite the same way that painting and sculpture once did. They may represent ideas or ideals - in this way they long prefigured abstract painting - but they only infrequently attempt to directly resemble other objects, unless those other objects are other buildings. They do not have to look like men on horseback, or landscapes, for instance: they may instead simply look like buildings - their walls are usually free to be walls of one kind or another, their doors and windows likewise. Thus has architecture been in large part free from the struggle over representation that painting and sculpture have had to fight and re-fight in earnest during the last one hundred or so years.

Perhaps this is because there has been no fundamental disagreement at any time in human history about the necessity for architecture, even if some peoples have gone largely without it (a fact indicating only that an expanded architecture, in which the world as such is the only necessary dwelling place, is possible under certain special circumstances). The verdict of history appears unanimous: like many other things, buildings - and as well as lasting

and solid, what goes by that name here may equally be temporary, fragile, makeshift or ephemeral - seem needed in order for human social life to proceed in an orderly fashion of some sort. People must dwell somewhere. (This is also evidenced by its opposite: social disorders, such as war or rioting, are universally correlated with the destruction of architecture. And to double the proof, for those few nomadic peoples who have truly lived under nothing but the vault of heaven, social disorder is usually linked to the presence of a roof over their heads, for instance in the enforced sedentary life imposed by the 'reserve'.) This necessity subsumes everything but the discussion of details: the best or right kind of building will be debated forever, but there is no real debate about the need for architecture as such.

By comparison, the complex and rapid collapse of the strictly representational image in European painting and sculpture during the early twentieth century does prompt exactly that debate: in abandoning thousands of years of tradition, the broadest function of the plastic arts immediately became an open question in a novel way. Unlike architecture, whose necessity was neither linked to the visual image as such nor ever in doubt, in dispensing with representation the plastic arts reframed the question of their existence, and reframed it in expansive and radical terms.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that painting and sculpture, once newly and finally liberated from representation, often sought to align decisively with developments in the social and political world. The frequency with which the diverse strands of interwar non-figurative painting are to be found intermixed with Utopian or progressive social programmes of one kind or another indicates the tone of this realignment. The profusion of complex and esoteric theories that accompanied the voyage into colour/geometry and form also suggests a related reading: that abstraction, for want of a better word, was the gateway toward a conception of the arts that assigned them the potential for more essential and engaged functions than representation could allow. Such functions could be revolutionary or visionary, political or philosophical; they could point toward culture or nature, to art as art or art as life. As a variety of answers to a variety of questions, the multiple visions initially developed for non-figurative art might nevertheless be said to converge toward the fundamental reassessments demanded by the crumbling of the image: now painting and sculpture are free of their oldest, heaviest shackle, what is their nature, and what is their potential? In the charged pause between the World Wars, as empires of land and capital expanded and armies once more began to mass, painting and sculpture began to dream vivid new dreams of both their *ur*-forms and

their ends: the points of connection that bound them to social and political life as a necessity, after the example of architecture.

Seen from this partly mythic perspective, sculpture's field of investigation has come to include all possible ends and meanings that can be brought to light from the manipulation and development of three-dimensional form. This is its privileged arena. Sculptural interventions, at their most fundamental, apprehend the human condition as something lived among created objects in a three-dimensional, time-bound world -the old question of what it is to be human, but reformulated as a problem of concrete relationships in three dimensions. Sculpture imagines and reimagines, negotiates and renegotiates, the transformation of raw materials into objects shaped by hand and mind, and the behaviour of bodies and things under conditions of one kind or another.

From here, all possibilities and fields are open for investigation: effects of gravity and tension, journeys and processes, inertia and decay, place and placement, the properties of materials whether alone or in contact with one another, the movement and agency of the human body itself. Such unlimited considerations give onto the concrete exploration of the basic dimensional matrix of time and space that determines all material presence in the world.

If these are thought abstract considerations, it should immediately be noted that the concrete nature of the sculptural intervention always subtends them, returning them without fail to more proximate matters. Whatever else it might seek to attend to, sculpture, like everything else human beings do, always appears and develops within the contextualising matrices of social life. There it must be apprehended, and find its justifications. But, like architecture, sculpture of all kinds may be said to have a particular and significant relationship with the immediate and social, and therefore with the political: for it orders objects and spaces which are not the imaginary ones of painting, but which are real and which are always in some sense inhabited. And it thereby establishes from the outset a relationship with all orderings of material, and all orderings of material in space.

What is more, sculpture presumes, as does architecture, the ordering of space on explicitly human terms, for its field of action, as we have established, is that of the manipulation of materials in three dimensions (a field which links it to the earliest such manipulations, such as the simplest hand-axes, as surely as painting is forever bound to Lascaux, and architecture to its mythical foundations in shelters, windbreaks, bowers and so on). In fact, rather than simply *presuming* the human ordering of space as its arena of action, sculpture's role is more active: it is constitutive of this space. For if the concrete, lived realities of human life are determined in large part by the transformation of raw materials and the subsequent ordering of inhabited human spaces through the deployment and circulation of these transformed materials as objects, buildings, etc., then sculpture does not merely exist

within this matrix, but instead re-enacts and reflects it. Which is to say that the sculptural intervention, insofar that it consists in the critical apprehension of space and material as manipulable quantities, actively interrogates the terms on which human social space is constituted, and goes toward constituting and re-constituting it.

This is, of course, obvious: why else has every king immediately installed an equestrian statue of a famous general in the plaza, if not to use sculpture as an economical means of establishing and publicising the exact quality of the order and powers that pertain in real social space? Trafalgar Square, for instance, has this meaning precisely, and no other. As we have seen, a sculpture freed from the visual conventions that asked for bronze men on horseback or marble generals can explore the nexus of space and social life in broader terms, but the residual truth remains: where space is ordered by people and their objects, we must speak of social spaces, and social space is necessarily political space. Sculptural and social space are thereby *associated* with one another, properly speaking, in both concrete and imaginative terms. Sculpture thus not only speaks the language of the social as a native, but also has access to its vocabulary and syntax, and can work upon the deep structures of its grammar.

The respective grammars of sculpture and society could thus be understood as articulated, in the sense of being joined ('by a flexible joint', says the Oxford English Dictionary: a felicitous image). The flexible joint here, and indeed the universal joint that mends together almost all human things, is language. For the relationships between sculpture and society, or sculpture and the world, that may be staged by the work require articulation in the other sense: they must be drawn out of the encounter with the work by language.

The works presented here, under the heading *Association*, offer language a foothold through their titles, titles which in the case of *Fold, Congregate* (pp.17-27), and the *Republic* works (pp.29-51), give us to understand that we may apprehend them by thinking, one way or another, in terms of the social (we will return to the *Alphabet* works, in a slightly different key). Considerations of this kind are implicit in all sculpture, as noted above; but here we cannot but approach the work except with the suggestion, explicit in the chosen titles, that what is presented intends to address these areas directly. It follows too that sculpture itself is also, in part, the subject: the open broaching of the social through the sculptural carries inevitably the concomitant request that the sculptural as such be considered in a reciprocal and critical light.

These works do not approach either issue in empathetic mode, which is to say that they do not work through either seeking formal identifications or evoking formal resemblances. Rather, they engage with system and structure, staging complex ideas as concrete interventions. They are not without theatre, but their theatricality is what Brecht might call epic, rather than dramatic: the transformation of matter, the

arraying of form and the choreographing of space are here the subject of the investigation, and provide an occasion for critical thought rather than individual empathetic investment. "We must not start with [man]", wrote the playwright, "we must start on him. This means, however, that I must not simply set myself in his place, but must set myself facing him, to represent us all. That is why theatre must alienate what it shows."¹ In a similar vein, these works do not seek entry into a network of identifications, but are instead 'set facing' their viewers and the world, so to speak. They face toward society and sculpture in order to better represent them, and so to represent better how they are structured and articulated, both separately and together.

An aside: we may think this way through the relationship between Deacon and Moore - where Moore seeks deep resemblances and identifications between the landscape and the figure, between natural forms and human bodies, between stone and wood and flesh, Deacon's works often seem determined *not* to look like other things. Instead they look like sculpture, precisely: not *sculptures*, but *sculpture*. It is not easy to create things that do not quickly start to resemble other things, for the human eye and mind are so adept at finding likeness that we must suppose they are actually adapted to find it, and thus do so compulsively. Deacon does not deny resemblance, if it happens - and it does, here and elsewhere - but the game is being played in a different register: Deacon's work resembles *the category*, not the instance.

What we find in these works is a common theme, expressed in their construction: they are composite wholes made up of well-fitted but nevertheless irregular elements. Though they are in series, they are not modular: neither in their individual elements, nor across the type, for the specific components of which they are built differ in form and number throughout.

Which is to say that they articulate, through a language of concrete construction, a meditation on the manner in which societies themselves may be articulated. And this may be applied to either relatively small or relatively large social associations - from the modest and human scale of the simple congregation to the politically aggregate, multiplex nature of the republic. All such associations are necessarily composed of various bodies, whether they are the individuals that make up a small group, or the many such groupings of individuals that together compose larger and more complex social forms, right up to the form of the state or nation.

The works here restage these realities, which are defined by the organising of human relationships, in terms of precise relationships between forms. That is, though they may present them in analogue, they do not seek to symbolise them in metaphor or stand for them through metonymy. Its steel polyhedra as close-fitting as pomegranate seeds compacted within their integument, *Congregate* is designed with total exactitude, and its components are maintained in a tight-knit cellular relation

that is the optimal use of the space it occupies. The precision deployment of the irregular here produces a complete unity among the disparate: these elements are fitted and linked, and their open forms produce a spatial pattern which is girded but not fettered. The outer steel surface is brushed; the work maintains its reserve and preserves its form - it takes light, but does not reflect the world. It is not a metaphor for the manner in which groups of people, for instance, come together to form sturdy, resilient and open social bodies: it does not seek to be a symbol. It is rather an explication of principle and an exploration of system, and it attends to such processes with a gimlet eye and an unwillingness to be drawn into the play of metaphorical transpositions. That it leaves to language.

An alphabet, however, is less than language. Though all words are potential within it, it is not yet a word: it is a catalogue of elements, capable of infinite reconfiguration. The wall-mounted *Alphabet* works (pp.53-65) have an evident relationship with *Congregate*, and in one aspect they may be said to appear as projections of it, or examples of type or specimen, like a pressed flower. By another account they might be seen as a set of prototypical arrays or as a play of potential elements: the elements whose configuration begins to negotiate the transition from the exercise of functions in two dimensions to those in three - from alphabet to sign, from the potential use of space to the actual. Their bodies are made up of intersections and junctions, meeting points and crossroads: the crisscrossing marks of the written, where the social and sociable complexities of meaning and sound are crushed into arbitrary two-dimensional marks, ready for deployment.

Written language is composite, and its fundamental unit is the letter, the grapheme: where they are added together they begin to move toward the phoneme, and thence the word. In the flatness of the wall, a fold is made, a differentiation - from the flow of living speech is drawn the abstraction of the letter, and then speech returns again, pouring into the word. Again, these works are not metaphorical in their content: they are presented as letters, not ideograms. System is their *modus*, not the individual instance. The congregation gathers - the flock comes into the fold - not to see pictures, but to hear the word (though this is an image in language alone: just as all other such identifications are as a rule avoided, the religious connotation is perfectly and completely remote from the work). Each of its letters different, each with their allotted role, each essential and equal within the overall scheme, the alphabet is an overabundant language system born of the systemization of language. The distance between the letter and the concrete utterance is comprehensible as an analogue of the distance between the ideal image of society and its expression in lived realities. Here, this relation, which charts the distance between ideal societies and social actualities, between planning and execution, is expressed as the distance between complexes expressed in two dimensions, and related complexes that unfold in three. The *Alphabet* works are to

Congregate as the letter is to the spoken word, and the spoken word is always and only ever a social fact.

From history we know that social facts, of whatever kind, are never given. All people speak, and that is founded in biology: but the languages they speak are an accident of history, and could always be different. The same is true of social organisation.

There are no societies without order, but the varieties of this order are potentially infinite. Human social history has been a matter of explorations of form, some systematic, others contingent, most a mixture of both. Through their collective title, the *Republic* works refer us to the forms of politics directly, and more so than the other works in this group. And what they produce through, their formal structure may be understood as a meditation on many of the foregoing observations.

Smaller explorations of a form that Deacon had used in the 2008 *Assembly* series², the *Republic* works present themselves as complex ensemble forms composed of touching ceramic bars, fixed where they come into contact. The relations between these bars are meticulous: all their various and irregular forms and angles must work together with absolute precision, and the balancing of parts results in a series of carefully orchestrated combinations. The bars are many-sided, and up to three sides may be in contact with neighbours. The formal problem addressed here is complicated, even mathematical. The works are glazed monochrome - red, white, green - except in the case of those which are marbled. This latter effect is integral and reflects the structure of the coloured clays which made up the block from which the bars have been cut, rather than having been cast or moulded. . . ,

The *Republic* pieces put multiple suggestions in play. In the first place they clearly invoke the theme that runs through all these works: that of the play of possibilities in the building up of carefully structured groups of disparate elements, groups which are nonetheless unified and wholly intra-dependent. We have noted already that this formal principle carries in it an observation about socio-political principles and modes; here, with the introduction of colour and the most explicitly political title, we may extend this observation toward more complex social entities. The works then appear as so many alternative systems, of one form of the republic or another, forms that are the sum of the various expressions of and relations between their parts, just as the ideal form of the political republic reflects the will of its people and the relationships they enter into towards governance. Drawing on this we can note that their parts, though different, are inseparable, and despite internal differentiation, their colours make of them unitary wholes overall. The final form requires all elements exist in unison, and demands equalisation across disparately weighted and shaped parts: frozen at the moment of balance, their fine calibration is the principle of , collaboration, immobilised as model.

But the works go beyond this invocation of structure. Like *Fold*, their form brings us back toward more fundamental concerns. In both scale and appearance they call to mind various moments of architecture: the architect's model is evoked here, as are

the raw materials of the building process, the piled and unsorted girders or timber that must be put into their places to create built form. Also present are the dark twins that haunt architecture's past and future - the *ur*-forms of the primitive shelter or the lean-to, and also the ruin, the tumble-down remains of buildings whose constructed energies have dissipated in collapse. As we noted at the start, architecture's place as a human necessity has rarely been in doubt, and these archetypal states point towards this fact through evocations of the birth and death of social life: on the one hand the moment of differentiation - the fold, perhaps - where an inside and an outside are first created, on the other the collapse of social life that sees this basic socio-spatial distinction crumble as it is overtaken by entropy, and the difference is reduced to zero once more.

If anything though, the *Republic* works look tumbled-up, rather than down: like balanced piles of timber, carefully arranged by hand. The immediate suggestion is perhaps not the built shelter then, but a smaller structure, one even more fundamental: the carefully piled and balanced kindling of the fire. Here, then, we are returned to a most essential moment, the crucial human discovery that the energy held in "matter can be released, and that this release of energy can be brought under control. The same heat that baked the clay of these sculptures is thus evoked by them as potential energy: the carefully piled architecture of the fireplace before it is ignited by the spark. Fire is also the friend of the sculptor: cooking clay and melting metals, it is an essential moment in the transformation of raw material that is fundamental to sculpture. That it stands at the basis of human life, which is to say social life, does not need stating.

Where people have worked on the materials of the world, changed them, and organised their space through and around them, then the sculptural and the social must be understood as intimately linked in the process. These recent works by Richard Deacon, which ask to be considered as a commentary on and investigation of complex systems and structures, also push toward an understanding of sculpture that links it to the deep underpinnings of these structures. Their explorations of composite but non-modular form are thus not only an echo of the social sculpture that is human life, but also face toward the fundamental principles of sculpture itself, and extend those principles, part by part, element by element.

Francis Gooding

1. Bertolt Brecht from *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, 1948, first published in 1949

2. The *Assembly* works were installed in Madison Square Park during May-August 2008 as part of the Mad. Sq. Art. series (Michael Brenson, *Mad. Sq. Art. Richard Deacon Assembly*; catalogue pub. Madison Square Park Conservancy, 2008)